

A God Not Far Off (22Mar2020)
John9; 1Sam16:1-13; Ps23

I haven't been out much this week. You probably haven't either.

I was surprised on Monday to find I couldn't get my bulk flour or oats or even coffee at the co-op, with those aisles covered up and sealed off. I was surprised at empty shelves around the store. I guess I was also surprised the fruit was still sitting out. Those surprises were seeing in person what we've heard on the news.

More personally unsettling was a gas station errand Wednesday evening sensing I was supposed to be nervous. I dashed inside before another customer could go in, and tried not to touch anything, using the PIN pad with my knuckle, intensely eager to wash my hands after.

That's a strange, sickening feeling for me, this fearful avoidance of contact. It may not be unjustified for interacting with these days. But I don't like it.

It struck me this being fretfully apart from the world is the opposite of God, who interacts with and makes use of and blesses our world, a full contact God. Our God is not separate from here. God is not an austere, blank, clean isolation chamber, those sterile all-white rooms without so much as a speck. Not holy or heavenly to make earth off-limits as too corrupt and besmudging God's pure goodness. If that's your view of God and heaven and what's right, you need to be re-grounded.

Now, I know this contrasts with our recent instructions and practices. A backward love, we hear and know this a time for no-contact. But when you turn to church, it isn't for repeating the crisis or lessons on safety. You get that plenty elsewhere. That's not what you need to hear now. Especially right now as we don't get to do it ourselves, we reiterate relational trust in our up-close-and-personal God. I believe we're desperately needing the God who comes into our condition, even when it's messed up.

This is a God who gets dirty. It's a gorgeous gross image in the Gospel story today, of Jesus

smearing spitty sloppy soil on a guy's face. It echoes God the Creator in the beginning stooping down and scooping dirty hands to mold an earthling. Our God doesn't have well-manicured fingernails, but has crud packed under there. Again, for saliva and God's contagious goodness, God blew the breath of life into that earthling's mouth and lungs.

This also appears in the mucky work in gardens that continues seasonably in these otherwise foreign days, the obscurely hopeful life-givings of a creative God who sticks seeds into the damp, clumpy soil to bring new life, to wait for spinach and peas to sprout, grow, produce.

In the Gospel story, Jesus stoops into the dirt, spits, mashes it around, gets his fingers goopy and muddy. He is creating from the mess, forming it, reforming it. God is hands-on with this world, involved and committed to all of this earthly, earthy, fleshy stuff. Miraculously, even filth and contamination, the worldly troubles, are taken as God's problems...That's not how I want to say that, though: there's much we see negatively that God somehow still uses for the positive. Even the bad can become good.

A man was born blind in the story. That's bad. The disciples want to look for fault, to examine sin. The authorities look for contagion by association, they want nothing to do with Jesus or the man. They're trying to distance themselves. But Jesus isn't assigning blame or trying to rationalize it. Instead he sees an opportunity to reach out. Not exempting or excluding blessing, Jesus takes this as a place of good, a place of God.

God, of course, is always involved in our world, in our lives, in our bodies. This God we know in Jesus is born into our bodies. This God in Jesus also goes on to die in our bodies. Nothing of our lives is separate from God. Not from messy beginnings, not through confusing and disrupted middles, not all the way to frightful or fragile finales. God is not just by peaceful waters but also guiding through deadly valleys. Wellness is not closer to godliness, nor is illness or disease apart from God.

There are strong, valid, vital reasons we are

quarantining, with very very good intentions, to be helpful and caring. But in these isolating days and so much difficult uncertainty, through the fears that make us wary of the presence of other people, afraid to go into a gas station, that make us try to scrub-scrub-scrub off remnants of others, when it seems best, seems responsible, or is straight up the rule that we should or must avoid physical contact, it is more necessary than ever to say that God is not separate, not cut off from us, not held back through the bad or good, not apart from the realities of your life and what this world is facing. God is face-to-face, arm in arm, with every breath, fully embracing you and this world.

God who in Jesus got dirty and got bloody for this creative life-giving work certainly can't keep his hands off of you and won't let you go.

