



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

On Morning Prayer  
Easter 4, Year A  
Sunday, May 3, 2020  
The Rev. Amber Carswell

I don't know about you, but when things are bad, my motto is that misery loves company. When everything fell apart with the coronavirus, in the absence of living miserable human company, right off the bat I read Daniel Defoe's journal of the plague year from the 1600s. When we moved into isolation to save ourselves, the severe and bizarre desert fathers, the earliest Christian monastic movement, would take me 10,000 steps farther to choosing to live one's whole life in a 10' square cell. Times get bad, and I want the company of detailed histories of past miseries.

This is not universal, I've found out. I suggested to Missy that we play this strategy game called Pandemic, which is like Risk except everyone is battling together against a pandemic that threatens to sweep over the whole globe. She looked at me speechlessly with a dawning sort of horror, as if she was seeing me clearly for the first time. I took it as a no.

As I've been dwelling on the economic crisis, I've revisited something closer to home, literally. I have copy of some recordings my uncle Roger made in 1979 when he interviewed my great-grandparents about their lives. They're hours of Juanita Carswell and George and Elizabeth Lewis remembering their parents and grandparents and childhoods. Much of it dwells on the Great Depression and their tales of the Dust Bowl in Kansas.

"The drought was worse than the depression," my great-Grandma Carswell's, a tremulous tone I never heard in person. Farm folks were used to having little already. No rains coupled with unsustainable farming practices turned Kansas into a desert. The cattle had nothing to eat, every green thing including the garden providing most of their food was eaten up by grasshoppers that would descend in nightmarish plagues. The cost to ship livestock to a government buyer was higher than you'd get for selling the animal. My great-grandma's voice spoke of terrible northern winds that blew dust and dirt into their shut-up house so thick that she could no longer see the patterns on her living room rug.

What are farmers to do without a farm? Now, if you went to the Carswell farm now, you'd notice to the north of the house and barn and garden, there's a great row of evergreen trees. These northerly barriers are everywhere in Kansas, and they're all about the same age: Depression era. The government subsidized the cost of putting in tree rows on farmland. By the time Juanita Carswell's great-grandchildren came along, the rows had grown into a child's idea of a forest (at least if you're a Kansas child), tall as the great house itself, the ground now a soft pine bed, the branches made the walls of make-believe forts.

The rain returned in the 30s. The farmers got back to tending their now thistle-covered fields. But they had something new — rows of trees they had tended in the dusty interim, that would be to them a sign both of recovery from desolation and continued protection from the desolation's return. The tree rows are the Midwesterner's rainbow of Noah, if you will.

I'll tell you another story, and this one's my own. Some of you know that I found the Episcopal Church in my 20s. But I'll tell you, since it's just me and 9 other people, that I came in dragging along behind me a faith I feared broken beyond recovery. It's not a terribly exciting story how that happened, it was mostly watching people I loved die, too young and too often, and each time it reinforced to me that whatever God was, it seemed certain he was not interested in my life.

I loved St. Luke's, but the swift stroke of revelation and renewal wasn't happening. I met with the priest after attending for a few months and I confessed to him the way my disbelief was growing beyond my control, that I wondered if my heart was hard as Pharaoh's, that I feared I was a wolf amidst the incredibly kind and faithful sheep of St. Luke's.

And you know what he said? "Have you ever said Morning Prayer?" Which was really not an answer to my legion of anxieties and fears that I desperately wanted him to give me. He told me he said Morning Prayer every day and showed me how it worked. I walked away a little aggravated and with my own new Book of Common Prayer. It became my daily practice, too. It was no magical fix to the desolation I felt, but I tended it carefully like a new planting of evergreen trees.

It's funny, looking back, how this was actually how services like Morning Prayer came about originally during the Reformation. At the time, Catholics held services in Latin, a language only the exceptional few knew. Churches often had screens to block the unworthy laity from viewing what was actually happening at mass. Only the priests were able to receive in many cases; the unclean masses were urged to feel it in their hearts.

The Reformers, and we Anglicans, rightly argued that prayer should be of all the people and said in the common tongue. Thanks to the advent of the printing press, little books of prayer began popping up, meant to aid the everyday carpenter or the blacksmith or maybe even the 20-something college student as she paused her day to pray directly to God, without an intermediary, without levels of or barriers to participation, and in shared words.

Right now, today, part of my misery is absolutely the separation from the Eucharist; I'd be amused by the idea that literal uncleanliness is still what keeps people from the table if I weren't really sad about it. What are Eucharistic Christians to do without a common table? What are farmers to do without good soil?

"Have you ever said Morning Prayer?"

When I'm miserable, I want the accounts of others' miseries not because I'm attracted to misery, but because I need perspective. I want to know what the best of the human spirit does in the worst times of plague and famine and separation.

We know that there hasn't been and isn't going to be a swift, magical fix to what ails us right now, to return us to the way things ought to be. But it is right to consider the tending of patterns of care that we neglected until circumstance forced us to consider the sustainability and the health of the soils of our lives.

It may mean a daily practice for you, it may mean other discoveries of quiet and simplicity. It may mean family prayers, long daily walks, intentional phone calls or card-writing, game nights that may or may not include Pandemic. For us here on Sundays, it means Morning Prayer, honoring that tradition that says a table to which only a chosen few are invited is not a Eucharistic table at all.

And who knows? When the green returns and the grasshoppers depart, you may find that the good things you've been tending all this time have taken root permanently. They will be to you a sign: both a sign of

recovery and a sign of continued protection, for you and your children's children's children to take shelter in.