

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 13—Year B
Exodus 16:2-4,9-15
Psalm 78:23-29
Ephesians 4:1-16
John 6:24-35

I have always considered the **discipline of preaching to be a conversation—putting the text in conversation with what’s going on in the world, in the life of our congregation, and in our own individual lives.** It’s a **discipline that demands something of the preacher *and* also demands something of the listener, with the Spirit doing a whole lot of work in between.**

And this has been one of those weeks **in the world** that feels **all things COVID** with the news full of stories of the **Delta variant** sweeping across our country and the **CDC’s revised guidance on masks.** We’ve had yet **one more revisiting of what that means for us as a community at St. Luke’s,** and I am hearing **your own individual concerns as you try to make sense of all of this.**

For many of us, it feels like we’ve **circled back to an earlier point of the pandemic** where it feels like we **don’t quite know all that we need to know** and the **risk assessment that *was* working for us isn’t up to the task.**

For some, there are **genuine feelings of anger** at the **reluctance of so many to get vaccinated—** a sense that **we didn’t have to be dealing with another wave** and all that comes with it.

For some, there is a **fear of judgment of the decisions they have made** for themselves or for their family.

For some, there’s **frustration that we, as a society, can’t get it together to deal with this virus as the public health concern** that it is, which **demands a communal response.**

For other’s there is **genuine fear as they hear that Delta is much more transmissible with more breakthrough cases *and* poses a greater threat to those who aren’t vaccinated including loads of children,** as well as **those who are immunocompromised, and those who are older.**

For **those on the frontlines—medical people, those who work in restaurants and stores and other businesses interacting with the public, educators, and decision-makers—for those on the frontlines,** there is an **unbelievable weariness at having to go another round, the mental energy of thinking things through all over again,** and for some, **having to deal with the vitriol** that can come with **asking people to put on a mask or keep some distance.** I heard the phrase **“decision-fatigue”** this week, and that **applies to ALL of us** whether you are **making decisions for a school or a church or an organization or your family or yourself—we ALL have decision-fatigue.** So, **all of these thoughts and feelings and responses** make for **quite a stew** that’s stirring in a lot of us, and ***sometimes* it helps just to know what’s *in* the stew.**

And let me say, for the record, how **deeply grateful I am to all of you who continue to support the decisions we keep having to make here at St. Luke’s.** I promise you, I would not still be

standing at this point without **your support and encouragement**. We are **blessed to have a deep sense of being in this together**.

As I sat with these **lessons** this week, I couldn't stop thinking about **how they speak to this moment we are living through in the midst of this ongoing pandemic**.

Exodus tells the story of **being weary with the wilderness, of being hungry, of longing for Egypt and what was before, of complaining**. I get it. We *keep* wandering through this endless **COVID wilderness with the hope of the promised land on the other side but with the uncertainty of when or how we will reach it**. There is a **hunger, both to get beyond it and to go back to a time before we ever entered this wilderness, say March 1st, 2020**. And there is the **endless pointing of fingers at leaders for how they have led us**.

And then, there is **the action of the Lord**. In **Exodus**, **God tells Moses "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'" Sure enough, in the evening, quails came up and covered the camp, and in the morning there was this layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat."**

Our **Episcopal tradition** has always had a **reverence of scientific discovery with a fundamentally positive take on human reason and a deep appreciation of the natural world, always finding a compatibility between science and faith. Good religion and good science so often lead to the same place—mystery and awe and a sense that something so much bigger is at work**.

I can't hear this **story about manna** this morning without feeling **like the vaccines are manna provided by God through the gifts of scientists to fortify us as we move through this pandemic**.

And yes, there is a certainly a sense of **"What is it?"** I know I felt that when I first heard of **mRNA vaccines**, but then in learning **more about the last 35 years of science that has led to this breakthrough**, well awe crept in. It does call for a **leap of faith** that I also understand **not everyone is ready to make, but that doesn't make it any less of a gift that has been offered to us to help us navigate this virus**.

AND God also provided quail. Maybe the **quail** are things like **treatments, or front-end strategies to keep our bodies as healthy as we can—good rest, good diet, heavy doses of nature, exercise, things like this—or the healing power of connection and community, or mitigation measures like wearing masks, keeping distance, and washing our hands—all that stuff we are sick of doing**.

I get the **longing for Egypt and March 2020**, but the **only way through this wilderness is through**. There ain't no getting back to Egypt.

As *you* think about this **pandemic**, where can you identify the **quail** and **manna** that **God** has provided to sustain *you* in this time?

Then we come to the **Ephesians** passage, and it is loaded. All that the **writer of Ephesians** counsels, *we can take to heart* as we **wrestle with our call as people of faith in this time**. We need to cultivate *humility, gentleness, and patience*. We need a good dose of *bearing with one another in love*, and we need to make our very best efforts at *maintaining unity in the bond of peace*.

Ephesians reminds us that “there is *one* body and *one* Spirit, just as you were called to the *one* hope of *your calling*, *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism, *one* God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” If the pandemic has taught us anything it’s that we are truly *one* body; *we are all connected. What I do impacts you; what you do impacts me*. There is no getting around it. Creation herself tells us this. My goodness, this week, we had smoke from wildfires across the country in the Northwest—*we are all connected*.

