

“ENDURANCE AND ABUNDANCE”
Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
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Today’s lectionary readings remind us that the world of the Bible is distant and foreign to our own world in many ways. The 23rd Psalm and the passages from 1 Peter and John’s Gospel all use the imagery of shepherds and sheep to describe the divine-human relationship. These metaphors would make perfect sense to people in a rural, agricultural society. But in all likelihood, you and I have never set eyes on a shepherd, and our only contact with sheep is at a petting zoo! Likewise, the reading from Peter’s epistle appears in the context of an admonition to slaves to be obedient to their masters. The institution of slavery was taken for granted in the biblical world; whereas today, you and I find this practice to be not only outmoded but morally offensive. At first glance, we might ask how ancient texts that talk about sheep and slaves could have any relevance for people like us, who live in suburban neighborhoods in a free society.

And yet, all of these texts speak afresh to our generation and especially to this moment in our history. Yes, human culture changes over time, but the human condition and the divine response to that condition remain the same. This is what makes the message of the Bible universal and timeless.

All of today’s texts are written during a period when God’s people are facing threats to their very existence. These threats come in the form of external danger and unjust suffering. We all know that the 23rd Psalm paints a pretty picture of green pastures and still waters; but at the same time, the psalmist tells us that he is in the presence of his personal enemies, and that he is making a lonely walk through the valley of the shadow of death. In John’s Gospel, Jesus likens his followers to sheep whose pen is invaded by thieves and bandits who steal and kill and destroy – not anyone’s idea of a peaceful scene out in the countryside. The reading from the Book of Acts offers an idealized portrait of life inside the early Christian community, a picture of harmony and generosity; but in relation to their surrounding culture, the first generation followers of Jesus live in a snake pit, opposed and persecuted on every hand. Finally, the lesson from 1 Peter refers directly to the mistreatment and misery of his readers, whose only “crime” is to profess faith in the one true God revealed in the risen Christ.

In sum, none of these passages is written during normal times, much less blissful times – which should grab our attention because these are neither normal nor blissful times for us. Like our biblical ancestors, our lives are shadowed by external danger and unjust suffering.

In today’s Scripture lessons, the writers respond to dire situations by offering two messages to their readers. The first message is a call to endurance. The dictionary defines endurance as “the ability to withstand hardship or adversity,” or “the ability to sustain a prolonged effort or stressful activity.” With these meanings surely in mind, Peter challenges his fellow Christians to endure – specifically, to “endure pain while suffering unjustly,” thereby earning “God’s approval” (1 Peter 2:19b, 20b).

You can surely see where I am going with this. In the early days of the pandemic, many of us envisioned this as a survival test. We realized our response was a life-or-death matter, so

we took every step necessary to protect and preserve life. Today we continue to take the Coronavirus threat seriously and follow the proper precautions. But as the weeks have passed, this ordeal has become less a survival test and more of an endurance test. You and I have been required to embrace a whole new lifestyle: the inconvenience of being confined to our homes and wearing face masks when we have to go out; the challenge of working remotely for some folks and the nightmare of being out of work for other folks; the absence of activities and relationships that are a large part of who we are. If variety is the spice of life, then this period in our lives is sorely lacking in salt, pepper, oregano and garlic! Six weeks into the pandemic, a lot of us are less afraid than we are bored. Every day, we're staring at the same four walls, the same refrigerator and dining table, the same re-runs of *Law and Order*, the same few faces – if we're fortunate enough to see any other faces at all.

Thankfully, the problem for most of us is not COVID-19 fever; we have another problem called “cabin fever.” And what complicates the situation is that we have no idea how long it will be before our fever breaks, how long we will have to endure the pandemic and all the disruption and isolation it has caused. We might compare ourselves to runners in a competitive race. It takes one kind of endurance to run a 100-yard dash; it takes another kind of endurance to run a 25-mile marathon. But which kind of race are we in? We really don't know.

