

2nd Sunday of Easter
April 19, 2020
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Macalester-Plymouth United Church
Scripture: Psalm 16

In H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, Martians launch a deadly invasion of Planet Earth. Human resistance is heroic but ultimately futile. In the end it is not humans who defeat the invaders, but lowly pathogens—viruses—for which the Martians have no immunity.

In that story, it is viruses that save us. In our present retelling, it is viruses that are the invading aliens, and human beings are the ones with no immunity.

In both cases, the virus is a biological agent that causes disease in its host. It is not a moral agent. It does not distinguish the moral worth of one being over another. But it enters a new host as something novel, and in so doing it introduces new possibilities, possibilities that can go more than one way.

Where moral agency comes in, is with us. We are able to discern different options open to us, to consider different possible outcomes, and to choose. For most of us here, our moral choices are guided by the ethics of Jesus and what we understand to be the nature of God. And all of that, we learn from the Bible.

Over the centuries, Jews and Christians have developed methods to interpret biblical texts. There's the surface, or literal meaning. There's the allegorical, or spiritual meaning. There's the meaning derived from comparing different texts. But then Christians seek out the moral meaning and try to suss out allusions to the afterlife, while Jews seek out the esoteric meaning, the secret revelation of God hidden under the deceptive covering of words. It is a method rooted in Kabbalistic mysticism.

Regardless of the method, the point is to learn something about the nature of God, and how God acts in the world. And the point of that is to answer the question, "How do I live?" We pattern our own behavior—the character we form, the choices we make, the way we relate to others—after our understanding of God

For example, if you believe creation to be the work of a loving creator, you try to treat creation as you imagine God might.

Most of us don't have the time to go through all these approaches. Most of us settle on an interpretive key, a lens through which to read the Bible and find meaning and inspiration. Perennial favorites have been justice and love.

Variations on the themes of love and justice are many. For some, the variant is power. Who has it? Who doesn't? How is it used? For others the variant is codified in the frequent references in the Hebrew Bible to the widow, the orphan, the stranger. The measure of a just society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. For others still,

the theme is inclusion, expressed in hospitality and equal participation in a society's civic, economic, and political life.

And then there's the interpretive key of "the two ways." Here's one example. In Ezekiel 34, the prophet contrasts the two kinds of kings Israel has had, using shepherds as his metaphor. The bad shepherds show how bad leadership brings disaster. They are self-indulgent leaders who enrich themselves at the expense of the flock, leaving the sheep vulnerable to various predations. God then decides that the best way to teach the way of the good shepherd is to actually become that shepherd. God, as the good shepherd, governs for the common good and pays attention to the needs of the flock—all members of the flock.

In other words, there are two ways to govern: one leads to disaster, and one leads to the common good.

Jesus made much of this "two ways" argument, especially by contrasting the just and compassionate kingdom of God with the imperial Roman empire of Caesar.

A little aside here: we are accustomed to the term *basileia* being translated as "kingdom." A word closer to the actual meaning is "commonwealth of God," favored by theologian John Cobb, or "household of God," favored by theologian Sallie McFague.

So, all of that brings me to the heart of what I want to say to you. The pandemic has brought us to the edge of a precipice—or, more accurately, our social and economic choices had already brought us to the edge; the pandemic opened our eyes and started us teetering.

There are two ways before us. We can fall, or we can spread the wings of faith and fly. Either way, it is a time of unprecedented opportunity.

Before continuing, let's accept as given that the Covid-19 virus is a tragedy of unparalleled loss—of life, health, and livelihood. It is not the will of God. Or, it is the will of God only insofar as natural processes are part of God's creation.

But human beings are meaning-makers. We can't help it. It is in our nature to ask "why?" and to seek understanding. Leaving aside the bad theology of "God's will," I think the most interesting theological context for this pandemic is "apocalypse," which—end-time visions aside—simply means unveiling.

In bible-speak, the point of an apocalypse is not to reveal the future or prophesy some calamitous end, but to shed light on the present. And that's where the unprecedented opportunity comes from. The pandemic as apocalypse has made starkly visible the great inequalities in our world—racial, social, economic.

Covid-19 is pulling aside the curtain and revealing the weaknesses of an employer-based U.S. healthcare system that leaves too many under- or uninsured.

Pandemic as apocalypse has also made starkly visible this country's increasing income inequality, which has concentrated income and wealth at the top, hollowed out the middle, and increased poverty at the bottom.

But this apocalypse—this unveiling—is an unprecedented opportunity.

For one thing, the world is now being confronted with what the mystics and physicists have been telling us for years—that we are all connected. It is useless—and lethal—to think otherwise.

We are not only connected; we are interconnected—and we are not just interconnected; we are interdependent. We are woven together in an interdependent web of life—animal, plant, mineral . . . and pathogen.

Out of that deep sense of connection, something exciting is happening. A global collective of learned change agents is spontaneously coming together. Philosophers, scientists, ecological economists, agronomists, systems thinkers, and theologians all over the world are meeting virtually to envision a way forward, out of systems breakdown and collapse.

