

April 1, 2021
Maundy Thursday
John 13:1–17, 31b–35
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship During the Coronavirus Pandemic
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

The Peace of Christ Be with You

It was an awkward moment. We had only been doing Zoom worship services for three weeks and then it was Holy Week. We had to figure out how to share the Holy Week services, using a medium that we were, as worship planners and leaders and as worshipers, just getting used to.

So, we took the Holy Week bulletins from previous years as our template and we adapted them for Zoom. It was a good place to start, but we clearly hadn't thought everything through. That's what led to the awkward moment.

I saw it coming as the service progressed and I thought to myself, "Oh, we should have taken that out..." but it was too late to do anything about it. So, I said the words, "The peace of the Lord be with you always." And the designated responder, the voice of the assembly, said back to me, "And also with you."

And then there was an incredibly awkward moment, when we all just stared at each other out of our little Zoom boxes. We all knew what should have been happening. We should have been moving around, shaking hands, giving hugs, offering each other peace.

But we couldn't move. We were trapped. Trapped in our homes. Trapped in our Zoom boxes. Together, but physically separate. What we were going to do? I didn't have a plan for this awkward liturgical moment, which in most liturgies has the power to bring us together, but which, in this moment, highlighted the sorrow and the strangeness of the way that we had been thrust apart by a disease.

I don't remember who it was, but into that awkwardness, into that moment of liturgical dis-ease, someone looked at someone else on their Zoom screen and called that person by name and said, "Peace be with you."

And then, everyone started doing it. Speaking each other's names and offering each other peace, the peace and presence of Christ.

It went from being an incredibly awkward moment, something that I wished that I'd thought ahead enough to take out of the service, because "How were we going to do that?" to being one of the most beautiful moments of spontaneous worship that I have ever been a part of.

A moment when what was scripted, what was written on the page failed us, but our desire for community, for contact, for Christ's peace and for each other's well-being enabled us to find a way to connect with each other, even in a disconnecting and disconcerting time. Christ's peace was spoken and shared. It touched us in spite of the fear, in spite of the isolation, in spite of the unknowns that plagued our lives then and that still, to some extent, are present with us today.

People still like to tease me, for my lack of pandemic imagination when this all first began. I guess I deserve it. When we first locked down, on March 15, 2020, I talked about hoping that we would be able to be reopened and "back to normal" by Easter. Easter 2020. Then, when I quickly realized that was not going to happen, I imagined that we would be open again so close to Easter, perhaps during the Easter season, that we could celebrate a delayed Easter Sunday on the day when we all crowded back into the building.

I figured out during the Easter season that we wouldn't be back to in person worship in keeping with any of the timelines that I had imagined and foolishly shared. I pushed Confirmation from Pentecost to Reformation, thinking that certainly by then, by October, things would be normal again. We had Confirmation on Zoom.

And so, it went. Obviously, we all figured out as days, weeks, months, and now a year dragged by, that this was not going to be a quick process, that there were not going to be any simple answers or any easy outs.

But never, never, did I imagine that we would still be here today, a year later, observing another Zoom Holy Week. And yet, here we are, together, but still physically separate.

I went back and reread my Maundy Thursday sermon from last year, just to get a feel for where we were then, three weeks into the pandemic.

Where we were was trapped, shut-in, locked down, afraid, and alone. I wrote in that sermon about not being able to take communion, not being able to see each other in person, not being able to touch.

That was before we even wore masks. It was back when we just, for the most part, stayed at home, worked at home, went to school at home, waited at home, alone. We didn't see our families, not even for socially distanced visits. We didn't see our friends, except through a screen.

Fast forward to today. We know that things are still off, we're still not back to normal and perhaps the normal that we knew before last March is never coming back, but still rereading that sermon from just about a year ago today, reminded me of how far we've come.

This year, you'll see more faces in the Holy Week videos that we have created. You'll see more people involved in Zoom Holy Week worship, people who were able to come together from different households, wearing masks, but still being together to prepare for Holy Week worship.

This year I come to this Zoom Maundy Thursday service, having just presided at two Holy Communion services, that we held in our Sanctuary, an opportunity for those who are local in our church community, to gather for brief in person worship services and receive the sacrament.

In my Maundy Thursday sermon last year, I talked about the unfinished projects all over the church, baskets filled to overflowing with the supplies for Lutheran World Relief personal care kits and quilts that had been left unfinished, tops and backs and batting in Kask Hall that had been left between one Saturday, when, for us, it felt like everything was fine, and the next Saturday, when the world had shut down.

