

Year B, Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 21, 2021
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

¹³Give me the joy of your saving help again *
and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.

Good morning to you! A very good Spring morning to you. At 5:37 yesterday morning, the North and South poles were equidistant from the sun. The vernal equinox. It is spring!

Now the vernal equinox is a religious significant day to us, and not just our pagan brothers and sisters. Easter is designated as the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal Equinox. The Equinox was yesterday. The full moon is next Sunday. Easter is the Sunday following. The rhythms of the world course through everything we do and this is reflected in our celebration of the holiest day of the Church Year. The early bulbs are peeking through. The junkos are back. The ducks and chickens are laying and the goats have that special spring glimmer in their eye. Ahh, spring!

Mark Twain said, “It’s spring fever. That is what the name of it is. And when you’ve got it, you want — oh, you don’t quite know what it is you do want, but it just fairly makes your heart ache, you want it so!” You know that feeling. We’ve got 50s in the forecast for the next week. It is all gray from here, right? At least until the Black Flies return. Even with the black flies on the horizon, there is hope in the air, the joy of God’s saving help is present after, not a particularly long winter, but after one of exile, of isolation from those we love and from most everything we are accustomed to doing. There is hope in the air.

Do you remember the April Fools day storm in 1997? It was brutal in Massachusetts, one of the five heaviest 24-hour snow falls on record. There was thunder snow. I was living on a Marine Corps base in the middle of the Mohave Desert, so I only heard about the storm from my family, but by April Fools day, we are supposed to be out of the winter weather zone, right?

I have some great news for everyone: Get your red suede shoes out because Pentecost ’21 is going to be a Pentecost to remember. On Pentecost, May 23, we will return to the room where it happens up on Hinckley Ridge Road! Church is going to open for in-person worship again. 14 months plus one week after the last proper gathering of St. Francis by the Sea Episcopal Church, we will be back at it together. Now there is a point of light to steer by. As Emily Dickinson wrote, “A little Madness in the Spring / Is wholesome even for a king.”

Let's savor that feeling. The light at the end of the tunnel. Somewhere between one third and one half of all Mainers have had at least one shot. On the bottom of your screen, to the right there is a button labeled reactions. Hit the "tada" party icon if you have had at least one shot. _____ It is going so well the vaccination schedule was just advanced a bit by the governor. Over 50 folks can get their shots starting Tuesday. The rest of us are eligible April 19th. Savor that feeling.

But you know, as we are doing this planning, as I speak with colleagues in the diocese about their plans, I hear a lot of "yeah, buts..." You know how it goes, One says, "I am so excited about reopening!" and the rebuttal comes, "yeah, but the variants... yeah, but the anti-vaxxers... yeah, but herd immunity hasn't been reached..." Yeah, but... Because it is not all good news. This is true. Being together in church will be somewhat different for a while. (We will all certainly feel different there for a while). There will be limited seating; no hugging; not passing of the collection plate; reservations will be needed... We've got a lot to do to make sure those of you who will still join us via Zoom and YouTube will be not only present, but will be included in the celebration of the community and the celebration of the Eucharist.

And, of course, our target date is all contingent on things continuing to improve. And, unfortunately, it is not all good news right now. Over 1000 people are still dying in the US every day. 1500 yesterday and 60,000 new cases. France reinstated lock downs. Germany and Poland might. Brazil is a total mess. Our own downward trend in cases has plateaued, and is increasing in some places, in fact of the ten states with the highest rates of COVID infection, seven of them are in the northeast. The new variants of the disease are spreading, and rapidly, and they are more contagious and more dangerous. To mix metaphors, there is a light at the end of the tunnel and we are not out of the woods yet.

When I sit back and think about all of this, I am very excited. I cannot wait for this next chapter of the Life of St. Francis by the Sea. Bright days are ahead of us.

I also have some apprehension. I am comfortable with how things are working now. I have a routine. (I like routines). I know how to do what we are doing. I appreciate my casual Fridays at the home office. And Casual Wednesdays and Thursdays and Saturdays. I certainly have my worries that just as things are relaxing, just as concert schedules are being released, and summer camp reservations are made, and vacation plans firmed up, I worry that just as this long, hard, lonely time of pandemic isolation seems about to end that we will be plunged back into quarantine, back into Zoom-only church, back to remote classrooms, and dinner alone and that the longest first year at a call ever will be even longer.

And all of that could happen. Like we could totally have another April Fools blizzard. But just because it might snow again, does that mean that you should temper your joy at the arrival of Spring? Do you not feel the Joy of Easter coming, even though we still have Holy Week and the Passion and the Way of the Cross to walk with Jesus?

I've talked to quite a few people, and not just those "yeah, butters" (who, by the way, were not St. Franciscans or is it St. Francis by the Sea-ers?) No matter... But lots of people, when I speak of lights at the end of tunnel, when I speak, with joy, about excitement and plans and "Good Lord thank you that this is coming to an end," lean towards the we're-not-out-of-the-woods-yet stance. Tempering joy in the face of possible disappointment.

I get it. Disappointment, back sliding, as our Evangelical friends might say it, are fearsome adversaries. No one wants to be disappointed, No one wants to prematurely anticipate how good something will be. That feels lousy. But what feels lousier, what contradicts the heart of true Christian hope is to resist feeling joy for fear of disappointment. That is the punch line of this sermon: Don't let fear of disappointment get in the way of the joyful anticipation of the end of this horror.

Laugh. Smile. Dream. Plan. Assume that we will be back together in May, and that it will go well, better than we hope, even. The shot glasses will be great at communion! I won't trip over any of the camera cables during Mass. It will be ok without coffee hour for a while. Everyone will get a ticket (no scalping at the door, but even at church, tipping the maître d' can't hurt).

And if it doesn't work out? If things get delayed. If plans fail. If ideas are bad. So be it. We'll handle those disappointments as we have handled the legion of disappointments we have handled over the past 12 months, that is, generally, with grace and patience and sacrifice for the good of the whole. You know, like Christians are expected to act. And when we fail, by despairing or bending rules or picking up a box of cheddar bunnies a day habit, we seek forgiveness and get back at it.

Right now we are walking the Lenten way with Jesus. He knew exactly what was going to happen. What did He say in our Gospel today, "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."

He was going to His Father in Heaven. His mission was about to be definitively fulfilled, like Salvation of the World level of fulfilled. There was a joy in His heart even as His soul was

troubled. And He was on that path to His Father even though there was a Cross standing on the path He had to take.

So what do we do, like right now? “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.” Do that. Rejoice and stay safe. Wear your mask. Now that our government is actually governing again, follow the guidance of the CDCs in Atlanta and Augusta. Get a shot when offered. If you are choosing not to have the vaccine, that is there are no medical conditions that contraindicate vaccination and you still won't get the vaccine, you and I need to have a conversation about the moral implications of that decision. They are significant.

But more importantly, rejoice. There are good tidings of great joy in the saving help of God, and we will be sustained by God's bountiful Spirit as we have been throughout this long and difficult year. Rejoice. AMEN.