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The Sixth Sunday in Easter

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“You know him”—the Spirit of God—“because he abides with you.” — *John 14:17*

March 17, 2020, the early days of Covid: a curious headline appears in the “Nation” section of *USA Today*: “Police department urges residents who have run out of toilet paper to stop calling 911.” Within days, similarly unusual announcements appear across news media both in America and abroad: *Business Insider*, March 10th: “How the World Rushed to Panic Buy Toilet Paper”; the NY Post, April 9th: “How a Global Pandemic Led to a Toilet Paper Shortage”; and an April 7th article from *The Washington Post*, aptly titled “Flushing Out the True Cause of the Global Toilet Paper Shortage” (some high-quality Dad-humor in that particular title).

Other news reports detailed actual armed conflict over toilet paper, including a gang in Hong Kong conducting an armed robbery of 600 rolls in one brazen attack, and a case in Iowa where a man pulled a gun while shopping at Walmart after other customers criticized him for the amount of toilet paper in his shopping cart.

Why was there such a run on toilet paper, of all things, during the pandemic? Of course it wasn’t just toilet paper: Sales of cute kittens and vodka also skyrocketed, but the logic behind those purchases is a little more transparent. It’s understandable that amidst the rapid spread of a highly contagious, life-threatening disease people would naturally seek solace and companionship through reliable comforts like pets and alcohol. But, unlike a kitten or a puppy, toilet paper is pretty lifeless. For the most part it just sits there waiting to be used and doesn’t really take much initiative to soothe or reassure its owner; except for the fact that its mere existence—simply owning it—does provide a certain sense of control.

Along these lines of control, a *Times* news article (from March 2020), analyzing the panic-buying of toilet paper amidst Covid’s spread, quotes Mary Alvord, a professor of psychiatry at the George Washington University School of Medicine, as explaining: “There’s comfort in knowing that it [toilet paper] is there...Our panic buying represents one thing we can control. In an exceedingly uncertain moment, it’s at least something.”

The long-and-short of my extended reflection on pandemic-inspired panic purchasing of toilet paper is this: We humans are far more fragile than we like to admit. Missing our morning coffee can put us in a funk for the rest of the day. Facing a pandemic, we will literally battle other human beings in the aisles of Walmart for little white squares of tissue paper—all in order to gain some tiny boost in our sense of control.

Rather than accepting our frailness as it is, we typically try to deny or bury it, pretending to be strong amidst suffering, stuffing down our very legitimate fears rather than plainly naming them, and literally (in the case of Covid) “papering over” our anxiety in a desperate attempt to feel in control amidst an out-of-control situation by owning more and more toilet paper. In other words, faced with threat or fear or danger or stress or suffering, all of us typically jump to short-term solutions that provide a brief burst of relief but really don’t address our deepest concerns. Still worse, because the high we get from panic-buying evaporates all too soon, we quickly plummet once again, feeding a cycle of ever-greater and gnawing anxiety deep, deep within—an anxiety which bubbles up and clamors to be soothed in a thousand different ways: from stress eating to binge TV watching to panic toilet-paper buying: all in a vain effort to distract ourselves from the frailness, the fear, the pain that feels just too overwhelming to deal with directly.

About 200 years ago, there was a man named Henry Francis Lyte. Henry was born in Scotland and grew up in the northern part of Ireland but had a pretty challenging childhood. His father deserted the family while Henry was still young, and then his mother and younger brother both died after Henry’s mother had moved their family to London. But, despite these hardships, Henry persisted: he worked hard, got into Trinity College, Dublin, and soon after college was ordained as an Anglican priest. Henry then served in various parishes across southern England, and by all accounts was an absolutely beloved small-town minister. According to one biographer, Henry Lyte was “slightly eccentric but of great personal charm, a man noted for his wit and human understanding, a born poet and an able scholar.” An expert flute player, Henry spoke four languages (English, French, Latin, and Greek) and was really at the height of his life and career when he began to develop serious problems breathing. Initially diagnosed with severe asthma and bronchitis, Henry and his wife (Anne)

travelled to Italy where they hoped the warmer weather would alleviate Henry’s symptoms. But rather than improving, Henry’s health steadily declined and, while still in his early 50s, Henry contracted what would become a fatal condition of tuberculosis. But as his condition worsened and hopes for recovery dwindled, Henry—rather than panic-buying toilet paper or binge watching the 19th-century equivalent of Netflix—sat down one morning to write out the tumultuous emotions churning within him. What emerged from his pen that morning became one of the most well-known hymns in our hymnal, with the first stanza, which we just sang, going like this:

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide;
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me.

