

Sermon – “The Church Always”  
Sunday, March 22, 2020  
Scripture Readings: Psalm 137:1-4; Acts 16:19b-34  
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Our first scripture reading is from the one hundred thirty-seventh Psalm, verses 1 through 4. This Psalm of lament speaks of the Hebrew people’s sense of bewilderment and loss after everything they knew came to an end when the Babylonian Empire conquered and destroyed Jerusalem, sending the people into exile in a far-away land. Hear now these words of scripture:

*By the rivers of Babylon—  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.*

*On the willows there we hung up our harps.*

*For there our captors asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”*

*How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?*

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Our New Testament reading shares a story of the Apostle Paul and Silas, out in the world sharing the story of Jesus Christ, and suddenly finding themselves arrested after they brought to an end a scheme by which people were profiting from their use of a slave girl. Listen now for God’s Word in this passage from the book of Acts, chapter 16, verses 19b through 34.

*[T]hey seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. <sup>20</sup> When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews <sup>21</sup> and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” <sup>22</sup> The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup> After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. <sup>24</sup> Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.*

*<sup>25</sup> About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup> Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. <sup>27</sup> When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” <sup>29</sup> The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> Then he brought them outside and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” <sup>31</sup>*

*They answered, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”<sup>32</sup> They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.<sup>33</sup> At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay.<sup>34</sup> He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.*

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I have an important correction to make: Church is not canceled. You may have heard otherwise. If so, you have heard wrong.

If you walk up to the doors of 533 South Walnut Street in Springfield, Illinois this morning, you might find them locked.

But church is not canceled.

The confusion is understandable. We aren't the first ones to go down this road. The ancient people of Jerusalem were besieged, locked within their own walls for over a year with dwindling supplies, and then conquered and exiled to Babylon, and their place of worship, the temple, the house of the Lord, was not just locked; it was burned and torn to pieces.

*By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.*

*On the willows there we hung up our harps.<sup>1</sup>*

I wonder if we feel as though we must now do the same—hang up our harps for the next few weeks, or months.

*How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?<sup>2</sup>*

Many of us are alone, isolated, distanced from one another and from life as we know how to live it. Even more troublingly, we know this is only the beginning of an exile whose time we do not know.

But I want to offer you again this truth: church is not canceled. Church is never canceled.

And you know this, if you are one who grew up in the church, for we are told from childhood that church is not a building, nor merely a ritual of Sunday morning. Church is what you are—what we are—when we live as the church.

Today our world has found itself facing pandemic and uncertainty. Illness and our attempts to stop it have left all kinds of things shut down, closed, and canceled.

But *we* are not left with nothing to do, just another institution forced to come to a halt, waiting and hoping to go back into operation as soon as this time has passed. No—the opposite is true: this is a time in which we are called upon to step forward and shift into gear. This pandemic is a worldwide crisis. People are suffering and anxious. This is a moment of worldwide need. And that means it is a moment where the church can, in a way, shine, as bearers of the light, as something whose existence means something in an undeniable way.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 137:1-2 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 137:4 (*NRSV*).

It can shine to its members, as a family of spiritual reassurance and in the practical meeting of needs; and it can shine to the community around it, as a demonstration of calm hope in the face of worldly threats combined with a no-holds-barred living out of its mandate to serve its neighbors.

Crisis is a place of loss, suffering, and hardship. It is also a place where those things can be met by a kind of beauty and depth in imaginative response that goes beyond the ordinary. Are we willing to bring our faith and imagination to bear on this moment? It takes seeing things from a perspective that is not the obvious one.

Did you listen to the story told in our second reading today?<sup>3</sup> Paul and Silas were in confinement. Perhaps you can relate. Theirs was a literal imprisonment. There was no question of their being in the pews that day. But it was clear from the beginning of this narrative that they did not think of church as a place they went, for the worship went with them, as they prayed and sang hymns, the other prisoners listening along.

