

Sermon: Inherited Risk

Year A, Second Sunday in Lent

[Genesis 12:1-4a](#); [Psalm 121](#); [Romans 4:1-5,13-17](#); [John 3:1-17](#); [Matthew 17:1-9](#)

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Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

The New Hampshire Public Health Division has an information site dedicated to the Coronavirus. They are updating it daily and as information is power, it is a great source of accurate information to counter the rumors and incorrect information.

There is also a public inquiry number and email address if you have specific questions.

NH Department of Health & Human Services / Div. Of Public Health - 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19): <https://www.dhhs.nh.gov/dphs/cdcs/2019-ncov.htm>

DPHS contact info for Public Inquiry line: 603-271-4496 or e-mail NHBIDC@dhhs.nh.gov

To sign up to get town-wide email alerts, including those from the Community Emergency Response Team, go to <https://www.brookline.nh.us/subscribe> and pick the kind of alert you would like to receive.

So here's the deal. When I was deciding what would be in today's worship service, I read the passage from Romans and thought, "I have no idea what Paul is talking about. Next." But then I thought, "well, if you don't know what he means, maybe it would be a good idea to find out."

Here's what he means. We get into right relationship with God by our faith, not by what we do. God reaches out to us and we gratefully, joyfully accept God's invitation. We don't get to follow a set of rules or answer extra credit questions or have enough frequent flyer miles that we get a free trip to heaven. In the letter to Romans, Paul points to Abraham and says, essentially, "he's an amazing person, and God gave him many blessings, but not because he did anything more than follow God with all his heart."

And in today's reading from Genesis, we get to see Abraham, although he's still going by the name "Abram" at the moment, head out on his great journey into the unknown, with his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot.

Well, we're setting out on a journey into the unknown, where we don't know where we're going. This corona virus, Covid-19, appears to be something our bodies haven't seen before. Some of us will get ill, a few of us will get very ill and most of us will just be fine. But all of us will be exposed to panic and misinformation and rumors. Mixed into that toxic mess will be actual good information which we'll have to pick out. In a year with a presidential election, there will be people trying to politicize the virus which will only make things worse and make people more crazy.

So let's take a minute in a community where we come every week to get re-oriented to God's presence in our life and think through what a faithful response to an unknown journey would look like. Especially a journey that really begins for us during Lent.

Part of what we remember during Lent is that we are not God. We don't get to control everything. We don't want to control everything. Well, we want to, but it would be a much better world if we stay on the human side of the line between humans and God. That means we have to acknowledge there is a line between God and humans. So does that mean that we just

pray and not change anything else? After all, Paul's arguing that we're rewarded for our faith not our works.

I don't think so. We have been called by God to be fully human and to take care of each other and the rest of God's creation. That means using the resources we've been given, including our big, beautiful brains, to take action. I believe a faithful person will take reasonable action, using their faith to make sure they're staying on the "I'm not able to control everything as much as I might want to" side of the line. What actions would we take?

Well, if we can, we make sure we have enough food, water and medicine for ourselves, our family members and our pets. And a little extra cash. Say, for about three days. Some of you are looking at me thinking, "Cath, that's what we do for a snow storm." Yes! Exactly! We've got this. We do it every year in the winter and we've got it down. Think for a minute about *why* we do whatever it is we do to get ready for a big snowstorm.

So we don't have to go out and get something while the roads are awful. Yes. Yes. But another way to look at that is: we are staying out of the way so that the professionals have room to work. They only have to take care of the folks who really need them. The rest of us knuckleheads just keep out of the way until we're not making anything worse. That's caring for your neighbor. It may not feel like it. It certainly doesn't feel like when we have a room full of seniors here for a luncheon, like next week. But sometimes caring for your neighbor is just keeping out of the way so that the folks who are hurting and who really need help can get it most directly and efficiently.

We all know that a virus isn't like a snowstorm. Instead of a low-pressure system meeting cold air from Canada, we're what carry the virus around. So there are things we can do to minimize transmitting the disease, either giving it or getting it. We need to wash our hands. A lot. And not just a lick and a promise. But with soap. Sing an entire verse of "Happy Birthday" and wash between your fingers and all the way down to your wrists. Then dry your hands, not just wipe them on your jeans.

Most of you know, I love doing embroidery. And your hands have to be super clean, otherwise, you get all sorts of permanent stains on the piece you're working on. I hate the hand sanitizer things, because they make my hands feel like I need to wash them. But I have some hand sanitizer in my bag now, because there are going to be times when I can't wash my hands at a sink.

