



“Don’t Stop Now” ©2020 - Ellen Clark Clémot

Sermon by Rev. Ellen Clark Clémot, Interim Sr. Pastor, Larchmont Avenue Church

Date: March 15, 2020, 10:00 a.m. 3rd Sunday in Lent

Text: Exodus 17:1-7

- Theme: “We are called to trust in God to guide us through the uncertainties of life to find our freedom in Christ.”
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Gracious God, help us trust in you as we face the wilderness of life, that we might be reminded that you are always with us to make us stronger in faith and firmer in our conviction, that you will provide us with everything we need.

Now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Is the Lord among us or not?

We washed our hands. We scrubbed all surfaces. We stocked up at Trader Joe’s. Still, the virus is everywhere. And long before this, we always took care of ourselves: worked out, ate right, got enough sleep, paid our taxes. We did everything right, but people are still getting sick.

Why this Covid-19 virus, why now, and why here? How did the East coast cluster of cases end up on our doorstep? Is the Lord among us or not?

Travel restrictions, telecommuting, event cancellations – no more Broadway shows, March Madness, or school. Even church services are suspended. Stay home. Mitigate. Social distance. Flatten the curve. Beat this bug.

Is the Lord among us or not?

We’re not the first to wonder. It hit the Israelites too. Not the Corona Virus, but severe social disruption. Moses leads the Israelites out from slavery in Egypt, following God to freedom – and into the Sinai desert. Forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Forty years of nothing to eat but manna. The passage we read this morning tells of their latest debacle. Our text follows on from the manna story – that steady diet of mystery food called “manna” which means, in Hebrew: “what is it?” Imagine “what is it?” for breakfast, lunch and dinner – manna snacks and manna meals, nothing but manna for a lifetime – 40 years.

Some of us might not mind this time of waiting and wondering about when the virus will strike one of us. But most of us are stressed. We suddenly find ourselves with a full to capacity household – both spouses now working from home. The kids are home from school for two weeks. Your carefully stocked larder, all prepped for a time of emergency quarantine, has now been half-consumed by the basic hunger and boredom of the people in your family. They’re usually are out of the house all day, eating at school or work, somewhere else.

Even for those of us who live on our own – it’s no better. We can’t sneak into the store to buy whatever we forgot, because its likely the shelves have already been emptied by the folks stocking up. It’s enough to make us want to grumble, were it not for the life and death nature of this disease. We need to hunker down. We need to mitigate the risks, and yet, we want to fend for ourselves. We need to feed our families. We need water to drink. We need hope for the future.

We’re only human, after all, trying to survive. The Israelites were probably feeling like they had more than their share of life challenges in trying to survive as well. Born into slavery in Egypt, back-breaking building projects along the Nile. Escape, by the grace of God. A long walk in the wilderness. Now they must have felt that they finally had turned the corner on their wandering. We read that they are now leaving the wilderness of Sin to enter the rocky land of

Rephidim. But then, just when they think the worst is behind them, they run out of water. Not a drop to drink. Nothing. Without water they will die in a day or two. They begin to grumble. They quarrel with Moses. They complain: Why did you bring us out of slavery in Egypt to kill us with thirst? Moses tells them to tone it down. “Why do you test the Lord?” But all of them are asking, deep in their hearts: Is the Lord among us or not?

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It’s a serious question. We might be asking it ourselves. The virus we face is serious and it is deadly. The pervasiveness, and invisibility, of the virus means that containment is no longer possible. Mitigation is the new strategy – “flattening the curve” to make sure that not everyone gets sick at once, because we are all likely to get sick. Instead of acting in ways that prevent us from disease, our best course of action now is to act in responsible ways as people who may already be infected – stop the spread by removing ourselves from encounters with the most vulnerable people in the community, the ill and the elderly.

We are working from home in order to reduce the risk of becoming disease carriers. We don’t want to promote the spread of this pernicious disease, lest our health care system snap under the strain of having hundreds of thousands of people ill at once. You’ve heard the analysis. You’ve probably done the math. And yet, you know that we must carry on, somehow, living our lives while protecting ourselves, our families, and our neighbors, while we persevere, day by day.

So we worship today, together, in our sanctuary space, as one last gasp of community time before we do our part to mitigate risks and distance ourselves. On Monday, when the schools close, we will suspend our youth programs as well. Session has suspended future Sunday worship here at LAC for a time.