Ephesians talks about having a *calling*. As **people of faith**, in light of this interconnected *one* body of which *we* are a part, in this **COVIDtime**, *what is our calling? What is our vocation?* This week, **two words** keep going round and round in **my head and heart**—“**social responsibility**.” *What is our social responsibility to the body and to other individuals in it with whom we are bound together?*

Ephesians goes on to say that “*each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift,*” and then sets out all the *different gifts that Christ has given* “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for *building up the body of Christ*, until all of us come to the *unity* of the faith and of the *knowledge* of the Son of God, to *maturity*, to the measure of the *full stature* of Christ.”

Oh, that’s a lot! We each have *been given a gift* to **equip others** for this hard, hard work that is **intent on building up this collective body**, the hard work of **weaving common language, common knowledge**, the hard work of **calling ourselves and others to maturity**, the hard work of **living into the full stature of Christ**—*to speak as he would speak, to act as he would act, always* with an eye to the most vulnerable.

What *particular gift* have you been given in the **midst of this pandemic**? What *gift* are you being called to exercise as *you* think about *your place* in this interconnected body? *What is your part to do?* What is the *particular, unique way* that *you* are being called to exercise *your social responsibility*?

Is it to **take the vaccine**?

Is it to **wear your mask** even when it’s **hot, uncomfortable**, and so derved **inconvenient**? Or to **keep distance from others** when every fiber of your being wants to **draw close**?

Is it to take *extra* mitigation measures because you are not able to take the vaccine, or you have discerned and chosen not to take the vaccine, and yet *you also* care deeply about protecting your neighbor far and near?

Are you being called to exercise the gift of prayer, praying that our bonds of affection as a society can once again be woven together *instead* of pulling apart and fraying?

How are *you* being called to exercise your *social responsibility*? What is *the gift* that *you* are being called to exercise *in this time*?

Ephesians knows how tricky this all is and how we have to be on-guard against going down rabbit holes. We are reminded that “we must *no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about* by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.” A cruise through social media would indicate that there is no shortage of such things these days.

The writer continues to counsel, “*But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.*”

As followers of Jesus, we are called to grow up, *every day in every way*, and to immerse ourselves ever more deeply in Christ. *He’s the one in whom this whole body resides and holds together.* He stands in the space between us, *joining us together, knitting us together, calling us and equipping us to work properly, to promote the body’s growth* all with an eye to *build up this body in love.*

What does all of this look like in COVIDtime?

How do we hold fast and maintain equanimity when misinformation or adrenalin-laden news cycles or the very real complexity of an ever-evolving virus is *tossing us to and fro*?

How can we tease apart those who would turn the pandemic to their own ends, to their own profit, who really have no interest in the care of the collective body, how do we tease these apart *from* those who are giving themselves in service to this body?

How can we have the courage to *speak the truth in love* to one another, *respectfully and kindly*, but *honestly and clearly*? It’s always risky to share one’s *truth* with another—*are we willing to take such risks for the sake of the body*?

And are *we* able to delineate *between* the thoughts and opinions fueled by our ego’s anxieties and our thoughts as informed by the mind of Christ?

Are we willing to let *love* be the source of our words and deeds and the end of all that we say and do, *not to mention informing every thought and action in between*?

With so many at St. Luke's having gotten vaccinated and those not vaccinated being really committed to the mitigation measures that we know work, you may wonder why I am preaching about this at all. I am preaching about it because **this particular moment feels so fraught**; it's affecting ALL of us, *and* because **our social responsibility** isn't just about the actions we have taken and will continue to take, but **our social responsibility**, as followers of Jesus committed to the most vulnerable and to the love of our neighbor, **our social responsibility** is rooted and grounded and arises *from our hearts*, and *a lot of our hearts* are a mess right now. It is easy to lose our way in judgment, frustration, anger, and fear.

We need those gifts that Ephesians talked about at the beginning—humility, gentleness, and patience, *and* a whole lot of bearing with one another.

We need to step back and get to the 20,000 foot view—looking down upon ALL of this with the mind of Christ who *loves the whole body*, who *died for the whole body*, who *rose for the whole body*. In the end, we've got to remember that *our salvation, our wholeness*, does not lie in vaccines or in our rights or in innate immunity or in this earthly body at all; *our wholeness* is hidden with Christ in God—it's beyond this temporal world; it's beyond *all of this*; it's eternal, and *it can't be taken away*. As the Burial Office proclaims, “So then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's possession.”

That *doesn't mean* that our actions in this moment don't matter; *they do*, but our deepest *wholeness* lies *elsewhere*, and knowing that *gives us freedom* in this moment that feels so constrained. Knowing that we belong to Christ and that, through him, *we belong to one another* reorients us to our *social responsibility*, *not* out of a sense of duty, but out of a sense of *love*.

So, yep, **this week has been a COVID hot mess**, and **no doubt it will continue to be**. As we all keep stumbling through this wilderness, *keep looking for the manna, keep looking for the quail, trust that we have gifts to offer* that are so desperately needed *at this time in this world*. *Be wise and discerning*, and *keep growing in Christ's love*. *We are one body*, and the only way we're going to make it through this wilderness is to *remember how connected we truly are*. Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC
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