

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
June 28, 2020
Preached remotely in the time of COVID-19

I ended up flying home from a family event about ten years ago with my cousin Gretchen. We were flying from Kansas City back to Chicago, and we hit some choppy air. I immediately freaked out, and she looked at me and said that, actually, she kind of liked turbulence because it felt like being rocked to sleep. I wanted to scream at her that we were NOT being rocked like babies but, instead, were going to die as the plane hurtled to the ground.

A careful listener will pick up from this anecdote that I am not a very good flier. I'm much better now, but I had a run of about ten years where flying was just an agony—which was a shame because between friends and family, I was flying all the time.

These days I'm more mildly alarmed rather than full DEFCON 1 panic when I fly. But it is still pretty low on my list of pleasurable activities. I find myself waiting for this one moment right before we begin to taxi. The pilot usually comes on the intercom after the flight attendants have made sure we're all seated. The pilot typically welcomes us aboard, and then she says something like "our flight today is 4 hours and 15 minutes, and we can expect some bumps about an hour from our destination." And there is something about that announcement that I find incredibly soothing. I think, well, the pilot clearly knows what she's doing, and she's being honest about how we're going to have some unpleasantness closer to our destination. When the pilot DOESN'T come on with the little talk, I have a much worse flying experience.

This morning's Old Testament lesson is a little cryptic. I had to go look up what was going on because it is so short and kind of tricky to understand without context. In the story, the prophet Hannaniah has just finished preaching to the people of Jerusalem, and then the prophet Jeremiah lobs a pretty intense critique against Hannaniah's sermon.

Here's the backstory: Jerusalem has been attacked by the Babylonians, but the city hasn't been destroyed quite yet. Hannaniah took the position that the attack is going to fade and that they will be fine. Jeremiah's point of view is that things are going to get really bad and that the people should prepare for the worst. I like to think that both men were preaching from what they believed to be the truth, though it would turn out that Jeremiah was correct.

Sounds a little familiar, no? There are preachers in our society who are telling us that the dual scourges of COVID-19 and white supremacy are not as bad as we think. Surely some of these people are acting in cynical self-interest, but others probably legitimately believe that what they preach is true. And then there are other preachers who are telling us that, yes, things are historically bad and won't be back to normal for a long time.

There's a way in which the first kind of preacher—the “it's not that bad” kind of preacher—can seem to be offering the people a kindness—a balm. But I don't think this is true. I much prefer the preacher who is like the pilot on a bumpy flight—someone who will tell you that it'll probably be a long flight and that parts of it will be bad.

I believe as a community we need to look realistically at how bumpy this ride is likely to get. Infections are rising and we have a political class that seems uninterested in finding solutions that save lives, and who seem equality uninterested in providing relief to people economically disadvantaged by disastrous unemployment and loss of livelihood. And all this will affect our parish. Our sense of ourselves as an in person worshipping community is necessarily changing. Our work on finding a solution to our building problem has been delayed by months since we talked about it in January of the annual meeting. And our ability to be a central and visible sign in the community has lessened. These are all very real bumps in our lives, and I don't think it does any good to sugar coat it. I don't see us back in our building soon.

Even so, Jeremiah is not without hope. This is the same prophet who promises the people that they will be fruitful in their exile and that Yahweh will return them home some day. The turbulence will lessen and the plane will land. I believe we are in a moment where hope and faith—sometimes concepts we can give lip service to during good times—need to become more muscular, more central to our life. We have faith that we will worship together in person once again. We share the hope that the current unrest in our country will lead to lasting change and real justice for people of color. It takes courage to believe in these things that can sometimes seem impossible.

And yet that is what the prophet will ask of us—to trust that God's story for us does not end in separation. God's story for us does not end in injustice. Rather, the muscular hope and faith that we exercise tells us that St. Mark's will be loving God and our neighbors when this isolation is a bad memory. And we will be telling our children about the ways in which the nation is more just than it was in the past. For every Pharaoh, there is a Moses. For every Haman, there is an Esther. For every Herod, there is the star of Bethlehem to guide our hope.

This flight is going to be bumpy. And it will probably be long. But we will get there, stronger, wiser, and together with God. Amen.