

Pandemic Church, Transfiguration Church

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Exodus 34:29-35 and Luke 9:28-36

Two years. Two years. Though stories of the novel coronavirus, COVID 19, were bubbling up, our first real knowledge came two years ago. Two years ago next Sunday, we fist and elbow bumped as we passed the peace, though no masks yet. A week later, March 15, 2020, we shut it down. It will just be for a few weeks, a staff colleague remembered that I said, wishfully.

That first Sunday, our daughter, here for the installation service that would happen 18 months later, held my phone as I quickly learned what a Facebook Live post was and I talked for some minutes into that small screen.

We kept pivoting, into a nicely produced recorded service, with other offerings – live on Zoom and recorded – as those two weeks grew into months.

For a while, there were three of us in the building on most days, lower level, first floor, second floor, with working happening remotely, and our comfort and facility with Zoom growing.

There was the big tent, which, contrary to some opinion, did not meet my lifelong dream to be a revival-preaching evangelist.

There were many fits and starts – recorded Christmas Eve, front lawn Christmas Eve. Outdoor events that were rained out. The murder of George Floyd in the midst of all of this.

Two years. It hardly seems possible. Not to mention all that each of you endured, to varying degrees, and all that we endured together. First – 900,000 deaths in this nation. In our eagerness to move on, may we never forget that.

- And may we never forget the heroism – that's the right word – of nurses and doctors on the frontlines, and hospital workers who cleaned and cared, and medical researchers, and hospitals facing extreme challenge.

- May we never forget teachers who taught in the most demanding of circumstances.
- May we never forget garbage workers, and restaurant workers, and grocery stockers and truck drivers.

This isn't quite over yet – that's not my point, though some new moment seems to be on the near horizon. Two years. Do you remember? Binging things like "The Queen's Gambit" and "Bridgerton." The rise of knitting and sourdough bread baking and birdwatching. The return of family meals. People caring for one another in deeply profound ways. I cannot say that there was ever any silver lining to any of this, yet there were some habits and practices we might want to continue.

Yet there are other things I remember, and will continue to ponder. Extraordinary division within our culture and body politic on science and masks and social distancing and freedom and neighborliness. Pfizer and Moderna and Johnson and Johnson. Delta and Omicron variants. Students struggling to learn and missing things like proms and commencements and athletic events. Families turning their homes into schools and retreat centers and fitness centers, all the while trying to work themselves, hoping that furloughs wouldn't further deepen the already-present anxiety. Cancelled weddings. Postponed funerals. Had we even worried about something called the "supply chain" before, or worried that the Giant would never not have toilet paper?

Again, this is not over yet, as if we know what "over" will look like, as if we have any understanding of the real and deep long-term impact and implications – for each of us, for our world and nation, for the church, for this church.

But as we watch case and mortality rates decline, at least in the city of Philadelphia, and vaccination rates increase, at least in the city of Philadelphia, this day, this last Sunday before the commencement of Lent, this week, when for at least a few minutes it felt like Spring after a long winter, this week, when we can begin, just begin, to imagine some life without masks, this week, this historic week, when war comes to Ukraine and a Black woman is nominated to the highest court in the land, this week, when we encounter a very strange and powerful and profound gospel story, this week, this Sunday, this moment, when at best I will be able to say – paradoxically – yes, this is true and at the same time

this is *also* true, because I, like you, am still trying to make sense of it all, what it means for me as an individual person, what it means for our world and nation, and, what I spend much of my thinking and doing time, what does it mean for us as a church, a church in a constellation of churches and a church as this particular community in this particular time and place.

The first paradox – this and also that – is about time – that in COVID time, time moved very quickly and very slowly all at once. There were times when it felt that time had little meaning, that we were just waiting, and other times when important things and insights were happening, a reminder from Ecclesiastes that to everything there is a season.

