

Homily for the 4th Sunday of Easter

May 2-3, 2020

Readings: Acts 2:14a, 36b-41; 1 Peter 2:20b-25; John 10:1-10

Preacher: Deirdre McKiernan Hetzler

“I came that they might have life, and have it more abundantly.” That line jumped out at me as I reflected on today's readings. Abundant life. Isn't that what we all long for? Especially in the midst of this pandemic. As we struggle with job losses. Financial worries. Illness and death. Isolation. What does it all mean? What does life in abundance look like for us? Where do we find God in all of this?

For those with eyes to see, God is right there with us, in the midst of the mess. God is in the medical staffs, fighting to save lives. And holding the hands of the dying. God is in the grocery clerks. Postal workers. Caregivers. All who risk their lives to make life possible for others. God is in the strangers who wave and greet others on their solitary walks. In those who check on the elderly and bring food to shut-ins. In those who volunteer for charities (up 288 percent in the pandemic!).

Even in the serious threat posed by climate change, God's abundance is revealed. The isolation imposed by the virus has reduced pollution exponentially. Smog is gone. Waterways are becoming cleaner. Animal species are thriving again.

The spiritual writer Richard Rohr recently observed, “Sooner or later, life is going to lead us (as it did Jesus) into the belly of the beast. Into a situation that we can't fix, can't control, can't explain or understand. That's where transformation most easily happens. That's when we're uniquely in the hands of God. Right now, it seems the whole world is in the belly of the beast together. But we are also safely held in the loving hands of God, even if we do not yet fully realize it.” God can use our sufferings to expand us. To transform us. And bring about the promised abundance.

I think of a friend in the medical field. One who cares for her patients with great compassion and sensitivity. Recently, traumatized by the grave illness of a loved one, she shared that the experience has given her new insights

into patient care. She will return to work with new skills and deeper appreciation of those in her care.

Another friend speaks of how the diminishment that come with aging, the feeling of being considered “less than,” has led to a greater experience of solidarity with marginalized groups in our society. God uses suffering and pain to bring about new growth in us.

When the crowds in our first reading, pained by Peter's speech, ask what they should do, he says, “Repent!” The Greek word in the original text has a much stronger meaning than our translation. It involves a complete change of direction. A rupture of “business as usual.”

Is it possible that God can use our sufferings from the two pandemics—of Covid-19 and the climate crisis—to bring about new growth? Growth that leads to a more abundant life? Do we perhaps need a new definition of what that looks like? Are we ready for the transformation that is on offer?

When even *The New York Times* devotes an entire section to “The America We Need,” we are put on notice that a change of direction is needed. We cannot return to what was once considered normal. Our best hope, they say, “is to pursue the intimations of solidarity implicit in this moment to reframe the terms of public discourse...” As children of God, we are all members of the one family. Might we then hope that solidarity would become a way of life for us? "And thus create abundant life for all."

In this Easter season, we who celebrate Jesus' Resurrection remember that Jesus' Spirit has been poured out on us. Empowered us to integrate the values he taught by his life. Empowered us to make the kinds of choices those of the early Christian community memorialized in Acts, chapter 2.

Jesus offers himself as the One who reveals the deepest meaning and purpose of human life. Those who get caught up in his message will find abundant life in it.

