

Third Sunday of Lent 2020
March 14-15, 2020
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael Renninger

It was late June of 1972. My parents stopped at the local A&P Grocery store to pick up some milk. My brother and I hoped this would be a quick trip into the store.

The first thing I noticed at the A&P store was the smell of freshly ground coffee. Do you remember that? It smelled so good.

Then my brother and I looked at the grocery aisles – and it was *mayhem*. People arguing over a gallon of milk. Empty shelves. Angry voices.

We were dumbfounded. “What is going on?” my brother asked. And my mom said, “Boys, this is what panic looks like.”

When we got back into the car, our parents explained that a large storm named Hurricane Agnes was coming toward Pennsylvania. People were worried that there would be long-term flooding. So they ran to the stores to buy whatever they could find. Fear does that. “This is what panic looks like.”

(Does this ring a bell with anybody today?)

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The Catholic Church has been around for 2000 years. This community, founded by Jesus, has seen a lot! We saw persecution by the Roman Empire, and the Plague that devastated Europe. We've seen wars. We've seen epidemics of influenza, flu, small pox, and polio. We've seen droughts and starvation. We've seen golden ages and Dark Ages.

We've seen many moments in human history, where people look down the aisle and say “this is what panic looks like.”

There is a truth I want to ponder with you today.

And that truth is this – yes, people sometimes ask, “What does panic look like?” But the more important question is this: “what do *Christians* look like when people are panicking?”

In other words, during difficult times in human history, when panicking people look at the community founded by Jesus... *what do they see?* When people observe baptized believers in times of turmoil, what do they see *in us?*

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus goes into a region of turmoil. No, not caused by a medical issue. The turmoil in Samaria was political. The Jewish people did not like the Samaritans, and vice versa. It was so bad that Jewish people often walked many miles out of their way just to avoid walking through Samaritan territory.

But Jesus walks *right into* this region of turmoil! And two things happen. First, John tells us that Jesus sent his disciples to go to the grocery store (to buy bread, milk and toilet paper!). So, Jesus is alone.

And, Jesus is thirsty. He sits down at the well and encounters a Samaritan woman. Jesus breaks social convention by engaging her in conversation, exploring the turmoil which is going on in her own life.

She came to the well, thinking that she knew what she needed: 'just a bucket full of water.' But in her conversation with Jesus, she realizes that a deeper turmoil is at work in her life.

What turmoil? She has already been married *five times*. And as we might say in the South, she is 'keeping company' with a 6th man, to whom she is not married!

It's not just her bucket that's empty! There is something going on in her that reveals an inner yearning, an emptiness that is not being filled by numerous relationships. Clearly, she's not at peace. There's something chaotic going on inside her.

Chaos. Turmoil. Until she lets the truth of Jesus' love break through. Chaos. Turmoil. Until she hears his word and decides to act on it. Chaos. Turmoil. Until she comes to believe that he is the messiah. The savior.

Once she becomes a believer, she goes back to the village. And here is a connecting point with our current situation. All of her neighbors take one look at her, and they say to one another: *She is different!* They look at this woman, whose life had been a case study in turmoil, and they see... *something different*. Perhaps they see peace. Joy. Generosity.

She tells them about Jesus. And because they have seen how different she is, they go and find Jesus themselves. They, too, are changed. A village of turmoil is made better, because *one believer* decided to listen to Jesus.

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Which brings me back to the question I asked earlier: in a time of panic and turmoil, what do people see when they look at us - when they look at the followers of Jesus?

+ I hope they see people who know that the first thing to do whenever life gets difficult is... to

pray. In the last 72 hours, I've kept saying to people: "I chose to pray, not to panic." Jesus said, "Do not be afraid. Do not let your hearts be troubled." He meant it. We trust him. Before I do anything, I'm going to pray. I hope you will too. People will notice the difference.

When people look at us, what will they see?

+ I hope they see that Christians focus on the needs of *others*, when it might be natural to focus solely on ourselves and our families. When plagues and epidemics spread across Europe, when the nobility and powerful folks fled to the hills, who stayed to run hospitals? Who stayed to feed the hungry? People like Saint Aloysius. Catholics. Christians.

When leprosy ruined lives across the globe, who ministered to them? People like Saint Damian of Molokai. When the AIDS virus first hit the USA, and many hospitals refused to even admit people with HIV, it was Catholic hospitals that were often on the front lines of caring for them. Mother Theresa's nuns welcomed those living with HIV when no one else would.

Why do we do such things? Because we have been taught to see Christ in one another, and we chose to serve Christ in one another, even in the times of turmoil.

Throughout history, Catholics have stepped forward in times of panic and turmoil to take care of their neighbors, even when everyone else was hunkering down or heading for the hills.

Now it's our turn.

It's our turn to pray. First. Always.

It's our turn to see Christ in everyone.

It's our turn to call that senior citizen or lonely neighbor and ask if they need anything.

It's our turn to read the Scriptures, to seek the peace that Jesus gives.

It's our turn to stay informed and make good decisions. But it's not t time to allow fear to control us. And certainly not to allow fear to make us angry, judgmental or rude.

Saint Mary's is a community of people who are disciples of Jesus. In the days ahead, I will be emailing you about the things I believe Christ is asking us to do right now.

+ I believe that Christ wants us to find creative ways to make sure that all of the children who usually receive free lunches at school can still get nourishing meals, even though school is now closed. Those children live very close to us. Their hunger may grow in the days ahead. What does Jesus say? "When I was hungry, you fed me..."

+ I believe that Christ wants us to find creative ways to be present to senior citizens and others who feel isolated and alone right now. What does Jesus say? “You came and visited me...” If you know someone who is alone, who needs food, who needs a friend, reach out to them, and let us know.

+ I believe that Christ wants us to visit the sick. If you know someone who needs communion or the anointing of the sick, let us know. What does Jesus say? “When I was sick, you cared for me...”

+ I believe that Christ wants us to find ways to help workers who will not receive paychecks in the next few weeks. We are developing ways to do that. We will need your help to do this. What does Jesus say? “Give to those who ask of you...”

Jesus Christ is always faithful to us. So we must stay faithful to him. Especially now, when some of his children feel isolated, frightened or chaotic.

Viruses come, and then they go. I’m not dismissing the seriousness of this situation when I say that. But it’s true: these things come, and then they go. What does not ‘go’ is our call to do the Gospel. So if our neighbors look at us in the days ahead, let them see people who pray, people at peace, people feeding the hungry, people taking care of neighbors.

People who love.

That’s what we Christians should always look like!

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