

My clergy colleagues recently lamented that it's hard to write a sermon that doesn't make reference to COVID or coronavirus. The trouble is, it's all round us and effects us every day, how can we not talk about it? As the body of Christ, it is hard not to lament our separation or to ask ourselves how we can figuratively be the church while we are not bodily in the church building.

I've been reflecting quite a bit on how we, both as people and as a universal church will be shaped by this shared event in our lives. My grandmothers lived through the depression. And while my maternal grandmother was more effected by the polio she contracted than the abject poverty she lived through, my father's mother lived the rest of her life viewing the world through the lens of scarcity.

That is the power of journeys: be it a journey through hunger and poverty, through unpredictable illness and survival, through challenge or strife. It's important for us to evaluate how we respond to the crisis and yet we are wise to consider how we move forward once the storm or trial passes.

I will admit that as I hear the cacophony of voices lamenting life as we know it now, and you can add mine to that once in a while, it reminds me of another group of God's children who were on a journey of their own. Led by Moses, the Israelites fled enslavement in Egypt and risked their lives to begin the long trek to the Promised Land. The drama that led to their escape entailed a parted red sea and the destruction of enemy forces. Despite that harrowing beginning, it didn't take long for the Israelites to complain about their state. Water was scarce, food was like nothing they experienced before, and it didn't take long for these newly freed Israelites to ponder if perhaps they were too hasty in the decision to leave Egypt. "Remember

all the food we ate in Egypt? The melons? the cucumbers? The leeks, onions and garlic?”

Everywhere they look it's manna, manna, manna. Of course, at this point we know the Israelites are only in year 2 with decades more wandering to come.

These passages are often referred to as “the murmuring stories.” They serve to show not only the discomfort of the traveling peoples, but the anger that stirs up in God as their voices grumble ungratefully. God's response varies each time the stories rise up from the pages of Exodus and Numbers, but it's swift and destructive. Why? Why does God's ire turn against the very children God chose to save?

The answer is the second reason this passage in Numbers resonates, and it's about covenant and the leadership that reinforces commitment to that covenant. What we are keen to remember is that this pericope falls historically not too long after the Israelites had left Sinai. This is the very place where they promise not to live in community and not forget that God is with them and will never leave them. Their role in this partnership is to trust and obey. Moses finds himself in the position of reminding both people and God that we must not shy away from the promise we made to one another because we are unhappy with the way things are.

Many years ago, I led a bible study on Exodus. The author, Anthony Robinson, concluded the lessons with an epilogue. In it, he mused that it didn't take forty years for the Israelites to get out of Egypt. It took forty years because God needed to get the Egypt out of the Israelites.

I do wonder how this pandemic experience will effect not only us, but church. Even more so, I pray that our lamentations to return to what we *knew* will be replaced by a willingness to lean into what *know*. We know that we are not simply a local church, isolated and without mooring.

We are a United Church of Christ and that means we have covenanted with other churches and conferences to be a whole body that stands for peace, justice and the care of our neighbor.

I am encouraged because I hear all around this conference signals that we are a church of covenant. We are reaching out and grabbing hold of one another in surprising ways. In fact, this message, and others like it, come to you because we covenant our financial resources together. Covenantal help will arrive in the form of grants, loans, calls and care. It manifests in your work of feeding, caring, and watching after one another. And as I dream of the day when churches open, I also dream of the day when we take the church as it is now and reimagine the church that will be, and that is exciting news too.

Thank you, brothers and sisters in Christ. Thank you for holding me and our conference in a covenant that uplifts and strengthens so many. I count myself blessed to walk this pandemic road with you confident in the knowledge that no matter what comes, we walk together- side by side. God is with us and never leaves us. God holds our hearts and minds in the present hope promised to us in the Risen Christ. We are one people who worship one God, now and forever. Amen.