

Pondering for the vestry reflection is something I actually like. Writing is another story, but the pondering is a great way of stopping. Listening. Observing. Thinking. Pondering last week for this reflection, and we had yet another snowfall, I thought oh Lord, we're entering into Lent and yet, with this endless snow, the ever present covid 19 virus, haven't we wandered in the desert long enough? When will I be able to meet a friend for a coffee? When will I travel to someplace other than the Stop and Shop. When can I hug my children. When can I smell my 4 month old grandchild's head? When can I take off this dreadful mask? Having lamented long enough in my "prayer" to God, my desperate attempt to empty-my-woes to God asking for insight, inspiration, support, and hope, I looked up the readings for today. Classic answer from God. John,(15, v1, 6-16), verses familiar to all of us. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. Okay then. It is Lent, a time of wandering. The temptation of an easy answer was not going to be one from which I had to turn away.

I looked at the Christmas cactus this morning. It is not looking good. I am afraid we're up to the drastic measure of removing it from the soil, carefully washing the roots, then replanting it in a new pot with new soil, the total reconditioning approach. It has failed to live through the spray it with alcohol and dawn liquid approach. It has not responded to the pesticide use at your own risk written all over the bottle approach. It is one of three Christmas cactus plants that for decades have happily grown sharing a spot together

I was a young mother, and we had just returned to NYC having spent a year on Maui. Our daughter was 6 months old, it was Christmas time, we were exhausted, broke, but so happy to be back. My husband had gone to the grocery and come back with a little Christmas cactus, filled with little rose red blossoms. I had no idea what it was or what to do, but his smile was contagious and I knew he was just trying to brighten those dark days. For 40 years that plant has grown into 3 plants. This past Christmas was the first year none of them bloomed. Not at Thanksgiving. Not at Christmas. It doesn't appear there will be an Easter surprise either. Stressed like the rest of us I guess.

It is curious to me too, the relationship of the current state of our world, and simultaneously, our weather this past year. All last spring I noted with delight how perfectly the crocuses came up, the length of bloom on the daffodils. At the time I wondered if it was because we were all staying in our homes and had time to notice these things. Our lives being stopped mid step. But all through the spring and summer, the flowers continued to be just spectacular in their blooms, the weather was filled with brilliant sunshine days as well as rainfall when we needed it. I was comforted to behold and appreciate the beauty of nature all around, I felt it as a giant cosmic gift from God, assurances that although our lives were in turmoil, the political and health worlds were quickly hurling to places in a hand basket, I felt hope. Then the fall came and the days carried on so autumnally well into November. Even though I bemoan unceasingly about 7 million snow storms we've had since January 1st, I still marvel daily at the brilliance of the snow, how just when it's about to get dirty and disgusting, we have another snow fall that sprinkles just the right amount for a "snow lift" without flattening us. I went back to the verses in John.

That passage in John is actually quite a good roadmap for these next 6 weeks, for our entire lives. Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. Abide. Abide in my love, live in my love, be with my love, stay in my love. That's what we've been doing all our lives, living with God, but even more so this past year. As the Father has loved me, has loved us all, we have been constantly shown that in so many ways daily including mother earth doing daily cartwheels to draw our attention to the splendor all around us! Abide in me. See these colors. See the creativity in how humans have responded to each other in this time of need. Abide in me.

Fine. So why is my Christmas cactus doing such a slow death? Why is it not responding to fertilizers, sprays and washes? Well, I suppose the truth of the matter is that it's possible this summer I did not always remember to water it. And we had some dry days. It's also possible that some errant plant I brought into the mix had the dreaded white fuzzy stuff that eats the plants and renders them ruined. I actually threw out the 3 orchids, most likely the original culprits. I threw out plants?!?! Yes. The vinekeeper gathers the withered branches and burns them. This too is the challenge of Lent, as we walk this journey, we will discover things about ourselves that perhaps are not playing to our best and most loving selves. Prune it pitch it, get it out.

Yes, this is a challenging time, and Lent is meant to be a time to face our challenges with more thoughtfulness, more strength, more resolve. For we do know where all this is leading, and we also know what awaits us. The snow will melt, the virus will get tamed, the sun will rise. We will hug those we love , we will smell babies' sweet heads. We may even try rerooting parts of plants in insolation. Above all else, we will see God perform the most wondrous gift of all. And that is more than worth this journey.