But for today, on this Sunday morning, in a sermon entitled: “Don’t Stop Now,” of all things - what lesson can we learn from this scripture text? What do those grumbling, thirsty Israelites, and the faithful exhausted leader Moses have to do with us? What hope can we find for our day when we, too, begin to ask, with greater alarm and seriousness, as the situation here in the U.S. further deteriorates, as we know that it will: “Is the Lord among us or not?”

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There just might be something – some Good News for our day. There is hope in this passage – for all of us. First, there is the good news of God’s grace. God does provide water for the thirsty flock, eventually. God instructs Moses on what to do: take the staff that Moses had used in striking the Nile during the days of plagues. Strike the rock at Horeb – water will come coursing out from the rock. Moses does these things in sight of the elders of Israel. They witnessed the miracle of the water coming from the rock. The life-giving water saves them all. It is a significant message: God provides all that they needed in the end.

The second lesson is this: Moses, their leader, did not have a solution of his own until he put his trust in God and asked God for help. Then the solution came. It may have been an implausible one, water from a rock somehow, but it came with ingredients that God had already provided to Moses and the covenant people of God. It’s not to say that Moses couldn’t think for himself, or that we need not try to solve the problems that face us – but God helps. It’s always Love that saves the day. Faith yields trust and the ability to cooperate, even with something as ephemeral as the Holy Spirit.

And finally, there's Good News in knowing that Moses was already equipped to provide the help his people needed. He already possessed the staff that would bring forth water. It was the same staff that had brought salvation for the people in the past. Moses already possessed the ingredients for success. He had carried that staff of salvation around for decades.

In other words, Moses had all that he needed already on hand to save his people: trust in God, a deep faith, and experience. The only element that was missing was the overwhelming power of the Almighty which only comes when humans humble themselves in face of overwhelming adversity.

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A survival story like this one gives us some assurance that we will survive the threat that confronts us as well. And we can learn from this story a few hard-earned truths. Remember that God is with you – Love is present. The life-force of our Creator is relentless in wishing us to survive and to flourish. Take comfort that God has already provided you with what you need. If you are a scientist, it might be that all you need is your wits in developing a cure to this deadly disease. Or maybe what you need is your kind-hearted compassion in caring for homebound seniors or vulnerable family members of your own. It might be that what you have is “enough” – enough food, enough supplies, enough to get by, and you can start to share more with your neighbors in need. Or it might simply be that we have each other, and we can start to trust that together, in Christ, as a church, we can rely on one another to get through these difficult days.

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The church building will remain open this week. Our outside groups will continue to meet here for AA and Al-Anon – and so will some of our inside groups. Although we recommend remote dial-in for meetings, you can still come to LAC and pray, hold devotions, or work on a community service project that inspires you. This morning Session suspended church services on Sundays for the next few weeks, it's true. But it also made another decision.

Session also approved a grant request developed by our welcoming committee leadership, to be presented to our Presbytery, to develop and host a community workshop on mental health first aid. It is a training opportunity that we want to provide for our congregants and community partners. Together, we can learn how to help our homeless neighbors who come to our doors every week, sometimes daily, looking for help, assistance, or a quiet place of peace. How we receive them, how we assist them, and what help looks like, can vary a great deal in face of someone with a mental illness. We want to help our neighbors, and we will continue to envision new ways to do that, ways that are relevant and meaningful for the community context in which we find ourselves.

We can also join in an emergency food support program for Mamaroneck children who depended on school lunches and now have none. Watch your in-box for how you can join in to help.

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So, what else can we learn from Moses in the wilderness with his bewildered, bedeviled flock of thirsty people who were at the absolute end of their rope? We learn that when you're lost in the wilderness, when you find yourself in a life or death situation, where survival is at stake, you don't stop there. You don't set up your tent and make your new home address a

terrifying wilderness place. You don't cozy up to anxiety and depression or fear. You keep moving. You walk out of there.

We all need to keep moving, day by day, hour by hour. This time of crisis will pass. It may take awhile, but together, we will journey forward. We can find our way out of this wilderness place with the help of God, and by accessing the many gifts that God has already given us.

And when you realize you have spun your wheels in the wilderness long enough, you start to see that Light of hope shining in the darkness, the Light that darkness cannot overcome. That's when you've found your Way. Then you reach out to a neighbor, and share the good news, saying: "Let's not stop here. Don't give up. I can see a Light in the darkness ahead. A cool stream of living water for us to drink. And a clearing. Peace of mind."

Don't stop now, people.

There's hope just ahead – enough for all of us to live on – and thrive.

Amen.