

Sunday, April 26, 2020 – Third Sunday of Easter
“What Happens Next”

Psalm 116: 1-14

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.

The edge is removed from the darkness of night under the light of the full moon, hanging low in the eastern sky. Twelve men have finished a most holy meal – an observance of the Passover. Passover, that ancient event where God called His people out of slavery in Egypt, the angel of death passing over the houses of His people whose doorframes were smeared with the blood of an unblemished year old male lamb to deliver them from slavery in Egypt. On *this* night, a new agreement is entered into between God and His people, and new blood would be given to deliver them from slavery to sin.

Twelve men descend the stairs from their Upper Room into the moonlight and as they do, they're singing. What they're singing is called the Hallel – six psalms, now numbered Psalms 113-118, sung in Hebrew, in their entirety, by memory, on Passover and several other high holy days, recalling God's goodness and faithfulness to His people Israel in the midst of their great suffering in Egypt. Remember God's graciousness? His righteousness? His mercy? Even during the snares of death, the pains of hell, the anguish and distress. Of this Jesus and His disciples sing as He walks under the Passover full moon with His disciples to Gethsemane and the cross – “I love the Lord because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live.”

You know what comes next – the mocking, the rejection, the suffering, the anguish. Key word that I just said – you know what happens NEXT. All this praise, all this hope, even given what happens next – and Jesus knows what's coming next.

Yet there's a lot we don't know about what comes next. Are you caught in the snares of death? Are the pangs of hell taking hold of you? Anyone out there in distress or anguish? We'd be foolish not to admit it. We're all grieving. We're all suffering. We're all crying out – deliver us! Deliver my soul! Thy kingdom come, deliver us from evil, Come, Lord Jesus, Lord, have mercy. What comes next?

For Jesus, more distress and anguish. Let this cup pass, but not my will. Sleeping disciples. Violent disciples. Abandoning disciples. My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?

He was forsaken for us. For our anguish, our distress, our affliction. He's the Lamb of God, slaughtered with His blood washing over us to take away the sin of the world. Sacrificed to deliver us from our anguish and distress.

The anguish and distress of the days we live in are normal human responses to pandemics and all the attendant consequences – social, emotional and physical distance, financial insecurity, the whole nine yards. Some are rarin' for a fight – the right degree of angry politics at a high decibel will fix my issue. Others are running away, to the comfort of food, alcohol, substances, entertainment. Still others are in slow motion or paused altogether, frozen in a dread and malaise that makes it hard to get out of bed in the morning.

You – fighting, running away or frozen on your feet are why He was forsaken.

Our common challenge in 2020 is highly significant, historic and all that, even unprecedented in our living memory, but it's nothing totally new. Most humans, most times and places have lived through something like this. If not a pandemic, then a war, or generational poverty and famine or oppression or some other such traumatic thing. What makes us different as Christians from the world around us as we endure what so many humans before us have endured?

First, make no mistake – being a Christian doesn't spare you from anguish or distress. What being a Christian does is allows you a longer perspective of God's greater story to see meaning and purpose despite the pains of hell, the anguish. There's nothing new under the sun. The best predictor of the future is the past. And the past says that every time God's people have endured something like what we're going through, He is faithful.

Which is really what the psalmist is most concerned with in this psalm. Anguish, distress, snares of death, pains of hell – these things only lead up to the bigger deal, which is what God is that God's past faithfulness is impeccable, from the exodus in Egypt to the cross of Christ.

Gracious is the Lord and righteous, our God is merciful. The Lord preserves the simple (those who simply trust God), when I was brought low He saved me. Return O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.”

Gearing up for a fight isn't restful. Running away from your problems might bring some immediate relief but it's not relaxing and actually drains you. Freezing keeps the stress pressing down on you, like trying to hold a barbell overhead, eventually you'll buckle under the strain. Our rest is in Jesus.

Think of those men, walking on that road from Jerusalem back to Emmaus after the Passover. They were disciples of Jesus and after all the anguish and distress they weren't only depressed and downcast but they didn't see Jesus for who He was standing right in front of them. Only when they saw Jesus and the blessing He brings did everything lift.

That same resurrected Jesus was the source of hope for so many to follow through so many trials. I think of those people hearing Peter preach on Pentecost, cut to the core by the realization that they, their own sins, in some cases their own voices put Jesus to death – and God dealt bountifully with them in baptism. I think of our Acts reading from last week, the disciples being jailed and beaten for preaching Jesus' name and rejoicing, singing songs that they were considered *worthy* to suffer in His name. I think of Martin Luther, inspired to write his most famous hymn, “A Mighty Fortress,” during a plague epidemic overwhelming his city of Wittenberg. I think of the British troops pressed against the Atlantic at Dunkirk by the Nazi blitzkrieg messaging back three little words, “but if not,” recalling the grim circumstances of Shadrack, Meshack and Abednigo at the fiery furnace in the book of Daniel – trusting God to save them – but if not, God is still faithful.

We're living in a “but if not” moment now my friends. I know it's grim. We feel the snare around our foot, the pangs in our chest, the anguish and distress in our global Dunkirk moment against a relentless virus – God is still gracious. Merciful. He preserves us now when we're low. Return to your rest our souls – and as Jesus said, “Come to me, you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest... I will give rest for your souls.”

The best predictor of the future is the past. I don't know what May, June, or the year of 2020 in general will bring, but I do know that the past is the best predictor of the future and the

Lord has dealt bountifully with us. Right here, from our anguish and distress we can remember God's past faithfulness and His promises of faithfulness in days to come and we pray for deliverance – but if not, here's what comes next – I love the Lord, who has heard my cries for mercy. What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord, I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the Lord's house, in the midst of you, O Jerusalem.”

That's what's next. In Jesus' name, Amen.