Unlike the recession economists of 2008, these people have no desire to restore obsolete systems that failed, or systemic practices that are unsustainable.

These conversations are taking place right now, all over the world. They remind me of the turn taken by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his wartime writings. Midway through the war, he started focusing on how to rebuild Germany after the war. Because he knew there *would* be an after, and it would require the best minds and hearts for a chastened and just Germany to be born.

To make meaning out of the corona virus in this way is to see it not only as a deadly enemy, but also as a messenger. It reminds us that nature is crucial to human lives and livelihood. Seen this way, Covid-19 is undeniably an ecological crisis.

It requires a comprehensive, organic approach that recognizes the pandemic as a political, economic, philosophical, ethical, and psychological issue. In short, this novel virus requires novel thinking. And it's happening.

Teetering on the edge of that precipice, many of us realize that we can no longer abide the oppressive political and economic structures that we used to tolerate as inevitable.

Alternatives that a few months ago seemed pie-in-the-sky have become burning necessities. Critical changes that only months ago seemed impossible are now looking realistically attainable.

This is one way forward. This is the one where we unfurl our wings of faith and take flight.

I don't need to dwell on it, but of course we all recognize that there is also another way, the one where we fall—or are pushed—into the Pit. History has been ravaged by tyrants and dictators who lived in chaotic times and used that chaos to justify their seizure of power.

We know those kinds of people are active today, too. Nationalism, xenophobia, bold incursions into surveillance technology, using power to restrain voting, to loosen environmental standards, and to subvert democracies with bloodless coups, all are also made possible by this pandemic.

So, two possible ways forward. And no certainty about how long we will be living like this. If it becomes necessary, how do we sustain ourselves for the long haul?

And that brings me back to why I chose Psalm 16 for today, and why I wanted you to know about the different interpretive methods in Judaism.

But first I want to share something I came across in my pandemic reading last week. It was in the *Atlantic*, and it quoted Vice Admiral James Stockdale, who was held as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. To survive the experience, Stockdale said he relied on a mix of hope (“the need for absolute, unwavering faith that you can prevail”) and realism (“the discipline to begin by confronting the brutal facts, whatever they are”).

The pandemic has schooled us in the realism of brutal facts. Psalm 16 speaks to that unwavering faith that you can prevail. It is a psalm of great strength and comfort, but it is also, in its own way, an example of the two ways. That is, it is clear that the psalmist has made his choice. He knows which way he will follow, and the quiet assurance that flows from this choice has endured through the centuries.

I'm using a unique translation, so I put it in the bulletin. If you linger over the words, you will be surprised by how well they speak to us, in this era of pandemic, and how well they counsel our minds and hearts in what we must do in the days ahead.

And here I reach for the Jewish mystical interpretation, the one that discerns God hidden under the deceptive covering of words. Each of the verses is winnowed to its secret meaning, and each secret meaning is further winnowed into a simple affirmation. On its own, each affirmation becomes a statement of faith. Spoken as one, the affirmations form a prayer.

I'm going to read the psalm again, but this time pausing to read the secret ascribed to the different verses. Then, I will read each secret and the affirmation ascribed to it. Finally, I will read the affirmations alone, spoken as a prayer.

¹ Keep me safe, O God, for I seek refuge in you.	Secret of a Life of Trust	I trust in God.
² I say to the Lord, “You are my benefactor; My only source of well-being.”	Secret of a Surrendered Life	I belong to God.

<p>³ The gods whom earth holds sacred are all worthless, And cursed are all who make them their delight. ⁴ Those who run after them only multiply their sorrows. I will not offer them libations of blood, Nor take their names upon my lips.</p>	<p>Secret of a Separated Life</p>	<p>I side with God.</p>
<p>⁵ The Lord is my allotted share and portion; I am content with my inheritance. ⁶ Delightful country has fallen to my lot; Lovely indeed is my estate.</p>	<p>Secret of a Happy Life</p>	<p>I am satisfied with God.</p>
<p>⁷ I bless the Lord who counsels me; in the night also my heart instructs me.</p>	<p>Secret of an Instructed Life</p>	<p>I listen to God.</p>
<p>⁸ I am ever mindful of the Lord's presence; God is at my right hand; I shall never be shaken.</p>	<p>Secret of a Steadfast Life</p>	<p>I am engaged with God.</p>
<p>⁹ Therefore, my whole being exults, And my soul rejoices. My body, too, rests unafraid. ¹⁰ For you will not abandon me to Sheol, Nor suffer me to see the Abyss. ¹¹ You will teach me the path of life. In your presence is unbounded joy, In your right hand, eternal delight.</p>	<p>Secret of a New Life</p>	<p>I will live with God.</p>

I can think of no better way to leave this time with you, as your theologian in residence, than with these words of faith. If we hold fast to them, we will find our wings, and we will prevail. Amen.