

Sunday, March 29, 2020 – Fifth Sunday of Lent/Forward in Freedom III
“Freedom to Connect”

Acts 16: 16-34

Rev. Derek S. Klemm, Mountain View Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV
Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

I really miss you all. And not just in that quick and careless way that, in the olden days of a month ago you might have said, “Miss you” when you’re getting off the phone with a loved one far away. No – I miss you. It’s weird, looking into a camera, surrounded by empty pews, a dark narthex behind us, no sounds of kids rustling around out in the pews. It’s doesn’t feel the same, does it? Do you feel disconnected from your normal Sunday worship pattern?

“I miss you” applies to our second year confirmands, too, who were to be confirmed this morning. I’m sure it’s weird for you all worshipping at home, too – some of you are dressed for church and in a special place in the house to worship with your loved ones. Others have their feet up in their recliner, with pajama bottoms and mean case of bedhead. Still others are alone and feel the walls pressing in on them, disconnected from their community. And some are starting to feel the stress of close quarters and a tense, interminably long period ahead, wondering how long your relationships can make it. Regardless of your situation, I’m glad you’re worshipping, and we’re still all one body in Christ, even if we can’t all see each other now.

This whole Sunday sermon series called Forward in Freedom has taken a weird turn from being about our Forward in Freedom movement as the people of God at Mountain View, and at the same time it’s still the same – because it’s still all about ministry, and God’s mission to the world – and that’s what we’re about today. For all of the new unknowns out there, I assure you none of this is a surprise to God. He warned us it would be this way.

See, that’s the thing about our situation – as unprecedented to our lived experience and changes to our daily lives as the dystopian new normal in which we now live is, when you drill down to it it’s the same situation we’ve always been in... only now, under the universal and imminent threat of infectious disease causing illness, suffering and death, it’s harder to deny and turn a blind eye to the reality we’ve always been in. The core threat isn’t a virus called SARS-COV-2 (which is epidemiologist for SARS 2.0) or the disease it causes, COVID 19. And it certainly isn’t the stressors on the economic or the political order. It’s not even the impact on our healthcare system, as vital as it is that we help those folks out by delaying the peak of this

illness and stay home, not to mention pray for them and encourage them. The core threat is still sin.

COVID 19 does what sin itself does – it imprisons us – and you don't have to have it to experience that imprisonment feeling. Sin closes us off, disconnects us, makes us feel scared, insecure, worried, angry, grieving losses of various kinds. This is the epitome of the definition of sin. Every way we're reacting to it is reminding us of it – our vulnerability. I'm susceptible to it. You can't avoid it. So many of your normal, healthy, unhealthy and distraction focused ways of dealing with this reality are ripped away. And for those who are still bucking against it, that might last for a time... until they get sick themselves, or someone they love does. This disease forces us to face the reality we've always been in – which is sin and its wages – death.

Speaking of which, death is all over our texts today. God asks Ezekiel in that valley of dry bones, for example – can they live? Do you mean, “Does God stick to and accomplish His mission even when disaster and death strike?” A great sound rises and baked, bleached bone rattles and moves and connects to bone, and sinew and muscle tissue and all the physiological systems of the human body envelope the lifeless to bring about life again.

And Jesus, too – the pain of disconnection for death or any other reason, for that matter, is always sad. It even leaves Jesus in tears – despite the fact that He knows what comes next, despite the fact that He has the words of eternal life. By the same creative force that spoke the cosmos, He speaks life, and there is life. Death, undone. Disease, undone. And Lazarus with his family and friends are free to reconnect with each other and with their Lord.

The apostle Paul was no stranger to imprisonment or other hardships. The Acts text today has Paul and Silas beaten, arrested and shackled in chains for preaching Jesus and casting out a demon in a city called Philippi. He was free to speak God's liberating, healing word into the life of that young woman. And when her handlers saw their cash cow fortune teller dry up, they literally put Paul and Silas into prison. Yet it doesn't stop the Gospel from going forward.

This is something we can apply from our situation today – the Good News that we bear for the world. Look, Paul was human. Several other places in his letters he lists out the various challenges he has faced. He admits that he suffers, that he feels weak, that he has pleaded with

God to remove a particular hardship that he calls his “thorn in the flesh.” He deeply realizes his insufficiency to the task - and yet, He knows the God’s grace is sufficient, God’s power is in the Word. Even here in prison he and Silas are singing hymns – and all the other prisoners are listening. His pain and suffering puts him into a place to share the word of God in a way that perhaps none of the other men in that prison had ever heard it. That’s an opportunity before us today, too – in our work or lack thereof, in medical personnel and grocery workers and first responders courageously caring for the community, in your bringing a load of supplies to a high risk person who can’t get it. And while I pray not, perhaps for some of us in the not too distant future, in an ER or ICU near you, will have an opportunity by whispering a hymn or a psalm or a prayer.

And then, God intervenes. There’s an earthquake, and the prisoners have a ready route to escape. The jailer assumes they have and prepares to commit suicide to avoid the harsh consequences for allowing this to happen – but no one has left. Paul boldly speaks the truth of Jesus Christ and this jailer, shackled in his own distress sees the truth – that Jesus is God. That Jesus is for him. He and his entire household – presumably wife, children, servants, everyone – are baptized.

See friends, I do miss you, and I anxiously await the day we can worship together again. Receive communion together again. And we’re actively pursuing more and more ways to connect with you in video, phone and printed media – our Head Elder Jon Orr is starting a live interactive video Bible study with Zoom this morning. Pastor Brad and I are still available for appointments by distance, even if we’re not physically sitting in the office.

No, it’s not an earthquake, but we also have something that allows us not only to connect with each other but also with our community and with people in other parts of the country, shackled in distress. Satan would have you believe Nevada staying at home means you’re totally cut off. He preys on the natural sadness of your sincere “I miss you” sentiment to have you believe you are all alone and all is lost. But I still firmly believe that we and our community around us, fearful by the trauma of this disease like the jailer was at the earthquake destroying the prison will see God work through this time, powerfully. He frees us to connect at precisely the time when we’re most prone to feeling disconnected. No, it’s not the same as

being in person – but here we are, worshipping in greater numbers online than show up to an average physical worship service on campus. Here we are, social distancing and missing our normal activities, using technology and bandwidth that wouldn't have been capable of pulling this off just a few years ago. Do you see it, here, through your devices, God's Gift of forgiveness coming to you in His Word? Jesus' work on the cross and empty tomb applied to you in coronavirus America in 2020? Here we are, still God's church emphasizing our connection with God and each other, finding practical ways to serve those in our community who are more vulnerable to this disease and provide financial support to people who've lost income. Here we are, in the scariest and most open-ended crisis to touch our shores since World War II to speak freedom, life and Jesus to Las Vegas. You might be stuck in your house but God has freed you to connect to your church, community and world to share the love of Jesus. He knew we'd be here and He will use us for such a time as this! In Jesus' name, Amen.