

# “As Slow as Possible”

*a sermon for The Great Vigil of Easter 2019 by Christian M. Clough, Director of Music  
for St. Paul & the Redeemer Episcopal Church, Chicago, Illinois—20 April 2019*

Sisters and brothers in Christ, this is my second annual Great Vigil sermon. I’ve decided that this is the second in a very drawn out preaching series.

The slow rollout of this series reminds me of a pair of articles in the *New York Times* in May 2006. The title of one of the articles, “An Organ Recital for the Very, Very Patient” [<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/05/arts/music/05cage.html>], might suggest a name for my series. The articles describe the ongoing performance in the eastern German town of Halberstadt of a piece entitled “As Slow as Possible” by the 20th-century American composer John Cage. Cage originally wrote the piece in 1985, then later adapted it for the organ, calling it “Organ2/ASLSP”. On 5 May 2006, town officials, managers of the performance, tourists, locals, curiosity-seekers, John Cage fans, and others gathered to hear and see the first chord change in roughly a year. To accomplish this, every year or so, one or more pipes are added to or pulled from a very small, incomplete pipe organ. The organ has an electric blower, and solar panels and batteries are at the ready in case of a power failure. Keys are held down with small bags of sand, so the sound is continuous. The Halberstadt performance began in 2001, and is scheduled to conclude in the year 2640, exactly as many years after the turn of the millennium—639—as the first organ with a modern keyboard arrangement had been built, in Halberstadt, *before* 2000, in 1631.



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It's a powerful statement of faith in humanity to start a project whose completion is many generations beyond one's own lifespan. Similarly, the great cathedrals of Europe were started, completed, redesigned, demolished, repaired, expanded, and restored over several centuries. How ironic, and sad, that on the very day that I started writing this sermon, Nôtre-Dame de Paris went up in flames, a casualty of its own much-needed restoration. Will we live to see the new completion?

I wonder:

What similar projects were not expected at their start to be completed in a single lifetime? [*pause*]. Finding cures for cancer or Alzheimer's disease might be modern equivalents. Or achieving safe and controllable nuclear fusion to stop the ruination of our planet by reckless carbon pollution.

These long timespans make me think of this Great Vigil of Easter. Last year, I spoke about the symbolic power of the Great Vigil—in its use of time, darkness, and light—to recall the fear and uncertainty felt by Jesus' first followers in the hours between his death and the discovery of the empty tomb. You might remember my connection between waiting for dawn and the vigil for Jesus' resurrection. Before artificial light made true darkness almost unimaginable, dawn's early light breaking over the horizon and through the east windows of an ancient church was a vivid metaphor for the resurrection. The Great Vigil was a long—an *all-night* long—event. It was the “As Slow as Possible” performance of the liturgical year, though even our much-abbreviated modern vigil feels long within our fractured attention spans.

Studying tonight's scriptures, I thought about the thematic thread that runs through them: God's repeated efforts to redeem God's people: to save us from our enemies, but mostly from ourselves—from our own foolishness, selfishness and shortsightedness. These stories and the other options are united by the overarching theme of God's salvation of humanity. This vigil is a liturgy of trust in God and of hope in salvation.

What we don't hear tonight are stories of countless self-wrought human messes that prompted God's saving acts. Take the first, for example, “The Fall”: Adam and Eve get duped into eating the apple from the tree of knowledge, and God has to drive them out of the garden, lest they also eat of the Tree of Life and live forever. To live forever with a little too much knowledge is a dangerous cocktail. For thousands of years since, God has been trying to get humanity back in line, with decidedly unimpressive results—a performance that probably wouldn't earn God a promotion in most companies; but, one must admit that humanity has been anything but cooperative.

I wonder:

When God took on the redemption project, did God know that thousands—maybe tens of thousands—of years of work would bear so little fruit? God's sense of time is very different from ours, but does the work of salvation feel to God as long as the Halberstadt performance of “Organ2/ASLSP” does to us?

We take for granted that God will always forgive our failure to love God fully. But we fallen humans are imperfect at both loving and forgiveness. I fail you, and you might not forgive me. You fail me, and I might strike back. I have my own ways of doing things—the best ways, obviously. You have yours. Yours are different, and so are you. I attach my being annoyed by your weird ways to your appearance or your language or your clothing or your beliefs. I generalize that all people who are different like you are, are also annoying. I gather allies to my view. You do the same. Soon, we are at war.

