

Resurrection in Pandemic

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The 1993 film *Groundhog Day* featured Bill Murray as a cynical weather reporter who rose each morning to the dreadful realization that the calendar had not moved. We too have been hoping in vain to awake from our global COVID-19 ("Covid") nightmare. What a long Holy Saturday of waiting! As I write, we have entered Advent, and the world is bracing for another terrifying spike in the virus just in time for Christmas, and while the new vaccines hold great promise, we fear that Covid will plague us well into 2021. It may be Groundhog Day for a while.

We must not underestimate the pain of this pandemic. This season of "Covidtide" is on its own timetable, for the virus has no regard for politics or power and cares nothing about our secular and liturgical calendars. Schedules for schools, vacations, graduations, sporting events, birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, and even presidential elections all yield to it. Last spring many predicted that we would return to full-on, in-person worship by Easter 2020, amid alleluias, flowered crosses, and egg hunts. Yet, the pews of most sanctuaries were empty on Easter, closed for fear of catching or spreading the virus, closed for the common good. The Great Fifty Days of Easter passed and then Pentecost, until we reached the long summer slog of ordinary time, and with it, the realization that lockdowns would be with us for the long haul.

While the pandemic dominates temporal Chronos, God alone governs eternal Kairos. God is at work, redeeming what seems lost in this in-between season of "Covidtide." The Covid disruption has inspired incredible innovations in worship, formation, and service, particularly through online platforms. What follows is a witness to new life emerging from pandemic chaos, mostly among partners in faith in the Episcopal parish I serve.

The Church Never Closed

Our bishop drew a mostly welcomed line in the liturgical sand in March of 2020 when he announced that we would not be worshipping inside our buildings until science informs that we may do so safely. Covid literally threw us out of the boat—our Nave.¹ We have remained physically distanced since then.

A mentor once told me, "God doesn't waste much," and so it seems with the Church in pandemic. Signs that God is not wasting this opportunity to transform the Church are as viral as the disease itself.

First, the Church never closed. The Church cannot close, for she is not a building. Rather, we, the Church, have simply left the building for a time. This is nothing new. That first Easter, Jesus was on the move, appearing to the women, and then to the other eleven disciples, and then to more than 500 (1 Corinthians 15:1-6). Jesus' last word to the disciples in Matthew was a command that they *go* (Matt 28:16-20). We who would follow Jesus are and have always been a "sent" people. Some worshipping communities have long emphasized the contemporary mandate of the Great Commission with signs above doors reminding those exiting that "Now your service begins." Like it or not, worshipping communities in Covidtide must examine afresh

what it means to begin their service—to be the Church outside the building.

Online Is Real, Not Virtual

The destructions of the First and Second Temples and the resulting diasporas empowered the Hebrews to reimagine faithfulness to Yahweh outside of Jerusalem and the sacrificial system. Likewise, Covid has forced an otherwise reluctant Church to reimagine what it means to be the Body of Christ that cannot gather in its accustomed mode. Like Paul who wrote letters from prison to his fledgling communities, we too have needed to find ways to remain connected when absent from each other.

We do miss being with each other. More than that, we long for the physical embodiments of our spiritual connection as members of the Body of Christ, the handshake or hug at the passing of the peace, the common meal around the altar, and the adoration, singing, praying, confessing, and praising together in the assembly. We share something of Mary Magdalene's loss when Jesus forbade her touch during their garden encounter that first Easter morning (John 20:11-17).

Our online Centering Prayer class noticed with regret the following among Thomas Keating's guidelines for Christian life, growth, and transformation: "The presence of Christ is ministered to each other and becomes tangible in the community, especially when it is gathered for worship or engaged in some work of service to those in need."² How then may we recognize the abiding presence of Christ in Covidtime? Our Centering Prayer group and others have grown to appreciate the value of "seeing" and "hearing" each other by online means, before and after praying together in silence. The Spirit is binding us together as the Body of Christ despite the physical distance between us.

