

**Sermon for Pentecost 14**  
**September 6, 2020**  
**St. Paul and the Redeemer, Chicago**  
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In May (that seems decades ago), I found myself using the word “unprecedented” to describe this pandemic. Well, in the several months since, there have been a lot of events that we Americans could describe as unprecedented, including this week’s events in Kenosha, Charlotte, and DC.

But “unprecedented” this pandemic is not.

Pandemics have been a part of the human story since the beginning, whenever that was. It was a plague that spelled the end of the Athenian empire as Sparta gained power in the late fifth century before the Common Era. It was the Bubonic plague—the Black Death—that killed half the population of Europe in our own fifteenth century. One could go on. Cholera, smallpox, influenza; measles, polio, Ebola, HIV/AIDS, H1N1. Epidemics and pandemics rage through several millennia of human experience.

So what is happening today—at least from an epidemiological point of view—is hardly unprecedented. What matters in retrospect will likely not be the memory of the disease, which will eventually mutate if not disappear. What will matter in retrospect will be we how we *responded*. Viruses don’t have memories. But we do.

It's odd. My grandparents immigrated to central New York State from southern Italy just over a hundred years ago. Their families knew each other in Calabria, and they started courting in 1917, just before the outbreak of the worst pandemic in memory—the Spanish flu. I have the love letters that my grandmother wrote to my grandfather up to the day they married in 1919. I learned a lot from those letters, but it's remarkable that there's not one mention of the Spanish flu, even though 675,000 people in the United States died from the flu in those three years, over six times as many Americans as the Americans who died in the Great War just ended—and half of these American soldiers died not from the wounds of combat but from the effects of the flu.

A parishioner of mine in New York once pointed out that a lot of Episcopal parishes in the 1920s erected plaques in their church vestibules listing the names of the soldiers who died in the first world war. But there were never any plaques listing the much greater number of ordinary people who died of the Spanish flu. Memories are selective. Who knows how five years from now, twenty years from now, a hundred years from now, the far from unprecedented events of 2020 will survive in our collective memory?

Which brings me to today's reading from Exodus—a reading all the more pertinent for us in our current calamity. Here we are, cooped up in our households, hesitating to cross our thresholds for fear of catching the disease, or spreading it, listening to this meditation on our electronic devices rather than gathered together on Dorchester and 50<sup>th</sup> Street. We look more like the

Israelites, cowering in their houses for fear of a lethal plague, than we might ever have thought. What will we remember spiritually about these times? What—if anything—will we celebrate?

The story of the Exodus is about many things. But ultimately it is about the persistence of memory. In today's reading that ancient story, remembered and celebrated, reaches a climax, and does so in the midst of plague. Ten plagues, to be exact, with the tenth—the death of all the first-born of Egypt—the cruelest and the most significant in retrospect.

The story of the Passover is all about retrospect.

“This shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival of the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.”

It's important to remember that the story we have just heard was told many generations after the events it describes. In fact, it may well be that the story was told in the way it was in order to explain an elaborate Passover celebration whose origins might otherwise have remained obscure, or even forgotten, as the centuries passed.

Like so many of these Torah stories, it is a story of retribution—of punishment for the oppressor. No doubt the Egyptian families who lost their first-born sons remembered these events differently from the way the Israelites did. The Egyptian version of this plague story, if there ever was one, didn't survive. But from the Israelite point of view, of course, this is a story

of liberation—liberation from centuries of bondage of which the plague was perhaps the most powerful symbol.

In these days of plague, as we take cover in our homes, shut in, anxious about our future, anxious about what feels like unremitting and endless loss: What kind of story is it for us?

Where is our liberation to be found?

We all will have to construct our own answers to this question, I suppose. But for me, what resonates most is the way the LORD instructs the Israelites to eat their Passover meal:

This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly.

This is a story about readiness. It is a story about moving forward with courage and tenacity, even in the face of loss. It is a story about identifying what really matters in our lives—more than property, more than shelter. Don't wait around for the bread to rise. Get ready. Get moving. Don't get bogged down in worry. Face an uncertain future with courage, your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, your staff in your hand, keeping six feet of distance, your mask covering your nose and your mouth. Do what you can to liberate others from their fear. Come what may, we are not alone. We are here for each other, and God is here for all of us.

And even as we linger in our places of shelter, joining with others only virtually in services like this, we are not alone. As Jesus might have said to his friends, when two or three (or even ten or twenty) are gathered together in my name, even on You Tube, I will be in the midst of them. That's something to remember, and some day, God willing sooner rather than later, it will be something to celebrate.

This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

May this, some day, be so.