Tired of marginal success, God ramped up the salvation efforts, and sent God's only son to take on human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to God's self. In Jesus, people saw and heard and touched God, and

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witnessed God’s sinlessness firsthand. Jesus taught humanity how to become like God again, we who are made in God’s image, but who fail both to embody God’s pure goodness and love, and to see God in those around us.

Jesus offered two essential disciplines: 1) to love God—who, by the way, IS love—with our whole selves; and B) to love our neighbors as ourselves—those neighbors who, like us, bear the image of God, equal in God’s love. However, since we can’t see all of God, because God is so very, very big, and we are so very, very small, we fail to recognize that the unique image each of us bears is a tiny facet of God’s whole self. Since we can’t see God in God’s wholeness, we don’t recognize that little bit of God in each other. One minute, I see *your* curly hair. I crane to see *your* subtle smile, for it is so much higher than I am. Or, I have to crouch down to get a good look at *your* beautiful brown eyes. We lack both the wide gaze and the deep memory to gather, hold, and assemble all these tiny mosaic pieces into a complete picture of God, a picture of all-encompassing love; and, in our myopia, we fail at loving each other and God.

I wonder:

To what degree can we only love another person if that person is a reflection of ourself? Can an aging, orange-haired, scowling, hypersexualized, white, straight male love only his mirror image? Does everyone else exist only for exploitation and objectification?

I wonder:

Where do we each find ourself on the continuum between unconditional love and narcissism?

Jesus’ willingness to die on the cross—whether for our sins or on account of humanity’s sinfulness—demonstrated for us a sacrificial, selfless, unconditional love for God’s children. As KJ intimated in her sermon yesterday, the merit of a crucified God is that we have an example of a life lived selflessly for the benefit of all humanity and all creation.

I wonder:

Did God think that this would have turned out better? Did God expect that humanity would finally embrace love and justice after Jesus showed us what selfless love looks like?

In a few minutes, we’ll throw the switch on another resurrection party, with bells and whistles, and confetti, and fireworks, and champagne. There will be dancing girls popping out of a huge, triple-tiered orange chiffon cake, and brass bands and conga lines and feather boas. It’s gonna be great! Bigger and better than ever!

But as I look around the city and country and world, our waiting here in fear and darkness reflects reality more accurately. Standing in front of this curtain of origami cranes, created for the National Prayer Vigil against Gun Violence held here last December, I see our current challenges as a kind of vigil. Each of these cranes is labeled with the name of a Chicagoan injured or killed by gun violence.

Someone told me years ago that many children who grow up in Chicago’s poorest neighborhoods—and I bet that they are racial and ethnic minorities—may never visit the Loop or the Magnificent Mile or Museum Campus. Even if their families could afford bus fare, what could they do once they got downtown? Wouldn’t they feel out of place there? The poverty they endure, and the violence memorialized by these cranes, are results of systemic, structural, discriminatory policies rooted in selfishness, not in unconditional love.

I’ve been concerned about environmental issues since I was six. I get literally depressed by the constant bleak news. Have you heard about the spread of an aggressive species of tick that is following rising temperatures northward?

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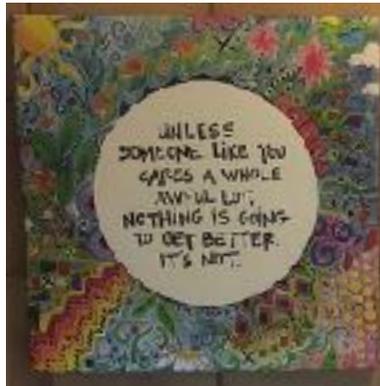
In my beautiful home state of New York, these new ticks swarm on moose calves, as many as 50,000 per moose, and feed so aggressively on the young mooses’ blood, that the calves are weakened to death. The plight of these wild animals is only one dot on the pointillistic canvas of ecosystem collapse, being painted ever more rapidly by humanity’s selfish consumerism. United Nations research estimates over 200 species have gone extinct since 3 PM yesterday, the hour when we commemorated Jesus’ death. This nearly 1,000 times the “background” rate of natural extinctions before modern human interference.