We have been heartened, too, by how nimbly our parish has taken up communal opportunities for spiritual growth through Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and other online platforms. Mature practitioners, members who have moved, and many seekers have come to our online classes on social justice issues such as systemic racism and white privilege. Online studies of Lewis's *Great Divorce*, the daunting Book of Revelation, and other books have formed faithful followings. Expert presenters and gifted preachers from coast to coast have enriched our gatherings with relative ease and, importantly, without the added expense of travel and lodging. Meanwhile, with but modest encouragement and support, the laity have led online evening prayer offerings for every day of the week, and other groups have created weekly online gatherings on their own. Our aging population has been particularly faithful to these electronic meetings, many reporting that they are lifelines to connection against the forced isolation of Covid.

To be clear, not all have accessed online offerings. Perhaps because they have been online in school so often, youth have reported "zoom fatigue." So the parish has experimented intentionally with masked and distanced outside gatherings such as a costumed "Oktober-ween" celebration, a planned drive-in movie, and socially distanced bonfires. Youth now organize, videotape, and edit Sunday worship every six weeks, sharing with the congregation their lively faith through contemporary music that has drawn them together on retreats. Nonetheless, there is still much work ahead to engage and incorporate youth in our common life.

Online Worship: Clergy As Televangelists

As the poet James Russell Lowell penned, “New occasions teach new duties; Time makes ancient good uncouth.”³ Mainline denominations have been content to let the “Evangelicals” lead the pack when it comes to broadcasting worship, but making worship accessible during Covidtide requires us all to enter the online on-ramp, lest we slip away into irrelevance. Although some clergy have lamented becoming “televangelists,” many have allowed curiosity (or at least desperation) to suppress that aversion.

Some clergy have reported “Covid fatigue,” finding themselves neither equipped for nor called to new tasks such as recording and editing video and managing zoom technology, particularly under the heightened pastoral load of Covidtide. Many are triggered by the all too common “addiction to competence.” This is vital work for God, after all! But true discernment includes determining both whether the task is necessary and whether it is the clergy’s to do. Empowering the baptized in their ministries is among the most important responsibilities of clergy in every season. The Body of Christ has many parts, and each is necessary to its vitality (1 Cor. 12:12-30). A few things are up to the clergy, but not everything.

Our parish learned by doing on those first Sundays of Covidtide. We decided early on that if we could no longer gather in the Nave, we would worship in solidarity together outside of the building. Worship leaders (clergy and lay alike) videotaped their respective parts from where they were located (with a few exceptions, such as a baptism in the courtyard and some sermons in the Chapel). In our preparation to return to in-person worship, we have purchased specialized cameras for videotaping some portions of the service in the Nave even before we may gather there as a body. But, importantly, the Church has been gathering in our homes during Covidtide, revealing them to be the sacred spaces they always could have been for us, but for our failure to appreciate the possibility.

Our parish’s understandable resistance to unfamiliar technology and the change in the pattern of worship gave way to acceptance of new, safer ways of gathering. Early online converts even included a parishioner who before had insisted on a printed newsletter. Worship leaders took ownership of producing our Sunday offerings. Unlike pre-Covid, rarely has anyone failed to show up (by video) when needed. Lectors and intercessors became quick studies in the technology, recording themselves using handheld or desk top devices. Others submitted voice recordings for our virtual choir. After a few live mishaps (internet freezing, etc.), we switched to pre-recorded Sunday services, streaming them at the normal time for our main service. And we encouraged parish fellowship by framing the recorded service between an online “Narthex” (time for prayers, birthday and anniversary blessings, and announcements) and an online “Coffee Hour” following the postlude. We closed each online Narthex with the bidding “See you in the service, and back here afterwards for coffee.”

We settled into worship in our homes, connecting with each other through the platform’s chat feature with comments on sermon content or musical offerings or to praise a youth who had sung or played an instrument, or to offer real-time prayer requests and praise reports. Each service recording remained available for later viewing, and many more checked in to watch during the week.

