



*a Faith Community in the
Anglican Church of Canada*

228 Pearl Street
Thunder Bay, ON P7B 1E4

March 26, 2020

Dear Sisters and brothers:

As we come to the end of Lent, and move through the days of Holy Week, all of us realise that this will be a different sort of Easter for all of us this year. We had, of course, hoped to be able to gather together for worship by Palm Sunday, but the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus requires us to extend this period of time of physical ('social') distancing for what is most likely to be a much longer time than we had at first thought.

Although we are not physically gathering as a community of faith, it is important for us to realise that we are not 'disbanding'. We have read that our God *'who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples made by human hands.'* The apostolic writer told the newly baptised: *'As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.'*

In this light, we have said frequently and for a long time that 'the church is not the building; the church is the people.' Miguel Petrosky writes: 'We can believe that God is present and still be either six feet away or in the safety of our homes on Sunday morning. The church will always be the church no matter how physically close its members are. God isn't just found in the confines of a physical church building — God meets us where we are.'

Now, to paraphrase something Abraham Lincoln said in another context, we are engaged in a great trial testing whether this community can endure. Do we really believe what we say we believe about God and about God's people? In this situation, we are being called upon to find what Archbishop Anne called in her latest letter 'creative ways everyone is staying connected during this time.'

Our journey that began on Ash Wednesday leads us through this long fast of Lent, into the difficult days of Holy Week, along the road of Jesus's Passion (his suffering and death). It is a journey that has taken on an unexpected significance for us this year. Last Sunday we heard the familiar words of the Psalm speak of walking 'through the valley of the shadow of death' and we realised that these were not just comfortable religious words of a long ago Hebrew Poet. They describe our present reality.

It's so very important, when there are so many reasons to let go of hope, to remember that where we walk, our Lord has walked and continues to walk with us. Even in 'the valley of the shadow of death' — even in this time of global pandemic — our Lord is with us, comforting rod and staff in hand. Our journey takes us through lenten lands and days of passion right to the open door of Easter's empty tomb.

We will not be able to physically join in the processions of palms, but in our hearts and in our homes we can sing: 'Ride On, King Jesus'. We can consider what our Lord has done for us, not as the proverbial 'white knight' but as the servant who washes our feet and feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation - as the broken one who prayed three times in the garden but then drank deeply of the cup of suffering. We can see the wounded one who dies bleeding on the cross to show us how very much we are loved and forgiven.

This we recognise as the same one who broke the power of death – death that had kept humanity bound with chains of fear – rises never more to die. We may not be physically present to kindle the New Fire or to shout together: 'The Lord is risen!' But we can trust anew that our Lord – the light of the world – 'is risen indeed!'

In that light we are being called to consider again how we, made to be members of the Body of Christ by the Spirit, live out our vocation to be the light of the world – to *'love mercy, do justice and walk humbly with our God.'* now in this time of 'physical distancing'.

We are very much an incarnational community. We gather as an incarnational community to celebrate together sacramentally. We aren't able to do that in present circumstances. We're being challenged and stretched by the paradoxical question as to what it means for us to remain together when we can't be together.

As part of this, Archbishop Anne, along with other leaders of the church, have called us to a period of 'Eucharistic fasting'. That means we will continue, for the time being, to engage in worship using non-eucharistic liturgies and will continue to livestream via our website and Facebook page until such time as it is safe for us to gather again. (This will include the liturgies through Holy Week.)

These are difficult times. I wish I could tell you otherwise or promise that this will all soon be over – that we will just go back to normal. I can't. The world and the church which emerge from this experience will likely look and feel very different.

I am reminded of Sir Winston Churchill's leadership during the Second World War. He didn't mince words nor engage in Pollyannaish magical thinking. He said: 'Nourish your hopes, but do not overlook realities.' What we don't want to do is fall into the traps of despair or denial. These really are difficult times.

At the same time, these are times ripe with potential, and we want to sustain, as much as we can, our life as a community of the beloved. We want to encourage one another and continue to hope in God. There are many ways to reach out to one another and our other neighbours while still practicing safer 'physical distancing'.

In that light, I echo these words from Archbishop Anne: '... we have been forced out of our buildings and are discovering fresh ways of being the church in new and exciting ways. We need a message of hope now more than ever and we are all being transformed by the prayers of the wider church as we gather together in our own small corners.'

I will end by saying this: I am inexpressibly grateful to the wardens. Pastor Gail and many others who continue to work long and hard to lead us through these times. I have heard people asking how we are

enjoying this 'staycation', but leadership in this time for which none of us were prepared calls for persistence and energy and creativity and careful thought – all a lot of hard work.

Godspeed,

George+

ps: Here are some other things to take note of:

- ✝ *The building will remain closed indefinitely, though phone calls will be answered during office hours. All gatherings, events or meetings must either be postponed or conducted by means of various internet tools.*
- ✝ *The Food Cupboard will operate every second and fourth Sunday of the month in its present modified format. No emergency food parcels will be distributed during this time.*
- ✝ *Pastoral visitation is drastically restricted. In emergency situations please call the office or the Rectory. We realise that, despite the focus on this crisis and the cutting back on medical and social services, other things still go on – and some things get worse. Isolation is hard for many people for different reasons, not only physically, but relationally, emotionally and spiritually. We want to do what we can to help.*
- ✝ *There is a new 'prayer chain' to supplement our ongoing prayers. Please call the office with potential requests. Remember to pray especially for leaders and for those who must engage in heroic forms of 'risky behaviours': medical personnel, emergency responders, those who deal with the dead and their families, those who keep vital services operating, and those mostly unseen people who enable these others to keep going.*