

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I am preaching today from the study in my home because I am on COVID quarantine. Unfortunately, my husband tested positive for COVID earlier this week, and he is isolated in our guest room. His symptoms aren't too bad and he is getting better each day, praise God. Fortunately, I tested negative that same day, and I'm not having any symptoms, but out of an abundance of caution, and following the nurses' recommendations, I am quarantining at home until enough time has passed that I know I did not get COVID and can't spread it to anyone else, which at this point is Tuesday the 30th. I want to give a special thank you to Pastor Kirstin Kellaher who is leading worship in person at Mt. Zion this morning - I am so grateful for her generosity in time and sharing her gifts of ministry and worship leadership. And thank you to everyone who has graciously held us in prayer as we navigate this difficult situation.

I spent much of Advent last year connecting the season of Advent and its historical and spiritual focus on anticipation to our current moment of pandemic, but friends, this year, it's on a whole different level. Actually experiencing the thing that you've been anticipating in a negative sense for so long (nearly two years of pandemic at this point, friends), and physically living through it is both challenging and enlightening. This, for me, is embodying the spirit of a church season like I never have before. And while I certainly do not wish COVID or any of its impacts on anyone, and do everything I can including praying fervently for a quick end to this whole pandemic, I'm grateful for the opportunity to live and speak into an embodied season and moment like I'm not sure I've been able to before. I've had some time to reflect on embodying anticipation amidst this quarantine (often while chopping vegetables into small pieces which is holy in many ways). And I appreciate this connection to how our faithful forebears must have felt during various seasons in their journey of faith too.

What must it have been like in those three days after Jesus' death and before his resurrection? What must it have been like to wait for God's deliverance in the time leading up to the Exodus? What must it have been

like for our early church leaders to try and lead and grow and be in community together after Jesus was gone and they faced violent persecution left and right?

Now look, obviously, isolating and quarantining in my comfortable, American, middle-class, 21st century home with plenty of space and resources is an enormous privilege and because of this privilege I will not truly be able to know what many of these situations were like. And my experiences now are a lot easier to handle than those of many of our fellow people around the world, even in this time and place. But this is the beauty of the Gospel and of our faith as a whole - there are certain tenets and core parts of being human and having faith that are true regardless of the physical circumstances. Regardless of our place or time or privilege, we are knit together as one body of Christ, one common humanity, who are here to live and love and serve God and one another with whatever we can and have.

And what makes the challenges of being human bearable is the love and support of our fellow people.

We find God in the people around us, in the love and support they provide as well as the lessons learned and growth that happens from them too. The ages and experiences of the people around us give us a good demonstration of this idea of here and not yet, anticipation and arrival at the same time. In this moment in time, we are in relationship with people who have lived a great variety of lifetimes, some longer teaching us lessons of what is to come or what could come about in our lives, some shorter teaching us to see things with a new perspective, with wonder, as if they're happening for the first time. And so it is with God as well, always co-creating new life alongside of us, as well as guiding us with wisdom and grace for what is known about the way life progresses.

The stories we read from scripture today are all united with a sense of speaking into a community's reality. These messages are helpful and life-giving for an individual, sure, but their original message was meant for a group of people, connected by faith and relationships with one another. In

the Jeremiah reading, we hear of God's promises for the sake of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah - it's for the communities of God's faithful people that he promises the Branch of King David, a King of Kings, the one who will save and unite us all in a just and righteous way. The 1 Thessalonians reading is written from a group's perspective, using "we" and "our" pronouns to describe what they are doing to show gratitude and live out their faith as a community. We pray most earnestly, night and day. We feel joy before our God. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

Our Gospel reading gives us Jesus' words to the community around him towards the end of his life, close to the time he knows he is about to be killed and resurrected. The anticipation Jesus must have felt, knowing he was to die a painful death, after betrayal by someone he loved, a dear friend, a disciple. And yet, even in the midst of his anticipation for something terrible and painful, he still leans on the hope for what is to come. He says to the people gathered, "So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

We hear in the Gospel of John that Jesus, the Word of God, was with God in the very beginning, the creation of the world, and now we hear from Jesus himself, assuring us that even in the midst of life in heaven and earth passing away, his words, Jesus himself will not pass away. The promises, the hope, the new life made human in Jesus Christ will never pass away. We may be in a season of anticipating his arrival, the newness of his own life born from Mary, but still Jesus is with us, in the here and the not yet.

Dear friends, let us take comfort in knowing that God truly knows the human experience and is right here alongside and within us throughout the whole journey. In both the journey of anticipation, and the journey of what happens afterwards, God is true and life-giving and very, wholly and holy present. God is with us, and near to us, always.

I pray that in hearing these words of God that you will be reassured of God's presence with you. I pray that you will lean on the people who love you in community and relationship - God is with them and the love you have for one another. Even as we embody and live through our hardest seasons, of anticipation, hardship, illness, heartbreak, anxiety, depression, longing, grief, whatever you are facing, dear friends, know that God is with you. God is co-creating life itself with you, and will never leave you abandoned or forsaken. Let us all look with hope towards the future, that this too shall pass, and that the promises of life in Jesus Christ will never pass away. God is with us, always. Thanks be to God, Amen.