We also discovered the versatility of our Director of Music, who taught himself how to edit video, enhancing our recorded liturgy with images and video clips ap-

propriate for the theme of our services. For example, our Independence Day Service included flyover clips of the heartland, the Statue of Liberty, and the Capitol, with Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* and *Hoedown* as accompaniment. Images from the protests in Atlanta and elsewhere appeared on our screens after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Including engaging, reinforcing images in our Sunday liturgy and message had never occurred to us prior to Covidtide. It is now difficult to imagine worship without them.

Holy Altars, Holy Homes

Our *Book of Common Prayer* teaches that the Holy Eucharist is "the principal act of Christian worship on the Lord's Day."⁴ By keeping us from gathering in person, Covid disrupted the core of our life together as a worshipping community. Many clergy spoke passionately of the virtue of a "fast from communion" during Covidtide and advocated Morning Prayer and other non-Eucharistic liturgies as substitutes. Believing the rhythm of the Eucharistic prayers would provide helpful consistency and steady comfort during strange times, we and other parishes collaborated on ways to adapt the celebration to fit the limitations of the online platform.

Anglican Eucharistic theology is generous enough to allow a wide array of opinions on whether and how communicants may be fed spiritually without consuming the blessed bread and wine. With little theological elaboration, we simply invited people to be curious about and open to the work of the Spirit around the holy tables in their homes. At least one parishioner (and I am certain others) took this message to heart, reporting that they brought their own bread and wine to their table on Sunday mornings.

My wife Anne and occasionally one of my daughters presented the blessed elements from the altar of our breakfast room table. In solidarity with the online congregation, we did not consume them. Drawing on Augustine's teachings about the Eucharist, we then bid people to "behold what you are, become what you receive, spiritually, the Body of Christ, broken and given to the world."⁴

It cannot be said that online Sunday services have been as transformative as our pre-Covid liturgies. Two millennia of Jesus showing up when two or three are gathered or when people meet him together at table with burning hearts suggest otherwise (Matt 18:20; Luke 24:13-35). We also miss something of Keating's "presence of Christ...tangible"⁵ when we are not able to sing to God or adore him together in the assembly, but the Spirit has moved among us nonetheless through these new forms. Online platforms have proven their worth in reaching members and seekers for whom distance, schedule, or incapacity keep them from participating in person. Online worship as an augment to in-person worship is here to stay.

The punch line of our learning about online worship is that since this shift, we estimate that our Sunday service participation during the week has increased two and sometimes threefold over pre-Covid Sunday in-person attendance alone. And so we are already planning to record and stream our in-person services from the Nave when we return.

Keeping What Is Essential, Blessing And Releasing The Rest

Parents with school-aged children at home and perhaps others may object to the suggestion that the pace of their lives has slowed, and rightly so. Moreover, cabin fever

is pervasive. Yet for many, Covid has created a new spaciousness. For one thing, the commute time has been eliminated for the many who now work from home. Covid has restricted other travel, both locally and to distant locations. Beyond its impact on parish life, participation in communal activities from soccer games to concerts to movies has all but ceased.

This deceleration has opened opportunities for us to experience and appreciate simpler blessings as gifts from God, like a walk in the neighborhood or a carefully prepared meal at table at home (as opposed to fast food in the car stuffed down between events). Perhaps this time of sheltering in place has inspired us to pause and reevaluate our pre-Covid, frenetic activity. Perhaps it has opened space for God.

Deep within the received wisdom of parish life lies the sacred mantra that if you feed them, they will come. Yet, our parish has not hosted a single gathering around food since our Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper on the eve of Ash Wednesday 2020. In fact, we have held but a few limited capacity, outside, in-person gatherings during Covidtide. Still, we have survived as a worshipping community and even thrived. Had we been spinning needlessly faster and faster on the hamster wheel of activity? Might we reapply our energies toward efforts that give life and yield growth, like our online and in person reach into the community? One wonders which activities we will resume and which we will bless and release when the pandemic ends.