Faced by circumstances that were overwhelming, out of his control, and literally life-threatening, Henry knew that stress-eating, panic-buying, or binge-watching was nowhere near adequate to address the life-and-death challenges confronting him. It’s not that any of these activities is “wrong” (I’m not saying we all should go home and cancel our Netflix subscriptions), but just that in the face of death, these distractions are miles away from what we really need to get us through. And not only in the extreme situation of Henry’s advanced TB, but also amidst the realities of our present world which cause us real anxiety, anger, and fear: sick family members, an uncertain economy, rising seas, weekly mass murders, race-based violence, political gridlock at the highest levels of our government.

Amidst these very real stressors, and the specific afflictions and illnesses and anxieties that trouble us individually, truth be told, we humans are really far too frail to survive for very long on our own. We can choose not to face reality; we can (and often do) choose to numb and distract ourselves, to stress-eat or panic-buy in a vain attempt to boost our sense of control while swimming in stormy, chaotic seas.

But at the end of the day none of these things is really going to help us, and that old gnawing fear is going to return. We’re much better off learning from Henry Lyte, who in his hymn is simply echoing the words of Jesus we just read in this morning’s

Gospel: “You know him”—the Spirit of God—“because he abides with you...”

What if, the next time we felt afraid or anxious, instead of numbing and distracting, we whispered a little reminder to ourselves: “God abides with me.” “God abides with me.” What if this week we each took just 3 to 5 minutes each day to sit quietly, reflect, meditate on the fact that God abides with us—God abides with me—today, no matter what happens, regardless of where I’m at, regardless of whatever storms threaten our world, our country, my family, my personal life: “Throughout the day ahead, God abides with me.” “Throughout the day ahead, God abides with me.”

That word “abide” is quite a word. Not just “stays with,” “hangs around,” or even “watches over” but actually “abides with me.” That word “abide” has the connotation of persistence: God doesn’t just come around sometimes; God persistently, day-in and day-out, dwells with me; when I’m looking really nice and pious up here in the pulpit, God abides with me, and when I’m tired and under-caffeinated and feeling like Oscar the Grouch, God abides with me; and when I ... [fill in the blank: feel concerned over the state of our country and world; worry about my loved one’s health problems; lie on my deathbed seconds away from departing this earthly life...]. However you fill in the blank, God abides with you and with me.

It struck me recently that the longer I’m a Christian (which is going on four decades now), the less I think being a Christian means believing a certain set of very specific doctrines, and more so means holding on, despite the raging storms, to a fundamental hope. In other words, increasingly I’m convinced that being a Christian has much less to do with how one understands specific doctrinal points (like how Jesus precisely relates to the Father, or what exactly happens up here with the bread and wine during Communion), and instead has much more to do with looking the reality of our lives, our country, and our world squarely in the eye, and choosing to hope, choosing not to let go of hope, despite all the violence, injustice, political rancor, [fill in the blank]. Now, being a Christian also involves some other important aspects (I’m not saying that hope alone makes you a Christian), but I’m increasingly convinced that maintaining a fundamental hope is one of the 3 or 4 core components of what “being a Christian”

entails, and frankly demands, at this point in history. But how do we do this? How do we truly “be Christians” amidst multiple life-threatening problems—from weekly mass shootings to rising oceans? How do we live out our faith by expressing ultimate hope amidst such trying times?: “Throughout the day, God abides with me.” Or, as Jesus put it in this morning’s reading, “You know him”—the Spirit of God—“because he abides with you.”

I do not know of any more effective way to maintain hope than the promise that “God abides with me.” I do not know of any more powerful response to the difficulties of our lives, whether large or small, than the conviction that God is with us: “God with us”—“Immanuel”—Jesus’ own title: “God with us,” God abiding with us, God ready, willing, eager to be our solace and comfort and hope if only we will let him.

So in the midst of Covid or climate change or personal illness or loss of a loved one or, let’s save our money, not panic-purchase toilet paper, take a breath, and live out our Christian faith as we turn to a much more powerful and effective response: God with us, God abiding with us, today, tomorrow, Tuesday—and forever. Amen.

