

*[The Israelites] said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?"*

[Exodus 14:11 NRSV]

Dear Sisters and Brothes in Christ of the Northeastern Ohio Synod,

Our country is facing a time unlike anything ever faced in our lifetime. We are faced with a public health challenge that has the country's leaders at odds with each other. The President and several state governors are in disagreement on how to proceed, or what takes priority.

The economy always seems to hold sway over these decisions. What has more value, people's lives, or their livelihood? Are we better off sheltering at home, or does safety take a back seat to the budget?

You might find this hard to believe, but I understand both sides of the argument. I wouldn't want to be a political leader in this day and age. No decision is going to satisfy everyone, so a person in leadership has to rely on the advice of those who have expertise in different areas, be it public health or the financial markets.

Our churches face a similar dilemma. Those who have oversight of the congregation's finances are fretting over the suspension of public worship, now approaching three months. More than a few are concerned that they may not survive if this goes on

much longer. I'm not in the habit of writing pastoral letters, but in the last three months I've written nearly a half-dozen of them, mostly urging caution in their haste to return. Having people in a confined setting for any length of time also puts people at risk, and could make survival a moot point.

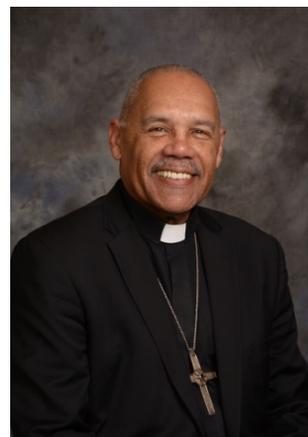
My predecessor, the Rev. Elizabeth Eaton, was fond of saying, "Every church has a committee to go back to Egypt."

In other words, every church has a group of people that long for the way things used to be.

There's another saying that one never steps into the same river twice. I can't recall the origin of that aphorism, but simply stated, nothing ever remains the same.

I've thought about both of those sayings recently as we begin considerations for the resumption of in-person public worship. People are anxious to be back on familiar territory, to feel normal again, to return to "the way we were."

In our frustration, sinfulness often rears its ugly head and can sometimes make us vulnerable to actions and ways that don't bear witness to our identity as Children of God. As Americans we tend to be rather good at the shallower pursuits. After all, we



live in a culture that tells you that the most important person in the world is you.

The Israelites in the wilderness were pretty much the same. Though they escaped from 400 years of slavery in Egypt, their subsequent 40-year journey through the wilderness was marked by a litany of complaints against their leader, Moses, and against God.

From the very beginning of their escape, which is where our quote is taken, they voiced a preference for the certainty of oppression to the promise of freedom that God was offering.

Though the journey was not without its challenges, God was always with them, and provided for them along the way. Though they were God's chosen people, it was difficult for them to see that, because of their incessant desire to have their needs met.

God has been present with the faith community throughout all time and has served as a reliable and strong protector. Israel may have been homeless and landless, but they had a dwelling place.

So it is with us. Even though we may not all be worshipping in the same building at the moment, I hope people will consider, besides the financial challenges, is that we serve a God of abundance. A God who provides for our needs, even during times of great difficulty. A God who is never far from us, even when the way seems uncertain. A God who assures us that we will return to public worship again, even

though we may have to wait a little longer. In this day and age, it is important to remember that who the church is cannot be separated from who God is.

Our fears are not unfounded. Crises are part and parcel of human existence. But our life of faith is risky, and faith does not guarantee us wealth or even health. But in God, we have the promise of love, wholeness, and grace.

During this challenging time, let us look forward with patience, and strive to recognize those places where God has already been at work in the world, beginning with each and every one of us.

Peace,



+Bishop Abraham D. Allende