

Not very long into the pandemic, a colleague and I were talking about worship and church life in general. So much had changed in such a short time. It was clear that, because of the pandemic, we could access worship at any time and in any place. Indeed, we--like everyone throughout the world--could worship with any community in any place at any time. My colleague's wife recognized this as well, and one day she said to him, "Because Covid has opened up all sorts of options and different ways of doing things religiously, are you going to be changing what you do?" I continue to live with that question. Because we recognize that the world is different, do we actually live differently. Even when we go back to "normal" will we keep some of what we have realized and learned from this experience? Will we change? Can we change?

Keeping this in mind has shaped some of what we are planning for the season of Lent. As always, Lent is a time for renewal, restoration, and reconciliation. It is a time of journey. It is a time of reflection and a fuller awareness of the divine in our midst. It is also a time of call to action, precisely given our awareness of the divine in our midst. You can't not do something. This year, we will be trying to move beyond our immediate community of Saint Francis and worship with St John's Lutheran Church during the Sundays in Lent. This is not earth shattering. However, I suspect that it will create the need for some adjustment.

First and foremost, we will not be communing during the 10 a.m. service on Sundays. St John's does not commune virtually, and we will be observing that practice during the season of Lent. One way of thinking about this is that it is part of the Lenten fast for us this year. Many Christians have not communed since the beginning of the pandemic. Meanwhile, others have found comfort with a certain homestyle or some other expression of communion. I have appreciated the flexibility that has been expressed in St Francis during the pandemic around this issue. We have not been absolutists one way or the other. I think that this is a helpful way to navigate these difficult times. I also think, again, that refraining from reception of the Eucharist during Lent this year may be a profound experience, one that expands and deepens our appreciation of and desire for communion.

We will begin these services on February 21, at Saint Francis, and we alternate to St. John's and back during the Sundays that follow. We will conclude with Palm Sunday at Saint John's Lutheran Church. You will have access to the links to engage in worship as well as the weekly bulletins. You will however experience worship from different locations every other week. You also will be able to hear the different voices of preaching week in and week out. Now, this is not a huge stretch. Nonetheless, it is a bit different, and I hope that it will be received in the way that it is offered: to enrich, to enhance, and to expand our understandings of worship, community, and church.

Initially, our thought was to visit a different place of worship each week of Lent. We were hoping that we would not have to simply vacillate between St. Francis and St John's. In fact, we

hoped that each week we would be at a different type of church: Congregational, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Methodist, Baptist. What a great way to expand our understanding of our worship together here in Stamford. What a wonderful way to recognize the fullness and the richness in the diversity of God's family. What a way to connect with other congregations and begin to build relationships that could expand our understanding of ourselves and foster work that would improve the lives of so many others. Unfortunately, none of our colleagues were willing to take that leap. Some discussed the fact that they had programs that they wanted to run during Lent. Others noted that they really needed to focus inwardly in this time of the pandemic. All very valid. Yes, I had hoped that perhaps this year might be so strange that it would allow us the freedom to try something different. Again, I am grateful to St. Francis for its willingness to experiment with these types of offerings.

Because of this fact, I am aware that it is very easy to remain enclosed and circle the wagons wherever you are in the midst of difficulty and uncertainty. I also recognize that so often throughout the biblical narrative such action is antithetical to the very nature of God and the will of God. More often than not, God calls us not into activities that are easy, simple, and uncomplicated, rather God often causes us into those places where it is precisely difficult, hard, and unnerving. We don't always know what to do. We don't always have the answer. We don't always feel comfortable. Yet, that is the very nature of our humanity. And the nature of our tradition is one that incarnate the human. Thus, our tradition is one that is going to be fraught with traces of nothing less than our humanity.

Along with the Sundays in Lent, there are many other offerings during the season. I hope that you are able to take advantage of some of them. I realize that there are many, and I know the time is limited. Participation where it is possible and when it is possible is always greatly appreciated. What is coming up follows:

Sundays at 11 AM

Sundays at 11 AM we will meet via zoom, and we will be discussing podcasts that deal with religious engagement with suffering, the pandemic, and the difficulties of life. These are all one off, standalone podcasts. You can jump in whenever and wherever it works. The podcasts are very interesting, relevant, and sure to raise questions.

Wednesdays at 7 PM

During the Wednesdays in Lent, we will gather with a few other churches in Stamford for a zoom discussion from 7 PM to 8 PM. The format will be a short video presentation from a group known as Work of the People. We will then hold a discussion around the contents of the video, and we will close with a brief prayer liturgy. We hope that this time is one of reflection, self examination, and deepening of faith.

Thursdays at 7 PM

The Thursdays of Lent will be a time of reflecting on systemic racism and white supremacy within the church and within society. St. Francis will join with Union Baptist Church, First Presbyterian Church, St. John's Lutheran Church, Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church, and Zion Lutheran Church. The sessions will be an hour and 15 minutes, and they will be book-ended by brief prayers from the various traditions. The work that we will do will be led by Donn Reed and Michael Hyman. There will be presentations, plenary work, and time for small group work. This is an excellent opportunity to begin or to continue reflecting on how faith and race are experienced in the world today.

Whatever you can participate in, please know that my thoughts and prayers for you are for a blessed and holy Lent.