

THIS IS OUR DESTINY
SIGNS OF LIFE: WHY CHURCH MATTERS
SHELTER
FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT – MARCH 22, 2020
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I know you've heard me say plenty of times that we select the readings a month or more before we read them in church.

As most of you know, we're doing a sermon series this Lent based on a program developed by the good Episcopal monks at the Society of St. John the Evangelist and the life-long learning center at Virginia Theological Seminary.

I received the first pamphlet announcing the themes early last fall.

Even then, this week, the fourth week of Lent,
was labeled *Signs of Life – Why Church Matters: Shelter*.

This week's theme was chosen nearly a year ago.

A year ago, what did we normal people know of pandemics?

A year ago, who had ever been told to "shelter in place" because of one?

But, just yesterday, I got a call from the Pinellas County Health Department that I need to shelter in place, to self-isolate, because of a pandemic.

Someone I know and had been close to,
back when we thought "social distancing" meant bumping elbows,
had tested positive for the COVID-19 virus.

Now, do I think the good brothers and the professors at VTS should give up their day jobs to become modern-day Nostradamuses making predictions about our destiny?

No. I already know our destiny. So do they. So do you.

I remember a dog-eared old story about a guy sitting on a bus reading a Bible when a young fella gets on and sits next to him.

He peers over the man's arm to see what he's reading, and the young fella blurts,
"Hey, I read that book! I don't want to spoil the plot for you, but we win!"

I admire the young fella's confidence, but what's he saying?

That good wins over evil? That Christians win over other religions?

Or that certain Christians will win while everyone else is damned?

My faith, my trust, my hope is much broader than that:

Our faith, woven throughout Scripture, teaches us: God is love.

God is love, our destiny is that love wins. Love always wins.

I have grounded my faith and life on this, yet I also know that our destiny in eternity doesn't necessarily mean that we'll have a bed of roses to lie on during our time on earth, or an easy path to walk in this life.

The saying that "life is difficult" is proving true for us all at this moment.

When life is difficult, a common human reaction is to be like armadillos and pill bugs: we roll up into little balls of self-protection.

"Sheltering" means setting up a fortress of self-interest.

Our walls are made of suspicion, they are topped with battlements of anger,
we pour down the hot oil of greed on our neighbors,
and shoot arrows of blame for whatever has gone wrong.

Fear, despair, and selfishness rule our hearts.

But they will not win, because God is indeed God.

As we get closer and closer to Holy Week, to be faith-filled disciples of Jesus, we need to look at how Jesus, God with skin on, Love incarnate, faced things when life got really, really difficult.

He prayed. In his prayer, he was very honest about what he wanted, but he ended by saying, "Father, thy will be done."

Is it God's will that we suffer and die? Absolutely not.

We'll all die, of course – someday, from something.

But God does NOT will senseless suffering.

Love doesn't will that; we armadillos and pill bugs do that to each other.

God's will is that those of us on earth love each other as God in heaven loves us.

On earth, Jesus prayed, and he dealt with his reality and never stopped loving.

He didn't dump on others or blame others.

He did his Father's will by dying on a cross and exposing our heartless dedication to acting and harming others out of fear, desperation, and self-protection.

Before he breathed his last anguished breath,

he gave his mother, his disciples, and the thieves hanging beside him words of love, forgiveness and trust.

That Good Friday, it looked like the armadillos and pill bugs who killed Jesus won, and that fear, despair and selfishness were our eternal destiny.

Today, sometimes our world looks a lot Good Friday.

Jesus teaches us, by his life, that our shelter in this Good Friday world must not be a fortress of self-interest.

Our shelter must be in our destiny, that Love wins.

Love wins. Life, hope, and justice win.

This is our shelter in times of trouble.

The prophet Isaiah wrote in the midst of horrible trouble,

and promised that God will give us calm and security forever. This is our destiny.

The Psalmist cries out in the midst of distress, and calls God a fortress. This is our destiny.

