

Hello to the Saint Barnabas community. I am a freshman vestry member and a dedicated “eight-o’clocker”, faithfully keeping a pew warm at Saint Barnabas every Sunday for about five years now. I am also an usher, a bread baker, a helper at the Joy Luncheons, a member of the Caring Community Network, and am training to be a Eucharistic Minister.

I list these joyful duties in the present tense but pondered whether to say ‘I used to...’ because I haven’t filled these roles in months. The exception of course is vestry member, for I’ve been attending our virtual monthly meetings and an extra one here and there to stay in touch. As always, please know that your vestry is always glad to hear from you, as is Reverend Karen.

I am a mother to two young adult children, the wife of Ralph, a licensed contractor, and the “mom” of Fritzie, our Miniature Schnauzer. I am grateful my family is healthy (including my octogenarian mother and mother-in-law) and that we are employed. The basics in my world are taken care of.

I used to do a lot of things during the week I don’t anymore: Drive my kid to school or to various activities, lead classes at the Aquatics Center, take my mother shopping or out to lunch, and attend church. I didn’t realize until recently how much the last activity prepared me for all the others. Going to church was like hitting a reset button on my week. During the liturgy and the many contemplative silences of my beloved Rite I service, I’d reflect on the week passed and prepare myself for the one to come. Attending church was a very important part of my week.

One thing I still do is work at a local assisted living facility. I’m thankful for the job not only for giving me somewhere to go but for the perspective I witness in the people I work with. One thing the elders teach me is that the happiest among them are the ones who have accepted change in their lives, even when “change” really means “loss”. Big losses. Loss of a spouse, of their home, of good health, of independence, of memory. They have adapted. They take each day as it comes, are thankful for what they have, and for the most part greet the day with a smile. Even as they witness the recent changes in the world -with the restrictions and dangers for them being most dire of all- their “Keep Calm and Carry On” attitudes remain steadfast. “This too shall pass.” I’ve been told more than once.

I’ll be honest, for a time my own outlook wasn’t as sunny and my characteristic glass-half-full disposition had switched to half-empty. A couple months into lockdown I had experienced a cluster of deaths of beloved residents (not Covid-related) and felt helpless witnessing the grief of the families compounded by social isolation. To add to it, at a time when compassion and understanding were needed more than ever I saw little on the news and in social media. I’d had it up to here (indicating forehead) with the bad news, blame, unkindness, and intolerance. I was getting overwhelmed by all of it.

So I imposed a lockdown of my own: A media blackout coupled with a retreat into a home project and an absorbing audiobook. I refused to discuss the news of the day with my family. I simply didn’t want to hear it. I couldn’t hear it.

This went on for week or so. Then my husband, as he so often does in work and in life, hit the nail squarely on the head.

“You need to go to church.”

He was right. I needed to go to church.

But wait, I had been “attending” church. I had been tuning in to the virtual Sunday services. But I realized my attendance had been more passive than active. I said the prayers in my head but not out loud. I listened to the hymns but didn’t sing. Why? Did I feel silly reciting the prayers in front of a computer? I don’t know. I don’t feel that way praying to myself or with other parishioners during various Zoom gatherings. The bottom line was I realized I hadn’t been spending enough quality time in God’s presence and I really needed to, especially during this difficult time. My daily prayer time and church “attendance” hadn’t cleared my head and fed my spirit in the way I needed. I needed to adapt. I took an honest look at what had become my lockdown spiritual practices and deepened them.

Because it’s obvious this temporary situation will not be as temporary as anyone originally hoped. It’s not enough for me to hold my breath for the time it takes to dive into the deep end of the pool; I need to learn to use SCUBA gear down here. I must accept change, learn from it, grow from it. It’s what my assisted living friends do. I needed to take a page from their playbook. I decided to spend more time tending my spiritual garden. I’m glad to report that things are much better.

Speaking of gardens, I, like many of you, am working in the yard a lot these days. And always I am accompanied by my ever-cheerful Schnauzer, Fritzie. For some reason it is Fritzie’s life’s work to follow me everywhere-kitchen, bathroom, indoors and out. He knows he’s not allowed in the vegetable garden so he waits patiently until I emerge then runs on ahead to the back door. He accompanies me into the hot greenhouse and pants uncomfortably until my tasks are completed.

“Geez Fritzie,” I told him again the other day “Take a break. I truly don’t require your assistance!” But as usual my suggestion fell upon deaf, furry, ears.

Then Psalm 139 came into my head and I laughed. Indeed, where can I flee from Fritzie’s presence? Nowhere. I’m sure if I were even to rise on the wings of the dawn and settle on the far side of the sea, Fritzie would try his darnedest to be there too. Dogs are such great examples of unconditional love.

So if I need to regain perspective during this time of change and adaptation, I only need glance down at the creature at my feet, for my goal is to seek God with the same steadfast, open-hearted innocence that my little Schnauzer seeks me.