

Surviving Our Fear of the Unknown  
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Today's Collect: Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Last month, on Ash Wednesday, our scripture readings asked us to consider our mortality. From ashes we came and to ashes we will return.

We asked ourselves a question: How will we live with the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death.

A few days later, on the first Sunday of Lent, we were asked to consider what it would mean for us if, instead of giving up something for Lent that we like (such as food or wine or Netflix), we give up bad habits that we do not wish to bring into the future with us.

So much has happened in the last few weeks that it's hard to believe that was only a month ago. And indeed, the reality we're facing now might seem to put the fears of a few weeks ago to shame:

A world-wide pandemic has disrupted every part of our lives, prompting schools to close, people everywhere to work from home, and—worst of all—our church services through Easter and until May to be canceled.

Our collect today speaks of “the swift and varied changes of the world,” and, boy, have they ever seemed more “swift and varied” than in these last couple weeks, when every day brings new restrictions and cautions to our everyday life?

But while many of us are fearing for the future, we have an opportunity to trust that God can handle this situation, however big it becomes.

And for us, we still have time to decide if there are things about ourselves that we don't want to take into the future—things we can still “give up” for Lent.

In the 1933 presidential inauguration speech, President Franklin D. Roosevelt famously said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

Those words could hardly seem truer than they do today in this post-coronavirus world in which schools around the world are closed, countries are

closing their borders, and people are shutting themselves away at home with their hoard of food, bottled water, sanitizer, and paper products to survive an unknown future.

We might recall Roosevelt's words and think, yeah, but what about the threat of respiratory illness? What about the chance of our families going hungry? What about the guilt I'll feel if I go out in public for no good reason and unintentionally carry the virus to others?

These are real fears that are fueling a lot of people's actions. People fear getting sick or getting others sick. They fear what will happen if more businesses close and we no longer have access to items like food, toilet paper, or medicine. What if rules become stricter and we aren't allowed outside our homes for more than an hour a day, like they're doing in China and Italy? What if desperate people start breaking into homes looking for items they can't find elsewhere? What if it comes down to them or me?

Roosevelt's words should still resonate for us, even 87 years after he spoke them in the midst of the Great Depression, when a quarter of the American population was out of work and most people were food insecure.

We are not at that point yet today, but the threat of job loss and rationed food may still be on people's minds.

In remembering Roosevelt's words, we should also remember their meaning: If what we fear is the simple act of being afraid, then we can overcome our fear by changing our outlook.

That's easier said than done, but consider this: What if you knew the outcome of these weeks or months of social distancing?

What if you knew that at the end of all this, society would get back on track and the economy would bounce back. If you knew all that, could you change the way you were living today?

Instead of feeling isolated at home, could you enjoy the chance to spend more time with family and work on projects you've been putting off?

Instead of fearing for a job that maybe isn't paying you while you're social distancing, if you knew that when all this ended you would find a different job that you like even more, couldn't you enjoy this time to improve upon yourself, perhaps writing a book, taking an online class, or learning a new skill?

Instead of fearing about the stores running out of your usual foods, knowing that after all this is over the grocery stores will have made it through and never stopped stocking shelves and never been truly destitute, then couldn't you

enjoy this time of being able to try new recipes, shop from your cabinets, and learn to enjoy foods you never would have considered before?

That is the sort of assurance that God promises us. He's told us that he's taking care of things, and that if we trust in Him, everything will be fine.

There's a saying that when God closes a door, He opens a window. Even today we're seeing physical representations of that idea all over the world, where people have shut themselves at home behind closed doors, but through open windows they're singing assurances to their neighbors.

These are little moments, but they matter. They give us hope. They remind us of what's important.

The reality is, of course, that we don't know what's going to happen. And that makes us afraid for what *could* happen. But in fearing for the future, so many of us are ignoring what we have in the present.

We're overlooking what's right in front of us. Most of us are not destitute. If we're out of work or short on supplies in an area where those supplies aren't available, then that's a troubling reality—but for those of us who trust in God to come through for us, the speedbumps of life are never a reason to spend our days in fear and spiritual isolation. It's never a reason to spread fear and doubt among our friends and neighbors or on social media.

Roosevelt's words have told us that fear itself is the only thing to fear—an inverted way of saying that there actually is nothing to fear. It translates into the idea that if we succeed in banishing fear, then there is nothing to stop us from being at peace.

The words of Jesus go even further in telling us how we can replace fear with faith.

Instead of fearing the unknown, we should embrace what *is* known: All those blessings we so often take for granted in times of fear.

Today's readings focus a lot on death—the bones of people no longer here; the spiritual death we suffer when we place our faith in the flesh and other earthly things; and the death of Lazarus to illness.

The sisters of Lazarus—Mary and Martha—send word to Jesus when they realize how close to death their brother is, but Jesus doesn't arrive until four days after Lazarus has been sealed in a tomb. Both sisters independently tell Jesus that if he had been there, Lazarus would not have died.

This could be taken as a sign of their devotion to Jesus and their believe in his abilities and teachings. I've also seen it as perhaps a criticism. After all, they had sent word to him days earlier. Did they know that he purposely waited before traveling there? Do they blame him (even a little) for taking too long?

I think we've all had times like this in our lives, when we wondered why God was taking so long to answer us or to come our aid and heal a loved one. Maybe we lost a loved one and wondered why God let this happen.

This reading is traditionally placed on the fifth Sunday of Lent, before Palm Sunday, but it seems especially appropriate for what we're all going through now—the uncertainty of illness and the potential for death. Many of us might feel like Mary and Martha longing for Jesus to come and prevent the threat of death that we see impacting our lives. We might even fear the sort of outcome that Mary and Martha endure upon losing their brother to death and having to confront Jesus, when he does arrive, with the reality that he is too late.

And yet, we can also learn from this reading. Jesus tells Martha her brother will live again, and when she thinks he's referring to the afterlife, he tells her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

This is a difficult passage, and I've found no clear answer on what Jesus means by this. I've read that theologians have found the words "resurrection" and "life" in this phrase to be redundant, and it seems that Jesus' words are referring to Lazarus, giving Martha assurance that her brother will live again.

But I think it's equally fair to recognize his words as assurances for those who haven't died yet. If we remove the first instance of the word "die," the passage reads like this:

"Those who believe in me ... will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

Couldn't he be saying that to prevent spiritual death, we must "live and believe"?

I would say that's reason enough to live as he would have us live—with belief that God has our backs and that we have permission to be at peace, without fear of what tomorrow will bring.