

Sermon for Christmas Eve

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Merry Christmas, everyone!

Oh wow, it's amazing to have something to celebrate, isn't it? We got folks in the pews, we've got folks sitting next door, we've got folks a thousand miles away, all together in this new way to celebrate one single thing: booster shots.

Wait, no, that's not right. Sorry. We're all here to celebrate one single thing: a unified country!

Nope, sorry. My mistake. Looks like I've got my notes all mixed up. Let's try this again. We are finally, all together in this way but also not and we're sitting next to the people we love, or we're not, and we're excited to be together but also a little worried about just how many people might sneeze during the course of this service. Yeah, there we go. That's more like it. Merry Christmas!

I saw a friend I haven't seen in two years the other day, and they asked how I've been doing, so I said, "Oh, I'm doing alright," which has become a kinda code these days. "I'm doing alright" is an easy way to signal to folks that everything is awful but I'd rather just appreciate the chance to look at your eyes for a second. So, I said I was alright, and he nodded, agreeing that he, too, was alright, and once we'd acknowledged in our new code that everything's awful, he asked how the church has been doing. And I said, "Oh, they're doing alright, too." And again, he nodded. Our socially distanced conversation shifted to the early days of the pandemic, and we reminisced about the ways we used to do things. Can you believe this has been going on long enough that we can reminisce and still be in it at the same time?

Well, right as all this hit us in those first couple of weeks, Becca and I went into quarantine, and Steve brought groceries to the back porch. He'd check in from the other side of the screen door, and we'd sort of look at each other with gratitude for the help and sorrow that we couldn't give those sad eyes a hug to assure him that everything would be alright. I remember wondering how long we should leave the grocery bags outside before touching them, wiping the produce down with bleach wipes and then washing the bleach off, wondering if it was overkill to wipe down boxes and jars, too. At one point, the dogs were so happy to see Steve that they opened the screen door themselves and refused to let him get away without petting them. And then we wondered if Steve should go into quarantine because he'd touched our dogs that we'd been petting.

I remember getting out of quarantine and the world being deeply changed. I remember arrows on the grocery store floor and plexiglass dividers between me and underpaid frontline heroes at the checkout line, and I remember wondering if it was now rude to pick up an item to read the label and then put it back on the shelf. I felt like my six-year-old self the first time my grandma took me into an antique store full of old china and uranium glass: don't touch anything. I remember so much from those early days, especially figuring out how to do services online and making sense of what were the most crucial aspects of our Holy Week celebrations. I remember the looks people gave each other when some new sorrow occurred. A look of pity and pain and a longing to reach out but a fear that you might get sick, or worse, might get them sick. Pain compounded on pain.

I don't remember much after we settled in for the long haul. Once it became clear that "this time we're gonna see what happens for the next two weeks" wouldn't bring about relief, my memory kinda shuts off. We just endured. We didn't really live through that era, we survived it. There are blips, of course. George Floyd's murder, Ahmaud Arbery being hunted, Breona Taylor killed in her bed, it seemed the world was losing its mind and finding it at the same time. Then Epiphany came, and what should've been the final moment of joy in the Christmas story instead brought images of an actual gallows and the flag of a treasonous nation bandied through

our nation's capital. Maybe this stuff was new, or maybe it'd been bubbling under the surface for decades. Either way, we learned that so much of what we've held dear might not've been as dear as we'd thought.

Another memory emerges around the end of February. I went to the Syracuse Fairgrounds to get my first shot; I was on the early side of vaccines, and I got a lot of weird looks clearly wondering why I deserved to be there that early. It's the only time in my life that having asthma has paid off. But that room, big and full and empty of the flashy State Fair decor I'm used to, I could imagine black and white photographs in textbooks years from now of that moment, the beginning of the end of the hardest period of my life. I also remember the stunned look from the 19-year old National Guardsman assisting my nurse when I removed my collar to get that shot. He didn't say anything but his eyes gave away the immense curiosity he'd had about just exactly how clergy fashion works. Be honest: you've wondered, too. Shot Number 2 was old hat, and then last summer was like the Roaring Twenties, at least, we'd hoped it'd be. But I just couldn't get into it. The specter of this changed world loomed heavy over everything, still. It's done, but it's not done, but we should get back to normal, but what is normal anyway, and who did that normal serve?

And then the variants started showing up. I have learned more about epidemiology than I cared to over the past two years, and I still know next to nothing. But I know this: the word "variant" is not something I want to see in a headline ever again. But this is where we sit. With the heaviness of the pandemic stretching behind us and who knows what stretching before us. We wait in this place of uncertainty about too much and an anxious certainty of even more. In the lead up to tonight, the church leaders from around Central New York had a Zoom call with a physician, theologian, and ethicist from University of Rochester Medical Center. (No, that's not a panel, that's one very accomplished person's job description.) She told us what we needed to know about the science of all this, about vaccines and masks and singing and liturgy and so on. She assured us of what we could do in-person and warned us against what we shouldn't. But at one point, I asked a question, and she wept as she tried to answer. I'd asked if we should be worried about the flu and the other respiratory things going around, too. And the weight of an overwhelmed system became unavoidably apparent in this overwhelmed person. And once she composed herself, she said, "Sorry, I'm alright." And we all kind of nodded.

I've learned a new word this year. Or rather, it's a word I've known the dictionary definition of for a long time, but I've only just come to really know its meaning. Y'all, I am weary. It's taken the past two years for this word to make its way beyond my brain and down into my bones. I think that's what "I'm alright" means. "I'm weary." I wept, too, when that old gospel gem by The Cox Family popped up on my spotify the other day. "I Am Weary, Let Me Rest." That's become my favorite hymn this year, believe it or not. I know, it doesn't sound all that joyful, but I actually think it fits better than most of what we sing or say or preach most years. See, we've been coming at Christmas as a thing of joy and happiness, a time to see family and rejoice that all is now well! And sure, that's great. But the First Christmas probably wasn't quite so happy, and it certainly wasn't widespread or on sale in the marketplace since the middle of the second trimester.

We have a tendency to reduce Christmas down to a cute baby inconveniently born with livestock eyewitnesses, but we don't like to talk about the rest of the story all that much. Sure, this little baby will grow to do wonders, but we don't like to talk about the terrible hunt for other babies that follows his miraculous birth. We don't like to talk about the death that comes so soon after, the terror that runs him and his family out of their home country, the dark days of empire that have ruled over his people for six centuries before he comes. We like to think of Mary and Joseph being mostly ok and then having to make an inconvenient and poorly timed trip only to get stuck out back because Joseph forgot to book a reservation. But that ain't it. Mary and Joseph know the same weariness we see in each other's eyes now. They know what hard, unending, uncertain times feel like. They know what it means to just survive. They're "alright." So when Jesus is born, his cherub cheeks and precious cooing bring all that a normal child's birth would bring into that dark place, but it brings so much

more, too. Jesus' birth brings an answer to the weariness. It brings the assurance of hopes actually coming true. It brings the promise that everything will be alright, without code or subtext or the cloud of sorrow. It will actually be alright.

For longer than I'd like to admit, I've been listening to "I Am Weary, Let Me Rest" on repeat. It's become my Advent hymn, the thing I've been longing for the most as we anticipate the reentry of Christ in this darkest time of year in this darkest of years. Let me rest. Surely there's room for joy and happiness and heralding angels, too. But for Mary and Joseph, for the long-maligned people of God, for thousands of years of hardship, for a couple of years of policies and mandates and medical vocabulary most of us don't actually understand, Christmas also brings relief. The relief that, in spite of all that's wrong in the world, thanks be to God, we're gonna be alright.