

THE ANT AND THE SLUGGARD
Proverbs 6:6-11 (RSV)

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on March 15, 2020, the Third Sunday in Lent, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This was the first Sunday of a closing for the Coronavirus pandemic and was preached to an empty sanctuary for livestreaming.

*Go to the ant, O sluggard;
Consider her ways, and be wise.
Without having any chief, officer, or ruler,
She prepares her food in summer,
And gathers her sustenance in harvest.*

*How long will you lie there, O sluggard?
When will you arise from your sleep?
A little sleep, a little slumber,
A little folding of the hands to rest,
And poverty will come upon you like a vagabond,
And want like an armed man.*

I.

One of the most tearful experiences I have ever had in worship occurred in June of 2006, when we left this sanctuary, processed to Agudas Achim Congregation, and were welcomed by over a hundred of their members who lined the streets and applauded us we entered their house of worship to make it our own for the ten months that we were renovating our entire facility. That beautiful sunny day, there wasn't a dry eye on the sidewalk.

I was equally tearful – for an entirely different reason – on Friday when our Session made the final but correct decision – in a conference call in which nearly all thirty-three members participated – to cancel all our activities, to livestream our worship, and to close our facilities. It was clearly the right decision, but I never thought I would see the day when I would say, “I’m sorry, but you cannot enter this house of worship.”

After the meeting, as I watched the dedicated people who work at Westminster share the news with the congregation through the E-gram, make signs for the doors, update the marquee, change the greeting on the church’s voice mail, and help Alex Bryant and Vince Crisler put the finishing touches on the work they were already doing to equip us for livestreaming, I walked the halls upstairs, wondering, “What am I going to preach on Sunday?”

- I thought about entitling the sermon “Faith in a Time of Coronavirus” – taking off from Gabriel Garcia Marquez’ 1985 novel, *Love in a Time of Cholera*. But I opened my email and saw that someone had sent me an article entitled “Love in a Time of Coronavirus,” so my purloined title had already been purloined.¹
- I thought about something that Karl Barth once wrote, to the effect that when a minister stands behind the pulpit, opens the Bible, reads the text, and dares to preach that proclamation of the Gospel occurs, even if the Sanctuary is empty.²
- And of course I thought about “Eleanor Rigby”:

¹ Andy Crouch, “Love in a Time of Coronavirus,” available at <https://journal.praxislabs.org/love-in-the-time-of-coronavirus-26aeb0396e3>. It is, by the way, a good article.

² I remember this quote from a class taught many years ago at Union Seminary by Christopher Morse, but I have not been able to find it in its exactness

*Picks up the rice in the church where a wedding has been
Lives in a dream...*

*Father McKenzie
Writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear
No one comes near...*

*All the lonely people
Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people
Where do they all belong?³*

Our hope is that through livestreaming this service, all of us who are lonely will remember where we belong.

II.

In a time of intensity, such as this week, I have been drawn to perhaps my favorite passage of scripture, what I have affectionately named, from the Revised Standard Version, “The Ant and the Sluggard.”

I have always liked the humor and playfulness in the passage, and the fact that it points us as readers to consider two tiny creatures of nature – the ant and the sluggard – as a way of *becoming wise*.

I have always pointed out that wisdom is a key *hallmark* to faith – in both the Old and New Testaments. “Whoever finds me finds life,” says Wisdom in Proverbs. “Those who miss me injure themselves.”⁴

I have always pointed out that *wisdom* is available to any of us – in our experiences in the world, in our experiences in nature, in our experiences with other people.

- “Go to the *ant*, O sluggard; *consider* her ways and be wise.”
- “Consider the *lilies* of the field,” says Christ, “how they neither toil nor spin. Yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these.”⁵

Wisdom. Available to all of us. All the time. In the world. In nature. In our interaction with other people. “Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise.”

What struck me about the passage in this week so unique week to many of us is the *resourcefulness* of the tiny, ordinary ant in responding to a crisis.

*Without having any chief, officer, or ruler,
She prepares her food in summer,
And gathers her sustenance in harvest.*

Something awakened in our national consciousness this week about how much preparation we as citizens and residents of our nation – indeed as citizens of the world – must do to *contain, reverse*, perhaps even *stop* this insidious virus.

