

Epiphany 5 Year B 2021
February 7, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Some of you have heard me mention before that in college I didn't attend church very often. Although I tried, I never found a community I really liked, and perhaps I was a bit spoiled because I loved my home church so much. Either way, I really only made it to church when I was at home and during the period of time when I was working for a church.

During this time, I learned one thing about myself. When I don't go to church for a long period of time, I get angry. In college, perhaps it was because of trivial things—having a boyfriend living 800 miles away, the stress of having too many papers to write, having to work on the weekend. But more likely, it was due to all the struggling I saw going on around me. For one, the college town was not a particularly wealthy town, and it was clear when we did things around town that people were struggling to make ends meet. Violence, crime and drug use were also very common within the town, and students were strongly encouraged to use the security escort service to take them around campus for any trips they had to make after dark. But the suffering wasn't just "out there", off campus. I worked as a Resident Advisor for three years—I was the one charged with building community among my residents and with making sure people were abiding by the rules. I saw the day-in day-out struggles of residents who were homesick, who had trouble adjusting to college life, those who had serious roommate conflicts, those who got caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. I saw those struggling with addiction. Those in unhealthy relationships. Those who struggled with depression and suicide. I carried this suffering. I internalized it. Their suffering became my suffering. And I had nowhere to lay down that suffering. So, I was angry.

Similarly, there is a lot of suffering in our world today too. We continue to be isolated from one another due to the pandemic, and while vaccines are becoming more available to certain populations, the end and a return to normal is still a long way off. We continue to know people struggling with COVID, either currently infected or still dealing with the effects months later, and we know many who are grieving due to the death of a loved one from this virus. This suffering lives in the forefront of our minds as we face limitations on activities and travel, and as we see the impact on our businesses and our livelihood.

But in addition to the pandemic, there is all kinds of suffering around us. There's suffering overseas in acts of violence and war, natural disasters, hunger, starvation. There's suffering in our nation over hard economic times, divisive politics, greed and selfishness. There's suffering in our own community—hunger, poverty and homelessness are no strangers to Hillsdale. And as we live in isolation during the pandemic, we may find that our relationships and our mental and emotional wellbeing suffer as well. Suffering is all around us. When we encounter this suffering, we deal with it in different ways. Some of you, like I did in college, might get angry. You might feel depressed. You might shut down emotionally. You might lose hope. You might try your hardest to ignore it, to turn a blind eye to the many layers of suffering in the world today. The suffering of this world is inescapable, and the burden can weigh us down.

Normally, we'd be able to gather in worship each week and be uplifted by the community that we share; the community that God has gathered together for us. We'd hear the Word of God, we'd confess our sins and receive the sacraments. We'd join in communal prayer and song, and give thanks for God's presence that brings hope, healing and love to our suffering world. As I

found in college, and as we've experienced in those "normal" times, when we worship, through our actions together in the liturgy, we carry the burdens of this world to the foot of the cross, and Jesus eases our burdens and calms our troubled minds.

But in the midst of the pandemic, this has become much more difficult. We haven't been able to gather regularly in worship. We haven't been able to visit with one another. We haven't been able to join in singing our praises and laments to God. And the sacrament has been absent from our lives. Many of us probably feel as though we're left to carry our burdens alone. But even in this time of isolation, Jesus remains with us.

We may not experience God's presence in the same ways when we are worshipping virtually, but Jesus still promises to come with us, to carry our burdens and lighten our load. And we live with the promise that God *will* gather us together again so that we might again join in community with the Body of Christ.

In our Gospel reading today, Simon Peter's mother-in-law was ill and suffering with a fever. The weight of this suffering kept her in bed, perhaps near death. She probably felt isolated and alone as well. But Simon Peter and Andrew knew what to do for this suffering. Give her Jesus. "Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." When Peter's mother-in-law was sick, and when we are burdened by this fevered world, Jesus comes to us—wherever we are—to heal us.

During the week, we gather up the suffering of the people we know and of the world around us. We draw them to ourselves, like breathing. We inhale the suffering and concerns and fevers of a world oppressed with fear. Then, in our times of prayer, in times of devotion, and as we worship virtually from our homes, we lay these concerns at the foot of the cross. With every "Lord have mercy," every "Amen," we exhale the fever we ourselves have carried on behalf of others. Jesus knows where to find us to bring the healing that our feverish world needs.

But it doesn't end there. As we lay our burdens at the foot of the cross, Jesus heals us *and raises us up for service*. Our Gospel reading tells us, "Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." As we worship, as we pray, and as we reflect on God's presence in our lives, we receive the goodness of the Lord that uplifts us, strengthens us and empowers us as we are sent out in mission. We are reassured that there is no oppressor, no power, and no illness that can stand in the presence of the God of all creation. We hear of the healing power of Jesus, who offers himself to us in the Word. We are sent out with Christ for mission in this world. We are sent out to teach, feed, sew, shelter, care, heal, comfort and love. We are sent out, with Christ, to be God's hands in this fevered world.

We approach God as broken people, burdened by the suffering, concerns and fevers of this world. And we lay these things at the foot of the cross. Jesus comes to us in the Word, and Jesus heals us from the fevers we carry, raising us up to lives of ministry and service. We are sent out with Christ, strengthened and empowered so that we might serve this fevered and broken world. Thanks be to God. Amen.