“A lamp to my feet, a light to my path”

Sunday, March 15, 2020, 10 am

The First Parish in Lincoln

Rev. Jenny M. Rankin

Dear Friends

(I’ve told you that when I don’t know how to write a sermon sometimes I just pretend I’m writing a letter to you, so here goes….)

What a long, strange week it’s been.

On Monday, I spoke on the phone to my brother Tom who lives high above the Janiculum hill in Rome. Italian authorities had just announced that if there was a shortage of hospital beds or ventilators, preference would be given to those under 60 years old and without underlying conditions. My sister, who lives in Indiana, and is immune-compromised, would not qualify.

By Tuesday, he and his family were in lockdown. He got a “pass” and biked to his office in Trastevere to retrieve a hard drive to work at home.

On Wednesday, I met with the Safe Congregations Task Force who recommended we cancel in-person worship and close the church buildings. The Parish Committee responded with agility and voted to approve.

I also met with the deacons, listened as they brainstormed how they might nourish the heart and spirit of this community in this strange time. As we rose to leave, I realized I had no idea when I would stand in that circle of dear faces again.

On Thursday, the staff scrambled to pack up what they needed and get out of their offices.

By Friday, universities, schools were closing, sports, so much closing. Numbers continued to pour in, charts, graphs, data, predictions. The New York Times had a list of things that had been “crossed off” with red chalk line: Broadway. Disneyland. The NHL. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Cherry Blossom Festival. NCAA March Madness. Staggering.

I know don’t have to tell **you** how long and strange a week it’s been.

One of the questions running through my mind as your minister, is “How are we going to continue to be a community when we cannot physically gather together?”

That’s the question.

I don’t know the answer,

But I know that a church is not a building,

As beautiful as that sanctuary may be.

 It’s the people.

And I have faith in the people of this parish

I may not have known you for long but I’ve seen you in action;

Poet Marge Piercy writes “I want to be with people who submerge in the task,”

Who go into the fields to harvest and work in a row and pass the bags along….

Who are not parlor generals and field deserters

 But move in a common rhythm

 When the food must come in or the fire be put out….”

That’s what we’ll all need to be doing in these days ahead and I know you’ve been doing that here since your beginnings in 1749, through the American Revolution, Civil War, World Wars, flu of 1918, Depression.

None of us know what these days will bring

 But I am thankful to be ministering alongside you

 In this community that is trying

To care for one another

And also reach out and serve the wider world.

There is nothing easy about this particular moment.

A few minutes ago, you heard some of the names of people we love; I hope you’ll send more for worship next week.

There is nothing easy.

Yet isn’t that one reason that religious communities like ours exist, isn’t that one reason we come together?

To speak the truth the best we know how,

 And stand shoulder to shoulder (metaphorically speaking in these days!)

As we navigate through whatever it is Life brings to us.

And to lift up and name the sacred dimension of life—

That we are not alone

That there is, as Paul Tillich said, a Ground of Being

Some foundation on which we stand

Or, as the book of Deuteronomy says,

“Underneath are the everlasting arms”

For me, in times like this, I go back to the basics.

I tick through the names of the people closes to me, locate where they are and that they’re safe, my three children, husband, sister, brother, other family, friends.

I’m a minister and I need to connect with you, let you know that I’m here, and feel that you are here for me as well.

And I try and find some spiritual ground to stand on.

This week I pulled out my Bible and turned to words that women and men have been saying for a really long time.

The Psalms, 2000 years old and frankly they aren’t always that easy to read.

There’s anger in there and sadness, there’s fear, there’s a lot of talk about enemies and vengeance and since I don’t always know the historical context I don’t always know what they’re talking about.

And there’s a lot of masculine language, “Lord” and “he” and sometimes I have to change the words so they work for me.

But what moves me about them is they are so gosh darn honest--

They’re written by women and men who have been pushed to the brink—

They live in a time that’s uncertain

Sometimes they feel afraid

Sometimes they feel grateful

They’re all over the place and so am I

And so there’s something comforting for me

To just place myself inside that river of human prayer

 And honest emotion

 That’s been flowing for so many thousands of years.

First I looked for the lines I know--

“I lift up my eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help”[[1]](#footnote-1)

“The Lord is my shepherd.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

But then I just jumped around—

And stumbled on Psalm 119—that’s a really long one!

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” [[3]](#footnote-3)

Well, I need a lamp right about now; I need a light for my path

And maybe you do as well.

“Your faithfulness endures to all generations

You have established the earth and it stands fast….”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Other parts are tough to take but I think they describe the human experience, or at least they do mine at certain points in my life:

 “I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters and the flood sweeps over me”

It’s tough, but I can imagine reading these words inside a prison cell or a psychiatric ward or a rehab or my own living room, in certain seasons of life, and them making sense.

Then there’s something for me to learn here.

There’s no filter, sometimes its messy, it’s blunt

But its people who place themselves before the God of their understanding and

Try to just say out loud what’s in their heart:

 “Here, I am, God, this is how it is for me today

This is how it is for me and the people I love

This is how it is for the town I live in, the country, the world.”

This week, the world trembles and we tremble with it

We go back to the basics.

We turn to the people we love

To one another

And to the sacred, wherever we may find it.

I turn to words I was given as a child

Not always understanding them

But needing to touch the strength of other women who have walked in uncertain times as I do

Needing to touch the honesty of those who have wrestled with demons of fear and anxiety as sometimes I do

I reach out to a Mystery I cannot know or touch or ever hope to name adequately

But one I continue to seek. Will always continue to seek.

“Be still and know that I am God,” the Psalmist says.

I’ll try to make that my mantra early in the morning before I turn on the news.

Let me end with these familiar words from Psalm 23

It’s a kind of prayer and I invite you to join me if you wish.

Let us pray.

The Lord is my shepherd

I shall not want

She makes me lie down in green pastures

She leads me beside still waters

She restores my soul

She leads me in paths of righteousness

For her name’s sake.

Yea though I walk through the valley

Of the shadow of death

I shall fear no evil

For thou art with me

Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me

Thou preparest a table before me

In the presence of mine enemies

Thou anointest my head with oil

My cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

All the days of my life

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord

Forever.

Amen.

1. Psalm 121 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Psalm 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Psalm 119 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Psalm 119 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)