When I wrote last year's sermon, we didn't have a plan for how we were going to finish those projects, how the quilts would be completed, how the personal care kits would be packed, how it all would get to Lutheran World Relief, but in spite of all of the disruption, 83 quilts and 113 personal care kits were sent to Lutheran World Relief from Emmanuel in 2020.

Right now, there are new quilt tops and quilt backs hanging in Kask Hall and there are thick rolls of batting, ready for the 2021 quilting season, which, much to my amazement, to my and many other people's joy, will be able to happen.

In last year's Maundy Thursday sermon, I talked about empty Sunday School classrooms, but, this year, thanks to the hard work of our Sunday School Superintendent, and our Learning Team, and our Sunday School teachers, and Sunday School students and their parents, we have been able to have Sunday School this school year. It's been on Zoom, it's been very different from what the teachers and the students are used to, but it's been able to happen.

In last year's Maundy Thursday sermon, I talked about the chairs set up in the Founder's Room, ready for the choir practice that still has not happened.

But we have still found ways to make music together. People have recorded their songs and sent them in for Zoom worship. Some of us participated in the Association of Lutheran Church Musician's virtual choirs for Pentecost and Easter and many people participated in the virtual congregation sing of *Silent Night* that Bryon Sol produced for our Christmas Eve service.

I'll admit, I wasn't very enthusiastic as we headed into yet another Zoom Holy Week, but I feel comforted seeing where we were and how far we've come.

It might feel at times like we're still stuck, still separate, still distanced, still paralyzed by this pandemic, but in so many ways, in the ways that we've learned to be together during this time, to serve together, to worship together, to pray together, and to be in fellowship together, and in the growing numbers of people who have been vaccinated against Covid-19, there are signs of hope.

It might seem strange to be talking about hope on this night when we remember Jesus' last supper with his disciples, the meal that he ate with his closest companions, "on the night in which he was betrayed".

Our gospel reading for this evening's service, from the gospel of John is one of the stories of that night. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell the story of the last supper happening on that night, with the breaking and eating of the bread and the pouring and drinking of the wine, and the words, take and eat, drink, all of you, do this in remembrance of me. But John tells a different story from this last night.

He tells the story of Jesus rising from the table, kneeling in front of his disciples and washing their feet. He tells the story of Jesus telling them that he had set an example for them saying,

Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord — and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you (John 13:12b-15).

Then Jesus gives them a new commandment on this night, this night that was not a good night for the disciples. It was a night charged with an ominous energy for on it, it had to become clear to them that Jesus was saying some kind of

goodbye. In John's gospel, Jesus speaks quite clearly about it. He says, "Little children, I am with you only a little longer" (John 13:33a).

It had to be with growing unease, growing dis-ease, that the disciples realized that things were not going to be the way that they wanted them to be. I wonder what look was in their eyes when they realized that everything was about to change.

And then Jesus gave them something that they could hold onto. He gave them a new commandment. A commandment from which we get that name of this night, a *mandatum*, a mandate, which was changed into Maundy as it passed from Latin to French to English, through languages, through centuries.

What we have tonight is Maundy Thursday, the day of the new commandment. And the new commandment is to love one another.

Jesus told his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

This new commandment comes as a gift, because it is not just a burden, it is not only a command. It is a community, a mutuality, an invitation, a love for us to give and receive to and from one another and a love for us to share with the world.

We are called to live and share Christ's servant love and we are also called to receive it.

The hope of this night is that into all that is strange and hard and unknown and even ominous about the life we have to live in this sin scarred world, in this time and in all others, is that we do not live here alone. Jesus is with us and Jesus has given us to each other.

It might seem strange, but I left the sharing of the peace in tonight's worship service. I almost pulled it out, remember the awkwardness of the silence, the staring, the liturgical panic of a community robbed of so many of its customs, its traditions,

its patterns of being together, robbed even of its building, its sanctuary, its sacred space, wondering, “What do we do now?” Wondering “How are we going to do this?”

But then I remembered the beauty of someone stepping out into the unknown and figuring out a new way to reach across the distance to each other offering community, offering love, offering a peace that passes all understanding, a peace that comes from Christ, who has never abandoned us and who never will.

So, I left the sharing of Christ’s peace in. Because on Zoom, in person, however we worship, wherever we worship, however we live together in community, however we serve, the most important thing is that we continue to find ways, perhaps new ways, to love one another and that we remember and share the peace of Christ, which is with us even in the hardest of times.

The peace of the Lord be with you always. Amen.