

Tending the soul of the beloved community



Worrying, Wandering, Wondering

By Rev. Bob Ullman

How shall we get through our uncertain days? Where do we and where will we find ourselves in the middle of this monumental time?

As our congregations and our people continue to struggle through the uncertainties brought on by the ongoing COVID pandemic, a faltering economy, a renewed racial justice reckoning and a continued and growing threat to the environment, we find ourselves betwixt and between. **We are betwixt what was once familiar and a new reality coming from a distant future that remains unseen.** Some have come to characterize this in between space as a liminal or threshold time with one foot still planted in where we left off in mid-March and the other stepping tentatively into new ways of doing and being Church. We may take comfort in remembering that God's people have been here before. Many stories of faith recount times of God's leading from the familiar into uncertain terrain and on to new-found space and creativity.

In the 14th and 15th centuries, Eurasia, North Africa and Europe were ravaged by a grave pandemic called the Black Plague which claimed the lives of 75-200 million people. It spread through much of the known world because of the trade routes opening up along The Silk Road. To contain the spread as much as possible seaports ordered arriving ships, crews and passengers to "quarantine" at the docks. The word comes from a Latin root meaning 40, the number of days determined to mitigate the spread of the disease.

God's people have been here before. Which Biblical stories can you recall that incorporate the number 40? (Hint: Noah and the Ark, the Exodus, Jonah, Jesus in the wilderness). All of these were monumental times of transition or threshold times for God's people. And here we are in the middle of an uncertain moment as well. We've certainly passed the 40 days of Noah and Jonah and Jesus. Could it be 40 weeks or, God forbid, 40 years of Exodus wandering? **How shall we get through our uncertain days? Where do we and will we find ourselves in the middle of this monumental time?**

Three responses suggest themselves to describe where we may find ourselves. **A common response is worrying, and goodness knows, there's plenty to worry about.** Will I or someone I know and love contract the COVID virus? If so, will it be a mild case or will it come with long-term, life-altering consequences? Will I be able to provide for myself and my family if the economy continues to falter? How can we keep our children safe as schools begin to resume classes? How

can we heal the racial and political divides besetting our nation? How much longer can our congregation survive?

If you're managing to keep the worry gremlins at bay, perhaps you are experiencing a kind of wandering through uncharted territory. One day blends into the next so that we're not really sure what day it is without consulting a calendar. Routines have been simplified to just getting through the day one meal at a time, not unlike the Hebrews' 40-year experience wandering in the wilderness being sustained day by day by God's daily providence with no end in sight. And many of our congregations find themselves in a similar daily survival mode unable to make plans for an unknown future wondering how long this uncertainty will last.

Then there is another kind of wondering, wondering what might be possible if we open ourselves to God's newness breaking in even amidst our worry and uncertain wandering. Since it may be some time before we are able to once again join our voices in song in worship, perhaps we can at least reflect on the words of a Ruth Duck hymn:

*Lead on, O cloud of Yahweh, we follow yet with fears,
So may we come rejoicing though joy be born of tears.
We are not lost, though wandering, for by your light we come,
For we are still God's people, the journey is our home.*

One of the touchstones that some of our Conference Communities of Practice use to create "Circles of Trust" is a teaching from Parker Palmer: **"When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.** Set judgment aside to listen more deeply to others and to yourself" and we might add, to God.

What wonders might God have in store for us and our congregation that beckon us to a new day and a new way of being Church? How might we imagine finding ourselves in a world, a time, a place, where God invites us to discover ourselves - in the words of that old hymn "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" – "lost in wonder, love and praise?"

Questions for pondering and group conversation:

- Of the three responses to our current circumstances – worrying, wandering or wondering – which of the three seems most present for you most days? How would you describe that?
- What questions are you grappling with?
- How would you characterize your congregation these days?
- What questions is your congregation grappling with?
- What resources – within or beyond you – are you discovering that help you cope with life these days?

Note: This is the first in a series of articles meant to help you and those you lead reflect on our faith stories and tradition in light of our present circumstances. What similarities might we find there? What new ways of seeing might we be missing that would open up new possibilities? How might we discover God's presence in the midst of uncertain days? **These articles might serve to prompt personal reflection but they are also meant to be used with groups as prompts for deeper conversations** at the beginning of meetings or with small groups of fellow travelers. We trust that "God is still speaking," if we but listen for God's voice as we listen to one another.