And of course, keep your germs to yourself. If you're not feeling well, stay home. Even if you know it's not the corona virus, take care of your neighbors and yourself. Because who want to have a cold and then get something else on top of it? Keeping your germs to yourself, also means having less physical contact with folks outside your household. You may be very healthy and hearty, but someone else may just be the kind of person who catches every disease going. And they're going to feel awkward saying, in essence, "Stay away from me. You might diseased." There's just no socially acceptable way to say that. So don't put people in a position where they want to say something like that.

Last week, you noticed we made some changes to the church service. We came to the Lord's table and celebrated the amazing grace of God that invites us there no matter who we are, no matter what we've done. But we minimized the number of people who touched the bread and the juice, and that with gloves. We're wishing each other a good morning at the start of the

service, but not shaking hands. We're singing together for the benediction, but we're not forming a circle holding hands.

I know. I miss it too. As a single person, it's one of the few times of the week when someone puts an arm around me, or rubs my arm. But for now, just for now, we're going to give it up, so that those among us who are more vulnerable don't have to make an extra effort to keep themselves safe.

Now those are all practical things. But we are emotional and spiritual beings as well. So with words like "pandemic" and "death rate" and "market crashes" hanging in the air, it's not human, it's not realistic, to pretend that those moments don't frighten us. If we're doing our job and staying on the human side of the line, we should just admit that. Part of handling the virus is to be more isolated, which is exactly what emotional and spiritual beings do not need when they're frightened.

So be honest about being frightened. Right now. And think about what would help ease that fear. You know that pile of photos you've been meaning to get into an album? That pantry that needs some cleaning out and fresh contact paper? That cabinet door that hasn't been closing correctly for six months and just needs a pair of new hinges? There are a bazillion things which are beyond your control. What is within your control? What can you do to soothe yourself? And do you have what you need to do to do it? Reading is soothing for me. And I realized that some of what I'd love to read lived here in my office at the church. So if you walk into my office, the shelves look like they're missing teeth. But if I really want maximum soothing, I need a cup of coffee. And that's when I realized that I needed more coffee filters. They come 200 in a pack. I buy them once a year. Well, apparently, it's that time of the year. Just a little early.

You may also want to tend to your prayer life. In today's bulletin, there's a 10 minute exercise that you can do daily or any day you want, to reflect on when you felt the presence of God, and how your day might have gone better if you had stayed more connected with God. I've been finding it really helpful of late, so I'm passing it along in case it works for you.

Now some of you are thinking, Cath, you're telling us not to overreact and you're doing a whole sermon to basically tell us to get ready for a big snowstorm. That's completely overreacting.

But some of you are thinking, oh, girlfriend, that snowstorm prep stuff is adorable. But what's coming is going to be so much worse. Three days of food, water and medicine isn't going to begin to cut it.

Well, maybe. I'm praying that it all passes over us and nothing goes wrong. But from what we can see in other parts of the world, that doesn't seem realistic. And yes, from what we can see in other parts of the world, it will take more than what we have for a bad snowstorm to ride it out if it hits as hard here as it has there.

But here's the thing. We're taking this journey together. If we need to do more to take care of each other more, we will. That's what this church always does. If we need to figure out how to have a worship service over the internet, so we come together but stay physically apart, we'll figure it out. If we need to have one person grocery shop for five families, we'll figure it out. If there are folks who need to go to the office and yet the schools are closed, we'll figure out how to keep the kids safe and sound. Whatever one of us needs, we will come together and figure it out. Because that's what being a person of faith means.

We are beloved of God. We do nothing, *nothing*, for that love. We *can* do nothing for that love. It is freely offered and is as real as any pandemic or market crash could ever be. We are beloved of God. Since we can do nothing to remain in right relationship with God, except humbly thankfully accept a gift greater than anything we could ever earn, we don't need to spend one ounce of energy trying to prove to God or anyone else that we are worthy of God's love. Because we're not. We *are* free to put our energy into loving God's creation, by doing what we can do. Keeping ourselves out of the way for 72 hours, so the professionals can help those in real need. Washing our hands. Keeping our germs to ourselves. Addressing our fears by acknowledging them and focusing on what we can control. Attending to our prayer lives.

We are beloved of God. Nothing we can do can change that. So let's do what we can to show how grateful we are to be so loved. It a journey that will last a lifetime. Amen.