



St. Paul's Church

422 Market St.

Box 1551, Camden, New
Jersey 08101

Faith and Presence

Today, Father, this blue sky lauds you. The delicate green and orange flowers of the tulip poplar tree praise you. The distant blue hills praise you, together with the sweet-smelling air that is full of brilliant light. The bickering flycatchers praise you with the lowing cattle and the quails that whistle over there. I too, Father, praise you, with all these my brothers, and they give voice to my own heart and my own silence. We are all one silence, and a diversity of voices.

You have made us together, you have made us one and many, you have placed me here in the midst as witness, as awareness, and as joy. Here I am. In me the world is present, and you are present. I am a link in the chain of light and of presence. You have made me a kind of center, but a center that is nowhere. And yet also I am "here," let us say that I am "here" under these trees and not others.

Thomas Merton

Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander

I was reminded recently how hard it is to be "here," completely present in mind and attention. Someone I love was saying something to me and I absently picked up a book while she was talking; she rightly pointed out that she was *still* talking, implying that I was not giving due attention to what she was saying. This episode led to how easily distracted I have felt these last months. I want to believe that I am not the only one who has experienced this distractedness lately, but it speaks to how easily I can be separated from the feeling of gratitude that have for this time of year, for my family, for the parish of St. Paul's, for the innumerable things that enrich my life. Presence, I

am often reminded, is something you practice.

What I love about Merton's prayer is that it includes all the sounds and sights of the Kentucky monastery where he spent most of his days, the lowing cattle and whistling quails, as well as the silent awareness of his brothers, "one silence and a diversity of voices." The thought struck me the other day that the rose bushes along the walkway at St. Paul's are begging to be noticed, to be given our attention and, unless I spent some time with them, my day would be the poorer for it. As I have tried to point out elsewhere, they don't have to observe "an abundance of caution," so they do what they are supposed to do, which is

to add to the beauty of a beautiful place. I am not a great gardener, but I do know when the world around me announces that we need to appreciate it.

Merton wrote during a time when the civil-rights movement was at the forefront of our collective consciousness, as well as the Cold War and the war in Vietnam. There was plenty to distract us and Merton writes about it copiously. We too have plenty to be aware of and to be cautious about, to pray for and to mourn, but we also need, in my view, to offer our gratitude for the beauty around us. In that attention lies our faith, faith that we still live in a beautiful world to which we need to bear witness every day.

Faith and the Kingdom

³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' ³² For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But strive first for the kingdom of God^[a] and his^[b] righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 6: 31-33

In our post-service Sunday Bible-study, we have been reading Matthew's gospel and the above passage, entirely unsummoned, appeared squarely in front of us this past week. There has been some discussion among clerics about whether to call this time of year Easter season (or "Eastertide," for the more traditional) or "the season of COVID-19," which gives the pandemic far too much dignity, in my view. In any case, Jesus does not allow us middle ground: either we are to give our concern to the physical details of our lives (food, clothing, maybe the retirement plans we don't even want to think about right now), things which Jesus believes God is already addressing for all of us, or to seek the kingdom of God.

It's no secret how difficult it is to keep our minds on the kingdom and God's righteousness, even without a pandemic outside our doors, but Jesus is unflinching in his belief that

worry is not only a distraction but has a caustic effect on our ability to seek them out. Worry is not only something that makes it hard to attend to our own needs; it has an uncanny ability to break relationships. I have been made aware of it recently whenever I tune into clergy meetings. We don't know what it will be like when we get together again (except that it will involve a huge party), but I am partial to Presiding Bishop Curry's "new rubrics of love," which he extrapolates from the end of John's gospel.

The disciples have been fishing all night (the old rubric) and have caught nothing. A stranger appears on the shore and directs them to let down the net one more time; they grouse about it but do as he asks (the new rubric). Suddenly there are more fish than they can handle. We simply will have to learn where and when to let down our nets.

St. Paul's, to all appearances, is fine. In fact, my hope is that we are a closer community of faith than when we began our isolation. We have been able to continue with our signature food ministries, we have gathered for our Sunday and weekday liturgies (including coffee hour) and have made a sincere effort to "be church" without "doing church" in the ways to which we are accustomed. All of these things mean more than flexibility; they reflect a commitment to our common life that I find breathtaking.

