

The Road Less Traveled – February 28, 2020

Fear is a powerful force. It can be a powerful force for change sometimes. But most often it acts as more of a paralyzing force, holding us in place when we should be moving. If you don't believe me, consider the facts surrounding the recent outbreak and spread of the coronavirus in Asia and Europe.

The virus – technically identified COVID-19 because it is but one strain of a series of illnesses associated with coronavirus – began in China and is responsible for more than 2,600 deaths worldwide, most of them thus far in Asia. But the disease's recent spread into parts of Europe is stoking fears of a worldwide pandemic. Earlier this week the U.S. stock market plunged more than 1,000 points in a single day on such fears. Officials with the Centers for Disease Control and prevention issued warnings of possible disruptions of everyday activities should the virus spread significantly in the United States.

Lost amid the fear is the reality that the influenza virus – the flu – is entering its third wave this season, and we are seeing the effects of it. Doctors' offices are crowded with sick people and schools, offices and even churches are being hit hard. Lost amid the coronavirus fears is the reality that more than 35 million people in the United States are infected with the flu each year. As many as 61,000 people will die from it. That's every year.

But the coronavirus is an unknown. And we fear the unknown.

I think it's the same reason that many of us dread the season of Lent. The traditional 40 days (excluding Sundays) leading up to Easter is a time of preparation, a time of reflection. It is an invitation for people of faith to consider and reflect on our own mortality, our own sinfulness and our own relationship with God through Christ. And implicit in that time is an invitation to dedicate ourselves more fully to our walk with Jesus.

That's where the fear comes in. Because we know instinctively that a closer walk with Jesus is going to change us. By its very definition it has to. A closer walk with Jesus means giving up some things. It means spending more time in devotion and prayer. It means spending more time serving others when we could be serving our own interests. It means putting others first. It means closely examining our own lives – lives that most of us like – and asking where am I not serving God?

A closer walk with Jesus means being open to the transforming work of God – even inviting it. We may believe that it is a more fulfilling life, but it's still an unknown. And that makes it scary.

That's why the season of Lent is so important for us. Because a few weeks from now, we will approach the empty tomb once again. We will once again be reminded of Christ's sacrifice for us and the miracle of resurrection. And we will be invited to consider our own response to that sacrifice and miracle. We will be invited to take our place in Jesus' footsteps and follow Him in earnest. That means a different life. It means a more fulfilling life, a life lived seeking God's dream for us. And so we take this time to prepare. We take this time to reflect. And we take this time to allow God to set aside our fears so that we may truly embrace the promise that real change represents.

See you Sunday.