In the Revelation to John, we hear of people who have endured great hardship,

whose lives were so difficult that they died, some because of their faith in Christ.

Now they are now sheltered in the eternal Temple, singing joyfully,

because God will wipe every tear from their eyes. This is our destiny.

Then, my Good Shepherd family, we hear the words of the Good Shepherd,

whose way of living, giving, and being is the gate to life to the fullest.

Which of you thinks a life of fear, despair and selfishness is life to the fullest?

Our destiny is a Christ-shaped life of love: doing what is best for each other, loving our neighbor, doing unto others as we would have done to us.

Here's what I know: in the midst of medical self-isolation, I have never been less spiritually isolated!

I have received so many texts and emails of love and support,

I know that Love has already won in the hearts of this congregation.

Although we cannot gather in person in the celebration of the Lord's Supper,

the spiritual Communion we will soon share is as real as your love for each other, your love for me,

my love for you – all of which is grounded in God's love for us. This is our destiny.

As we spiritually share this Holy Supper, remember that at this altar, heaven and earth meet.

Not only does Jesus open the gate to us to save and shelter us,

we open our hearts and spirits to shelter our Living, Loving God.

In a Good Friday world, we are in Christ and Christ is in us,

is how we, the church, keep rising from the dead.

This is our destiny: Love wins.

COLLECT OF THE DAY:

Beloved God, who, in your mercy, shelters us with your tender embrace; grant that we may know you as our one true refuge from the world of suffering, and help us to offer compassionate sanctuary to our neighbors in need; even as you dwell within and among us, one holy and undivided Trinity, forever and ever.

ISAIAH 32:1-2, 15-20

See here: A king rules to promote righteousness; rulers govern to promote justice each like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from a storm, like streams of water in a wasteland, like the shade of a massive cliff in a worn-out land.

[A] spirit from on high [will be] poured out on us, and the desert turns into farmland, and the farmland is considered a forest. Then justice will reside in wild lands, and righteousness will abide in farmlands. The fruit of righteousness will be peace, and the outcome of righteousness, calm and security forever. Then my people will live in a peaceful dwelling, in secure homes, in carefree resting places. Even if the forest falls and the humbled city is laid low, those who sow beside any stream will be happy, sending out ox and donkey to graze.

PSALM 31:1-5; 14-16

In you, O LORD, have I taken refuge; let me never be put to shame; deliver me in your righteousness.

Incline your ear to me; make haste to deliver me.

Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe, for you are my crag and my stronghold;
for the sake of your Name, lead me and guide me.

Take me out of the net that they have secretly set for me, for you are my tower of strength.

Into your hands I commend my spirit, for you have redeemed me, O LORD, O God of truth.

But as for me, I have trusted in you, O LORD. I have said, "You are my God.

My times are in your hand; rescue me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who persecute me.

Make your face to shine upon your servant, and in your loving-kindness save me."

REVELATION 7:11-17

All the angels stood in a circle around the throne, and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell facedown before the throne and worshipped God, saying,

"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might
be to our God forever and always. Amen."

Then one of the elders said to me, "Who are these people wearing white robes, and where did they come from?"

I said to him, "Sir, you know."

Then he said to me, "These people have come out of great hardship. They have washed their robes and made them white in the Lamb's blood. This is the reason they are before God's throne. They worship him day and night in his temple, and the one seated on the throne will shelter them. They won't hunger or thirst anymore. No sun or scorching heat will beat down on them, because the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them. He will lead them to the springs of life-giving water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

JOHN 10:9-16

I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. When the hired hand sees the wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away. That's because he isn't the shepherd; the sheep aren't really his. So the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. He's only a hired hand and the sheep don't matter to him.

"I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep and they know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. I give up my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that don't belong to this sheep pen. I must lead them too. They will listen to my voice and there will be one flock, with one shepherd."

SERMON HYMN: *The Church of Christ in Every Age*

BLESSING:

Our Triune God gives us the signs of life, equipping, empowering, and strengthening us to become disciples of Christ Jesus. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, bless you today and throughout these forty days.