Jesus takes Peter aside and, after a long exchange, asks him to "Feed my sheep". We know who the sheep are who need feeding right now; it may be another set that needs our attention when we return, or a new way of feeding. I am excited about the possibilities and I hope you will join me in some conversations about what this "new rubric of love" will look like in our corner of the kingdom.

Faith and Language

For me, one of the unrequested gifts of this time is trying to find language for it, to try to use words for the isolation, the grief I hear in people's voices, the loneliness and, often, fear. To try to encompass them all would be impossible, but they are all very real to people I know and love, and so I believe we ought to be able to find words for them. After all, if we can name them, we may be able to control them (so we think) and so find some purchase on being able to endure what often seems unendurable.

We have many words for God and God's presence. Praying the daily office with several wonderful people during this time, we have been making our way through Leviticus, with all its rules and proscriptions of certain activities on certain days, things which, if we are not careful, we can find tedious and arbitrary. These commandments, however, are often separated by the words, "I am the Lord your God"; there is an implicit sense that these things should be honored because we affirm the holiness of God. Indeed, the Torah is not meant to be viewed as an inflexible set of arbitrary rules; it is rather a reminder that there is no part of our lives that is exempt from the holiness of God. In everything we

do, we need implicitly to say, "Yes" to that holiness.

It is when our lives are thrown off-balance that, like everything else, our sense of the sacred becomes de-centered. As a recovering English major and a cleric, I find it doubly frustrating. A friend who is a priest once said that, generally speaking, clergy are generally speaking; to have no words for our current state often feels like failure. I believe that my frustration has a long and glorious history. However much we esteem the great poets of old in our tradition (Donne, Herbert, Jeremy Taylor, later Rosetti) or more recent ones (Auden, T.S. Eliot), they don't do much to clarify what we have to say about God. The most honest approach may be from a fifth-century Syrian, who used the same Dionysus (now often called Pseudo-Denys), who pointed out that when we ascribe certain qualities to God—when we say the God is unimaginably loving or merciful, for instance-- we are implicitly confining God, as we are using categories which are limited by our own imagination. We have an idea of mercy but having that category does not help in conceiving the divine idea of mercy; our conception is simply too small. So, we are thrown back on the idea of mystery, but that

too seems like a cop-out in the way I hear it used, as a lazy way out of neglecting something to which we should give more thought.

I cannot find words for this situation in which we find ourselves, but I can describe the responses I see. They are people who either go out and meet challenges that would beggar most of our imaginations, or they stay at home, doing whatever they can do to stay sane. Many of these people do so not because the governor ordered it or out of fear that they might be harassed by the authorities for pursuing "unnecessary" activity. They do it out of love, for the people they might expose, for all of us who want to minimize the suffering. To my mind, that is what the sacred looks like. And to most of us, it could not seem more ordinary. But I hope that we can all feel that we are integral to God's plan of limiting the suffering. I cannot imagine a holier act or one more important during these days.

Thank you!

I would like to thank all who have made an effort to keep up their pledges. Clearly, this is an unprecedented time in our history as a parish and diocese. Many parishes are truly suffering from folks who have been out-of-work or more seriously, coping with a sickness that no one understands very well. We at St. Paul's have been very fortunate; there are, to my knowledge, few if any people who have been laid-off and no one who has been ill, for which I give thanks every day.

Sustaining our pledges may be one the most sincere forms of gratitude we can offer. The church still has regular expenses and our effort to meet them as a community would indeed be a wonderful way of showing our love for each other and the parish.

Welcome Shinjoo Cho, Our New Pianist!

Bandoneonist, pianist, and accordionist Shinjoo began her piano study in Korea at the age of five and attended Westminster Choir College in Princeton, NJ. Her path to the music of other cultures began with studies in Serbia and Argentina. Shinjoo has collaborated with international music, dance, and film artists in multi-disciplinary projects as an improviser and an ensemble musician, with performances in the US, Canada, Korea, Guatemala, and Argentina.

In 2012 and 2016, she participated in the Marlboro Music Festival under the baton of Leon Fleisher and appeared as a guest soloist with the Cleveland Orchestra. During her 2014-2016 residency in Argentina, Shinjoo's notable appearances include solo piano performance for the President of Argentina and Teatro Colón debut with Branford Marsalis Quartet during the Buenos Aires Jazz Festival.

She is director of Oscuro Quintet and a member of multiple tango ensembles in NY. Equally at home as an educator and presenter of cultural events, she resides with her husband and son in Philadelphia.