Jesus’ resurrection happened nearly 2,000 years ago. We say, or we are told, that we believe that, in dying and rising, Jesus has redeemed us from our sins, reconciled us to God, and given us eternal life. If so, why does the world look so bad?

I’ve come to believe recently that Jesus’ resurrection was just the start of the process of renewal and redemption, not a *fait accompli*. Jesus gave us a perfect example of God’s love for humanity and all creation, but God expects us to change—to save—the world by practicing the Way of Love Jesus taught us. As our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, has described it, “the loving, liberating, life-giving way of Jesus” gives us the power to transform the world by committing to living the way of God’s “unconditional, unselfish, sacrificial, and redemptive love”.

Early this spring, I saw an artsy little sign tucked away in a building entryway that read,

“UNLESS  
SOMEONE LIKE YOU  
CARES A WHOLE  
AWFUL LOT,  
NOTHING IS GOING  
TO GET BETTER.  
IT’S NOT.”



Friends, we have to starting living and loving like we care like crazy... and we must get many others to do so, too.

What’s your care? I offer my care for the environment as an example. Climate change may be the greatest existential threat in the modern era. Am I making choices in my life that support my concern? My choice to live 16 miles from my work here at SPR is in direct conflict with my carbon-emissions concerns. What should I do?

I care about income inequality and economic policies that consign poor Americans to a hopeless future, devoid of opportunities to achieve financial well-being. I frequently vote for candidates whose policies might actually increase my tax burden, because I believe we will all be better off if everyone can live securely with good and equitable nutrition, health care, and education.

Do we think about the impacts of our choices on God’s children and creation? Flying business class results in about twice the carbon emissions as flying economy. Heating and cooling our buildings excessively requires more coal and oil and natural gas, the extraction and burning of which causes pollution that inordinately harms the poor—Native Americans, minorities in poor urban neighborhoods, Creole residents of the Gulf Coast; it upsets an already fragile ecological balance, threatening vulnerable species. We air-condition to sweater temperatures, and poor people in cities like Mumbai die from heat stroke as temperatures soar into the hundreds, and they have no relief. Pikas,

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adorable little rodents that live at high elevations in the Rocky Mountains can't migrate off their mountain peaks. When rising temperatures make their homes uninhabitable, they will die out.

What do we choose and how, if we can choose? Are our choices selfless and loving toward others? Hundreds of millions of poor people around the world are vulnerable to climate-related disasters. Does saving the lives of countless Bangladeshi families living at sea level alter our choices?

Among my recordings of music for passiontide, this year I was repeatedly drawn back to Arvo Pärt's *Passio*, his 1989 setting of the St. John Passion. Do you know it? You should. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJVJkaRwII8>] It's almost constantly dissonant, yet definitely not ugly. The sound is somewhat detached, and listening to it is sort of like being in an uncomfortable state of suspended animation for an hour, watching this horrible thing, Jesus' trial and crucifixion, going on just a little ways over there. This year, this music represents to me the state of our world: so much pain, so complex, and yet so much beauty, that it makes my heart ache. I see the headlines, and I start to cry.

After Jesus's death in Arvo Pärt's *Passio*, the choir sings a brief prayer set so beautifully, and in such contrast to the angularity of the music of the passion story, that I always cry: “You who have suffered for us, have mercy upon us. Amen.” Its momentary beauty is so powerful because it contrasts so starkly with the preceding hour's sounds and story.

In these last few minutes before our Easter celebrations really begin, I ask you to join me, and to help me, to take up the work of resurrection. We have lived for too long as spectators of, and participants in, the passion of our world, of our brothers and sisters, of our fellow creatures—through selfishness, hatred, fear, jealousy, pride, hypocrisy... you name the sin! It is past time to look at our fellow travelers on this tiny blue celestial orb and recognize that little bit of God each one reveals; to see God's creation—and to choose to love it all selflessly, unconditionally. The work of resurrection will not be easy, but it will be loving, liberating, and life-giving. It can lead us to true joy. This year, instead of celebrating Jesus' resurrection *per se*, let's celebrate the privilege of restoring God's good world, and give thanks for the tools given us to get the job done through Jesus' willing example. It's a project for “the very, very patient” AND the very, very persistent. Remember: Nôtre-Dame wasn't built in a day, either. But time is short. Let's start.