**Coping With Covid: A Spiritual Toolbox**

**Acts 2:1-12**

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

May 31, 2020

Some experiences change your life forever.

On May 3, 1980, thirteen-year-old Cari Lightner was struck by a car as she and a friend walked to a church carnival.  The car hit Cari from behind and threw her out of her shoes 125 feet from the scene of the accident.  The drunk driver, who had just gotten out of jail for his fourth DUI conviction, drove away. Of course, Cari’s mother, Candace, was devastated. Yet, by fall of that year, she had taken her grief and transformed it into energy and commitment to create change.  She is the founder of Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

In the summer of 2004, a thirty-something mom and teacher went on a church kayaking trip.  She was a beginner and the river was high.  Recent storms had brought down trees and branches that were difficult to maneuver over.  At one such spot, the mom’s kayak flipped.  She was stuck under the kayak and entangled in the tree branches.  She remembers holding her breath as long as she could, and her next memory is of finding herself draped over the tree trunk and gratefully drawing breath.  When she got home, something kept nudging her not to just move on but to learn from the near-death experience.  She sought out her pastor who asked, “What do you feel God has called you to do with your life that you haven’t done?”  Two years later, she started seminary and now she is your pastor.

More than two thousand years ago, a group of men closely followed a prophet, healer, and teacher as he traveled through Judea teaching a gospel of love.  They watched as he was ultimately arrested, humiliated, beaten, and crucified.  They grieved his death until, miraculously, he was resurrected.  He appeared to them, assuring them that he would ascend to heaven and would send the Holy Spirit to guide and teach him in his place. With the Spirit’s help, they were to go and make disciples of all nations.  Some fifty days later, the disciples turned apostles and founded the Christian church on this day we call Pentecost.

Some experiences change your life forever.  And we are living through such an experience.  None of us will be the same when, at some unknown point in the future, there is a vaccine for Covid-19 and this strange reality we are living in is over.  The question is what will we do with this experience?

Though set in different times and places and revolving around very different events, the three stories I just shared with you have one thing in common - they are stories of trauma that led to transformation.  Transformation that could only happen because those impacted worked to make meaning of their experience.

This is the last in a four-part sermon series entitled, “Coping with Covid: A Spiritual Toolbox”.  We’ve talked about dealing with uncertainty, naming our losses and grief, nurturing self-compassion, and, today, we’ll focus on making meaning of this time.

As I mentioned, today is also Pentecost - the day we celebrate the birth of the Christian church.  We tell that story of how the disciples were gathered in a room in Jerusalem when a violent wind began to blow, tongues of fire came to rest on each of them, and the Holy Spirit filled them with the courage and wisdom they needed to do what Jesus called them to do. They began to translate all that Jesus taught them - kindness, compassion, justice, and, of course, love. They translated from their own experience to make meaning of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection so others could join them in a movement to transform the world.

As we move through this global crisis, I believe we have the opportunity for a similar sort of transformation as individuals, as a church community, and as a society.  But, to get there, we will need to do the work of making meaning from this time.

Holocaust survivor and psychotherapist Viktor Frankl wrote, “Life holds potential meaning under any conditions, even the most miserable ones...In some ways suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds meaning.”

This was the experience of David Kessler, a student and colleague of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross.  Two weeks ago, I quoted from Kessler because he is now considered the world’s foremost expert on grief.  Though he has studied grief and counseled people who are grieving for his whole career, he still struggled deeply when, unexpectedly, his twenty-one-year-old son died.  His journey through grief led him to create a sixth stage of grief he called finding meaning.  He realized that he could not stay at the fifth stage, acceptance.  He needed to move forward to use his grief to create change.  His research and books about the sixth stage is the product of that time.

Before we can move toward that sixth stage, we have to be ready.  Like so many things, there will come a time when we can turn from the intensity of the losses and grief we are experiencing because of Covid-19 and focus on what we’ve learned.  Not everyone will get there.  But, research shows that eventually the majority of people who experience trauma can get to the place where they are ready to understand the experience and grow from it.  We don’t know how the disciples spent the days between when Jesus last appeared to them and Pentecost, but on the day the Holy Spirit began to blow and stir up tongues of fire, they were ready to begin the work of making meaning of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

That work is largely about fully exploring our thoughts and feelings about the traumatic event.  It took a lot of journaling and a number of conversations with my pastor before I could say, “I think God called me to ministry years ago and I ignored it.  Now, God is calling again and it’s time for me to answer.”

There are questions we can begin to answer by looking deep within ourselves as well as looking honestly at the world around us.  In the Quaker tradition they might be called queries.  Questions like “What have I discovered about myself through these months of Covid-19?”  “What changes have I made in my habits or priorities during this time do I want to hold onto?”  “What have I learned about what I really value and the relationships that matter to me?”  “What has happened during this time that has stirred up my passion or my anger?”  “What have I realized I can let go of?”  “How can I be a better person or more closely live the life I want to live because of Covid-19?”

Of course, we can also be looking at our church with similar questions.  “What have we learned about being the church through this time?”  “What changes that we’ve made should we hold onto and develop further?”  “What old ways of doing things is it time to let go of?”  “How can we grow - not only in numbers but in spiritual depth, connection to God, and reflection of God’s love to the world?”

And finally, there are questions we can ask about our society.  “What has Covid-19 taught us about how to prepare for a crisis?”  “What injustices and inequities has the pandemic uncovered in our country?”  “What can we learn as a country from this time?”  “What kind of country do we want to be going forward?”

Obviously, the answers to questions like these don’t come quickly.  And they shouldn’t.  It is the process of thinking and exploring that leads us to transformation.

But Candace Lightner didn’t stop with exploring her feelings about Cari’s death.  She began to tell her story and create change.  And, of course, the disciples didn’t stop with understanding how Jesus impacted their own lives.  They told the stories of their time with Jesus to others.  How he healed lepers and those who were blind.  How he accepted the woman caught in adultery instead of judging her.  How he stormed into the temple court and turned over the tables of the money changers.  How he pointed out the inequities in their society and challenged the Jewish laws when they hurt rather than helped others.  How he gave them hope, promising that God was at work creating a better world, a kinder world, a just world.  And how he taught them to love. To put love for each other and for God at the center of their lives.

That’s why we celebrate Pentecost - why we hang bright red banners with flames rising, why I bring out this beautiful stole made for my ordination by women in our church, why we take time to celebrate being the church, being a community of love, being people who seek to transform the world.

Some experiences change your life forever.  If they do, God calls us, when we’re ready, to tell our stories, too.  To share our feelings about this time and our memories and reflections.  We tell our stories, and we weave in those stories what we have learned, what we can pass on to our children and theirs, what we learned to do differently, how we changed ourselves, our church, and our world because we lived through Covid-19.

We are the church and our stories will carry the church into the future. So, Happy Pentecost, friends!  And when the time is right, may you seek to make meaning from the crises in your life. May you explore what God has for you to learn and to do because of them.  And may you value your relationships more deeply, follow God’s nudges more bravely, and tell your stories more boldly.

Because some experiences change our lives forever. Amen.