Too Much Room In The Inn

Covid also may cause the Church to face her attachment to physical space. The elephant in the room is that worshipping communities spend considerable portions of their budgets paying for, maintaining, cleaning, heating and cooling buildings that are occupied for very few hours of the week—and now almost not at all. Our experience with online gathering disrupts assumptions around the virtue of this old model, assuming it was sustainable to begin with. Are we trying to pour new wine into old wine skins? Like corporate America, the post-pandemic Church will have occasion to reassess whether the energy and resources spent on buildings supports or strangles the proclamation of the gospel. Experiments in sacred space sharing, centralized worship on feast days and other occasions, and other innovations likely will emerge out of our experience of lockdown.

Meanwhile, there have been at least two lights in the otherwise darkened hallways of our parish, for two essential ministries operated despite Covid, and both suggest a way forward after Covidtide. With pandemic-inspired help from our Mayor, in-kind donations from gleaners and unexpected monetary donations from others, our feeding ministry, Malachi's Storehouse, has doubled the number of families receiving groceries each week. The community clearly has taken on Malachi's as a vital cord in the safety net of support for those in need, as many outside the parish have opened their checkbooks for us. The Rotary Club, the City of Dunwoody, DeKalb County, and others have awarded significant infrastructure and food grants for Malachi's operations. In short, and thanks in part to Covid, and many hours of dedicated service and inspired leadership by our team, it appears that Malachi's may receive sufficient outside resources necessary to sustain this larger offering to the community—resources beyond the capacity of the parish to provide.

Second, at the very beginning of Covidtide, we decided to partner with a group called Clubhouse Atlanta, which provides a structured workday for people whose

lives are disrupted by mental illness. Clubhouse Atlanta officially opened its doors in October and now offers this vital care to its members in our otherwise empty parish hall, with plans to begin contributing to the maintenance and upkeep of our space beginning in 2021.

Kairos Over Chronos

Covid has torn up our calendars, but could it be that this disruption, dramatic as it has been in our lives, is applying the exact kind of pressure necessary to encourage the change needed for the message of the gospel to thrive? Could it be that the confluence of the pandemic and the rise of the online age are part of the Paschal mystery, God's plan from eternity for drawing together all of creation to God through Jesus Christ? After all, Covid may have control of Chronos for the moment, but it has no power over Kairos. It may feel like Groundhog Day all over again, yet like Bill Murray's character in the film, we are growing, changing, and transforming each day, even in Covidtide. Adapting to and adopting online platforms for proclamation seem part and parcel of the Church's work for a future after Covidtide. God is doing a new thing among us (Is. 43:19). If the Church fails to perceive it, she does so at her peril.

The Paschal mystery teaches this uncomfortable truth: the pain of Good Friday and the waiting of Holy Saturday are not to be avoided, but are to be lived through. The two days of disorientation are necessary for resurrection on the third. And resurrection life never looks the same as life before. Mary Magdalene mistook our risen lord for the gardener (John 20:11-17)! The post-pandemic, resurrected Church will look different as well.

Notes

1 *Nave* is a term Episcopalians use to describe a worship space, deriving from the same Latin root as the word *navy*. The Nave symbolizes that the Church is the ship of salvation.

2 Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of The Gospel* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006), 161.

3 James Russel Lowell, "The Present Crisis," available online at <http://poets.org/poem/present-crisis> (public domain).

4 *The Book of Common Prayer* (Seabury Press: New York, 1979), 13.

5 I first heard a version of this invitation by The Rev. Sarah Fisher, who served at our altar some years ago. It seems to originate from a Eucharistic liturgy used by the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in paraphrase of St. Augustine's *Sermon 57*, "On The Holy Eucharist," Augustine, *Sermons, (51-94) on the Old Testament*, trans. E. Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991).

6 Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 161.