In Luke's version of the Transfiguration – a word that means a kind of dramatic transformation of appearance – Jesus goes up a mountain to pray. This is, at the start, a story of prayer, a good Lenten reminder. He took three disciples with him, our surrogates. Suddenly, his face and appearance changed – he was transfigured. Two figures appeared, whom the disciples recognized – we don't learn how—as Moses and Elijah, representing, as most scholars say, the traditions of the law and prophets. The three engaged in conversation. Peter and James and John were half-awake and half-asleep – not that any of us has ever experienced that in church. They try to make sense of it. They don't – Luke even tells us that they didn't have any idea what they were talking about, also not the first for a religious gathering. The drama level is amped up as a cloud overcomes them and a voice booms out – “This is my Son, my chosen; listen to him!” And just like that, it is over, and a deep and intense silence comes over them.

What to make of all this? I wonder that as the Exodus story of Moses encountering God on Mount Sinai foreshadows the Transfiguration. Moses' face was shining when he came back down from that divine encounter. When he spoke with his people, they noticed the change. After that, Moses would wear a veil, a face covering, a mask, if you will, when he spoke with the people; he would remove it when he ascended the mountain to talk with God. Others continued to cover their face whenever they encountered God, given who they were and who God was.

The mask debate has become more than debate about masks, sadly, in these two years. A political symbol, a symbol of our divisions. My annoyance at masks –

fogged glasses, mostly – has never risen to the level of a complaint. It has been an extension of neighborliness and respect as well as a health precaution. I wonder how masks will persist, or not, and what they will symbolize. Neighborliness and respect, I hope, but I am not so sure. Surely, they prevented the passing of illness, at the same time as they prevented the full connection we seek with others, a symbolic as well as physical barrier. But surely, they protected us, as our forebears understood when they approached the divine.

The three disciples wanted to build three dwellings, little buildings, to house Moses and Elijah and Jesus. Good impulse or bad? Or both?

Perhaps you read a *Times* piece a few weeks ago that had my social media feed blowing up, as much as it does. An Anglican priest suggested that once COVID was over, that churches should stop live-streaming. My first instinct was to send her our equipment bill. My second instinct was to think her fundamentally wrong. My third instinct was to still think that, but with some reflection on her points. Churches are communities, she seemed to say, and communities need to gather in person to *be* communities. Well, *yes and*, I thought. We had begun the livestream conversation before COVID, so that new people could discover us, so that college students could watch us while away (because that's the first thing on their mind), so that you can watch us when you are on vacation (because that's the first thing on your mind), so that our members who are no longer able to be out can watch us – an important consideration. COVID accelerated and magnified that need.

Yes, a community of faith, a church, gathers at a certain place, in flesh-and-blood community. And yes, I'd like everyone to be in church, here, or somewhere, not only because it helps my job security, but because there is something deeply meaningful about incarnational gatherings. Perhaps people have gotten out of the habit of getting up, getting dressed, coming here. I don't know that for sure – I am not certain that anyone knows that for sure right now. But I am compelled that many who can't be here in person are here in spirit, and online, the immuno-compromised, the traveler, the less than fully ambulatory, the seeker. Community happens in many ways.

And on top of that, while the impulse to build three little buildings was good – a gathering place – it can miss the point that the church is not the building, but the

people, and that mission happens – an important COVID consideration – when the church leaves the building.

There are technical questions – how will we navigate this as it moves from pandemic to endemic? How will technology function in our life as a congregation? What are the budget and personnel implications? How have we been changed, functionally and practically, by this experience? What does connection look like? What does engagement look like? What new habits can be developed? How can we return to some things and discard other former things? How will this building matter? Are there financial implications to this, and if so, what are they? What have we learned? What do we need to learn?

But there are deeper questions – who are we as a community? How will we welcome all? What is our mission? How have we been changed by this profound pandemic experience and how will it make a difference as we journey into the future? How do we understand God to have been present through all of this, if we have at all?

To those questions, we must listen to the voice that tells us to listen to Jesus.

Again, I would never say that there is any silver lining to any of this – too much death and hardship for that, too much uncertainty and anxiety. Yet as the clouds depart and that booming voice retreats and we come down the mountain and are left with Jesus and each other, we have an opportunity – to forge a new thing out of this moment, to listen to Jesus, truly listen, and to be shaped by what we hear. To discard notions of “normal” and “how it used to be” and imagine together how it might be, how it needs to be. Because despite our very human tendencies to mess it up, Jesus keeps inviting us along for the ride, calling us. We always do better when we listen to him, even for such a time as this. Amen.