But the really interesting part comes next: an earthquake, knocking the prison doors open and breaking the chains holding everyone tight, including the unjustly imprisoned Paul. In the midst of this sudden chaos, what does Paul see? What does he find important here? Not his own chance to get away; not even the turmoil around him is what he latches onto. He sees the need of a fellow human being, one who believes his failure is so great that his life is altogether over, and Paul reaches out to him in reassurance. Paul met that man in the midst of disarray and mutual crisis, and he stopped and chose to be the church to that man, and that made all the difference. So thankful, the guard was, that he was trembling, having thought the entire prison had escaped on his watch.

And maybe we have some of that work to do ourselves, that work of looking at things in the strange, upside-down way Jesus Christ taught his followers to do, where what may happen to our bodies or possessions is much less important than living our lives as the right sort of persons, where our hope is in something deeper and truer, that cannot be taken away from us by disease or any other worldly loss. It is this perspective, of calm, confident readiness to live to our neighbor's gain that has always been the intriguing, shining light which has perplexed and drawn in the world.

The Christian church has never lived *fully* as church, but it has never entirely ceased to be church, either, and it has often been by reaching out into the kind of thing we see around us today that it has most fully lived up to its name. Remember that half of the hospital capacity in this city exists because the church—the people who follow Jesus Christ—have always been committed, and remain committed, to meeting people in their moments of need.<sup>4</sup>

Uncertainty abounds today, and we do not know what exactly is to come. But we can pretty clearly see that this present moment will offer plenty of occasion for meeting people in their moments of need. I have great hope for the capacity of this congregation to mobilize in response to what faces us.

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 16:19b-34.

<sup>4</sup> St. John's Hospital, a major hospital in Springfield (with other hospitals and medical centers in the Midwestern U.S.), was founded by the Hospital Sisters of St. Francis, a Roman Catholic Franciscan congregation devoted to a ministry of health.

There is an opportunity here. Well, there are opposite opportunities, here, actually. Some people will look at all the fear and see the opportunity to buy the entire shelf of baby formula at the grocery store and then re-sell it at inflated prices. I think it is our duty to work contrary to those forces in the world, by seeing a different opportunity—the chance to drop the unimportant stuff that takes over our lives, and step in where some new hole of need has opened up.

And an interesting piece of this is that there is no area of the church's life that does not bring a chance for doing something, a choice between backing away from or stepping up to the plate. There are people starting these conversations already—yes, they are only tentative as everyone scrambles to figure out how to navigate a situation that is changing daily or hourly.

But people who have taken up congregational care as their focus are talking about what it means to meet the needs of this faith family. People whose work is mission and community service are talking about how to understand the complex needs of the community around us. Worship leaders are trying to adapt and keep the whole church body in worshipful practice and continued connection to the Word. Those for whom prayer is a major calling will have plenty to do throughout this time. Creative work is being put into keeping fellowship and learning alive for children, youth, and families. The leadership of the church is taking up new questions daily. People with technological skills are jumping in and providing assistance in making sure things can get done remotely that used to get done in person.

What does it mean for the whole church—the particular church, the regional church, the worldwide church—to mobilize, to awaken, to step up and shine in the world's moment of need? What does it mean for you, and me, to be that church? I suppose it is time for us to find out.

Because any rumors that might exist to the contrary, the church is not shut down. Nearly two millennia ago, the one whom we follow gave an order: “Go,” he said. And we are still going. For “remember,” he then promised, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”<sup>5</sup> And from that day forward, there has never been such a thing as canceling church. Church is a continuous thing. *We are* the church; and we are *to be* the church, wherever we find ourselves, whatever our circumstances, whatever befalls us, and whatever befalls the world. We are to be church to each other; we are to be church to our neighbors; worshipping and praying and serving and caring, and imagining all of that work into new shapes to fit each new moment.

If what you need is to be the church, or if what you need is for someone to be the church for you, we want you to know: church is not canceled.

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<sup>5</sup> From Matthew 28:19-20 (NRSV).