Three Revelations
A Sermon on 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11 by the Rev. Philip Major
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Today and for the past six weeks we have encountered readings from First Peter. First Peter was most likely written 60-80 years after the first Easter, to encourage and guide a congregation, or a group of congregations, in lands now part of modern-day Turkey. These congregations appear to be comprised primarily of slaves and of women. It appears that these members are undergoing a great amount of suffering and perhaps even systematic persecution for their Christian practices.

In ten years of preaching, including over 400 sermons, I have not preached a single sermon on First Peter. I don’t feel especially qualified to join in this conversation about the meaning of, and response to, sufferings endured by women, slaves and Christian minority groups. I am not a woman. I have never been persecuted for being a Christian. Neither I, nor any members of my family for centuries before me, have been forced into a life of slavery.

Yet our passage from 1 Peter begins with words that seem directly relevant to the situation unfolding in many places around the globe today: Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. Regardless of our personal histories, to a greater or lesser degree, all of us are making our way through a time which is as close as some of us will ever get to a ‘fiery ordeal’. This time of isolation, uncertainty and fear, this time of job losses, trauma and death, will likely be the event that defines and shapes us for years or even decades to come. And it is clear from the responses of many nations and of many leaders, that we are utterly unprepared for the ordeal we are currently experiencing. So we look for God’s guidance more than ever at this time, as people making our way through an ordeal.

The first piece of guidance is that our relationship with God comes first, and that this is a relationship marked by humility. Humility means telling the truth. Humility entails acknowledging the limitations of our understanding. Humility entails acknowledging the limitations of our power. Humility is a spiritual gift. An absence of humility leads to a disruption in our relationship with God.

One of the revelations of the epidemic is that many of the leaders who have best demonstrated the spiritual gift of humility have been doctors, nurses and scientists. We have been disappointed to see many of our political leaders and even some of our religious leaders reveal an astounding lack of humility. In this lack of humility, it seems they are revealing the poor state of their relationships with God.

Our relationship with God comes first, and humility is at the heart of that relationship. Humility does not mean that I am always weak. Humility does not mean that I am always wrong, or that I am always guilty. Humility means I pray to God for guidance, because I understand that on my own, I will certainly get lost. Humility means I constantly look for the truth outside myself, because I realize I only see and hold onto small slivers of the truth. Humility means I give thanks for the gifts I have received, because I recognize that everything I have comes from God.

As we make our way through this ordeal, we move forward by putting our relationship with God first. Our relationships with one another are based in our relationships with God. In the Gospel of John, Jesus gives us the clearest descriptions of our relationships with one another as his disciples in chapters 13, 14, 15, 16 & 17. In these chapters Jesus describes our relationships with one another with images and words of unity and community and loving service.

A second revelation of the epidemic is that we have seen countless courageous examples of unity, community and loving service given to us by people of varied professions, varied faiths and varied ethnic backgrounds. Each day we see examples and hear stories of nurses, doctors, hospital
staff members, pharmacists, store clerks, postal workers and first responders who have risked their own lives to care for those in need and provide essential services. Even as some of our political leaders have continued their xenophobic attacks on immigrants and those perceived to be foreigners, many of those who have placed themselves at greatest risk of exposure to the disease have been first generation Americans.

Our relationships with one another flow from our relationships with God. Out of these relationships comes an awareness of the power of love, but also of the continuing threat of evil in the world.

The author of First Peter provocatively depicts the threat of evil, saying **Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.**

Is the threat of evil embodied in an actual character, like a roaring lion or the tempter depicted in the Gospel of Matthew? I am sure I will never have a definitive answer to that question, but I am also sure that evil is, and will continue to be, a deadly threat to our relationships with God, to our relationships with one another, and to our communities and nations.

As we make our way through this ordeal, part of what has been revealed is the terrible effects of evil in our nation and in our communities. Part of the grief we see and experience is the result of evil. We see evil in disparities in health care and the lack of health care for the poor. We see evil in the disregard for the lives of the bus drivers, meat packing workers, the elderly and others most susceptible to the coronavirus. We see evil in leaders who seek to divide Americans from one another on the basis of religion, wealth, ethnic heritage or culture. We see evil in the suggestion that states should declare bankruptcy, and thereby be freed from their commitments to support those who have retired, and will retire from public service, including police officers, firefighters and school teachers.

We are making our way through one of the defining ordeals of our lives. Sometimes we are surprised to see the evil around us. Most of my friends and colleagues refrain from discussions of the threat of evil. For decades we have watched with horror as extremist religious leaders have branded their political opponents as evil. We are loathe to engage in pointing the finger.

But it will not help for us to pretend that evil does not exist. As long as there is racism and prejudice in the world, we will need to be alert to the threat of evil. As long as there is greed in the world, we will need to be alert to the threat of evil. As long as there is callous disregard for the well-being of the poor and the disabled, we will need to be alert to the threat of evil.

We are making our way through this ordeal, and part of the ordeal has been caused by the evil done by people. Do not be surprised. Keep alert. Be aware of the destructive potential of evil for us and for our community.

Find strength in your relationships with one another. Find strength in your unity with one another. Find strength in loving service, received from or given to others. Find strength in a relationship of humility with God. Find strength in your relationship with the one who has loved you from the start, with the one who formed you in the image of divine love.