Except with medical workers, that level of contact is currently off-limits for us, even as we know it's the right thing and miss it. I saw a post this week attributed to Pope Francis looking forward to "when we hug again, when all the shopping together will seem like party, we will go back to laughing together." We recognize now is neither how our embodied lively touchy-feely God is, nor how we want to be.

It's with this God still operating in our lives, turning our bads to goods, that I relate to a couple roles in our Old Testament reading. The first is the young person, David, so unexpected to be chosen by God that he didn't even bother coming to the special gathering, the church service for commissioning and ordaining. Out alone, he felt far from the action. But God went out to claim him. It was totally unknown then, but he went on to become the greatest leader in his nation's history, in spite of a whole muddy trough of his faults and failures.

In these days, when we long for answers and clarifications of what is going to happen and when, maybe in the anointing of young David there's also a sense that in unexpected ways, far from feeling like you're an important part of the action, without any idea of the ending, God is working. There aren't qualifications that mean readiness and ability, nor details that render God

incapable. God keeps bringing us to what God is working for.



I hope you'll get the chance during this service or at another moment to participate in the prayers and blessing for marking with oil. It's a dual sign. On one hand, oil was the primary medicinal component in ancient times, applied for healing and relief and cleansing. But also, with the Hebrew word *Messiah* and the Greek word *Christ*, anointing was a sign of being chosen for God's work, like young David. This anointing is a reminder God is both working healing in you and for the world.

The other meaningful role I notice in our Old Testament reading was that it started with an old person in fear. Samuel felt the risk. He's scared, and with good reason, that it would cost him his life. But God offered the assurance it will be okay, promised to be with him.

Our version from the story Bible had God saying, "I'll help you," but in the biblical text God says "get going and I'll show you what to do." I don't like the verb "help" for God. God isn't a "helper." God is the primary actor. God may work with our assistance or God may work through our lack of willingness. Again, the God who is not separate from disease, who doesn't see a disabled person as worse off but as better, this God isn't just along for the ride to give a boost and a little help.

I don't know why God doesn't say it clearer, but somehow we discover through days like this that God is showing us what to do, like for old Samuel. We don't know beforehand, we worry maybe the whole time, but God is showing us.

In this week really not going how any of us wanted or expected, even the alternative plan didn't go how I aspired. I have felt in these days that you could use spiritual care and need a pastor.

So I thought that this week I would get the chance to call some of you, to hear how you're doing, and maybe to say a prayer.

Well, that plan fizzled. Instead I was endlessly futzing with reconfiguring things to make them function a bit. It was tedious and frustrating, but then somehow that was part of the way ahead God was showing. In this thing that I didn't expect and was worried wasn't going well or being what was needed, people still began to reconnect with online gatherings, to delight at seeing faces, to share in some grief, and some strategizing and coping, and also to notice the good. Maybe as you've also come to see, it was more blessing than I would've anticipated. It's not my muddled efforts, but how God is working in this moment. You are receiving from God now through a livestream as dispersed but connected community. I wouldn't've chosen it but somehow (I guess) it was a way God was showing us what to do. Or even if it wasn't, God is still bringing about the good and sustaining life.

That's also to say that we're not just here for a list of ideas on how we can feel helpful and in the action.

These days may not go how we want or what we would plan. They may fill us with fear. We may have very little sense of direction, for ourselves or how this will turn out. We may not be sure of our role. It may be so very unnatural. What we do may not seem important or helpful, much less very godly and loving, and we will function with faults and failings.

But our God is always striving for life, for the good of our bodies, for the good of our world. God knows the way ahead and will show you, through the fears, and guide you into life. You may have glimpses and hopes of that now, or you may feel like you can't see it at all and are desperately down. But in either place, God is with you, in the mud and muck and very physical reality of your life. God comes to assure it will be okay. More than that, it will be good.

anointing:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/6fiyj7lpnr9vzsj/A03%202022%20creation%20covid.pdf?dl=0>

bulletin, including prayer and blessing for