In any case, there's that word again: endurance. It's helpful to remember that endurance can mean two different things. Endurance may be something we do passively – simply taking what life dishes out, absorbing the blows of illness, unemployment, or the death of loved ones, without giving up either on ourselves or our circumstances. But endurance is also something we do actively; it means exercising the inner strength to persevere through our difficulties. The long-distance runner doesn't just tolerate heat and exhaustion; he or she fights through these obstacles, gets a second wind, shifts into a higher gear, and pushes toward the finish line.

This is what Peter means when he calls his readers to endure pain and suffering. Endurance is not just lying back and taking it; it's also standing up and moving forward in the race of faith. Endurance means to “keep on keeping on” with a purposeful life when life seems to come to a screeching halt.

You and I may ask how such endurance is possible when we're suffering from pandemic fatigue. Well, according to Peter, a Christian's endurance doesn't come just from true grit or will power; it is fueled by a Higher Power. Peter cites the example of Jesus, who endures abuse and still manages to forgive and love his tormentors, the same Jesus who always looks to God to help him endure suffering and to vindicate his cause. “For the joy that was set before him, Jesus endured the cross, despising the shame” (Hebrews 12:2).

And so, the next time you and I sit on the pity pot and fret about how much longer we can endure the pandemic, we might remind ourselves of what Jesus endures and how he endures it – how he is wounded by the whip and the spike, but then uses his wounds to heal all of humanity; how he transforms his own personal misery into the ultimate act of love. In his own words, Jesus is the good Shepherd who not only protects his sheep, but even lays down his life for them.

Friends, I would be remiss if I did not commend all of you who are following the example of Christ during this crisis. Like good shepherds, you're being as protective of others as you are of yourselves. Above all, you are transforming your isolation and boredom into an

opportunity for connection and loving action. This is how the Bible pictures endurance – not just making the best of a bad situation, but making the most of it.

Along with the call to endurance, the other theme that stands out in today's readings is the promise of abundance. Jesus contrasts himself with those dark forces who threaten the well-being of his followers. Others come to bring death, Jesus says, but “I come that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). What a remarkable promise this is! Jesus' disciples are enduring external danger and unjust suffering, yet he tells them that their lives will nonetheless be full and fulfilling, not defined by scarcity and suffering but by abundance and joy.

In every conversation I've had with church members over the last few weeks, I've heard testimonies about unexpected abundance in your lives – about God's generous provision of poise and patience and inner peace; about the gifts of time and caring and love you have received from family members and friends; about how you have remained committed and connected to your church even from a physical distance.

You are also demonstrating that abundance is not something merely to be received; it is also something to be shared. Luke's portrait of the early Church in the Book of Acts is a perfect case in point. The first Christians develop a support system where they both receive from one another and give to one another. They experience the amazing grace of God through study and prayer, fellowship and worship; then they make God's grace available to those outside their community, and get an astounding response.

I see this same sharing of abundance taking place within our own church family today. A number of you have adopted on-line giving as a way of remaining consistent and faithful in your support of our church's ministry. We've created a special COVID-19 support fund to provide assistance to those who are facing financial emergencies, and you are giving generously to that fund as well. We have individuals who are making masks for their fellow church members, who are delivering groceries and home-cooked meals to those who are especially isolated, who are calling friends to assure them that they are not totally alone and to listen to their troubles, and who are making extra-mile donations to the Woodbury Food Bank, the Connecticut Community Foundation, and other helping agencies in our area.

And then today, we are setting the Lord's Table on the tables in our own homes. When you stop and think about it, Holy Communion is a celebration of endurance and abundance. In this sacred meal we recall Christ's endurance through his own unjust suffering. We also affirm the abundance of Christ's love for us and our love for one another. This meal is just the nourishment we need during our season of adversity. As we eat the bread and drink the cup, we are given endurance and abundance from above, and we are empowered to share our abundance with a hurting world. So let it be.