³ John Lennon and Paul McCartney, “Eleanor Rigby,” Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, available at https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1GCEB_enUS887US887&sxsrf=ALeKk03Fq7qmgARvPwkDzmrD_RtUWr3i8g%3A1584213173595&ei=tSxtXtWFJNCqytMPkOGG4Ak&q=eleanor+rigby+lyrics&oq=Eleanor&gs_l=psy-ab.1.0.35i39l2j0i273j0i67l3j0l2j0i67l2.4729.6296..9123...0.0..0.73.502.8.....0.....1..gws-wiz.....35i304i39j0i131j0i131i67.-tQa2eec2YY.

⁴ Proverbs 9:35-36,

⁵ Matthew 6:28-29.

- The awakening has come from mayors and governors and school superintendents and basketball players and theatre directors and league commissioners and office managers and corporate officials and golf tournament executives and ordinary citizens.
- It has come when people began to take seriously warnings available through the scientific community: when we began washing their hands frequently – to the tune of “Happy Birthday” or the “Doxology” to get the twenty seconds in – and when we began bumping elbows, then closing offices, then retreating to our homes.
- It has come when churches began to realize that we would have to give up that for which we most exist: *gathering* for corporate worship.

Almost spontaneously, together, as a nation, we began to “prepare our food in summer” so as to be able to “gather our sustenance in harvest.”

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After the Bach Cantata last week, I was able to take a full day off on Monday. After working out at the Y at 6:00 a.m. I didn’t leave the house the rest of the day. It was a wonderful day of rest.

- Tuesday and Wednesday I was still working with others as to how to find gloves and hand sanitizers and wipes and figure out how to take up the offering without touching plates and sing hymns without touching hymnbooks.
- As churches closed left and right, I spent Wednesday and Thursday still determined to figure out a way that we could hold worship, even outside, in the courtyard, six feet apart from one another, sitting in lawn chairs we had brought from home, singing hymns we knew by heart, drinking coffee from mugs that were ours and ours alone.

But finally, as others spoke up, as the world literally closed around us, I came to realize that the best way for Westminster to bear public witness to the Gospel was to play our part in reversing this virus by not being physically close to one another. Period. So, I decided to recommend that we close, and with one voice, the Session agreed.

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What has been beautiful about this experience is the way so many people in our nation have come together to embody the wisdom of the ant.

I stood in line in Safeway Thursday evening for an hour and half. The line stretched from the cash register about halfway back down the aisle into the center of the store. All the lines were this long.

After about half an hour of waiting, with very little forward movement, the cash register in front of the line in which I was standing broke down.

Pretty soon someone emerged from behind the customer service desk, bearing a cash drawer, keyed in to open the new register next to our line, signaled us to move to the new line, and began to work as quickly and efficiently and cordially as she could to get everyone checked out.

People were by and large cooperative. By and large convivial. When I got inside the elevator, bearing my goods, as the elevator door shut I thought I heard a call my direction, so I came back up, walked toward the cashier, where people in line with me pointed to a sack of bread I had left behind. People joined together, working together, like ants in a colony.

“Consider the ant, and be wise.”

III.

The second stanza of the ant and the sluggard is both playful and foreboding. The sage who addresses the sluggard grows a bit sarcastic:

*How long will you lie there, O sluggard?
When will you arise from your sleep?
A little sleep, a little slumber,
A little folding of the hands to rest,
And poverty will come upon you like a vagabond,
And want like an armed man.*

Projections by the Centers for Disease Control, made *prior* to the interventions of the last few days, estimate that between 160 and 214 million Americans may contract Coronavirus. 160-214 million.

- This could mean between 200,000 to 1.4 million people *dying* in our country alone.⁶
- This higher estimate *exceeds* the number of civilian and military casualties in Civil War, World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War *combined*.⁷

We are threatened with even more than “poverty and want.”

IV.

I love the title “The Ant and the Sluggard,” but I also really liked the title “Faith in an Age of Coronavirus.”

Had I used that title, I would have said that in an age of pandemic threat, faith leads us to *face the truth fearlessly*, like the priest Eli, and *speak the truth courageously*, like his young charge Samuel. When Eli senses that the Lord has told Samuel less than good news concerning, Eli says: “What is it that [God] told you? Do not hide it from me.”⁸ And the boy Samuel tells Eli of the destruction to come.

Eli welcomes the truth. Samuel speaks the truth. We must do the same.

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Had I chosen the title “Faith in an Age of Coronavirus,” I would have also said that faith compels us to do what ants do well: *live together in a colony*.

- We need to keep ourselves safe, well, clean, hour after hour, day after day, for our sake, for the sake of those with whom we live, the sake of our neighbor. Think “Happy Birthday.” Think “Doxology.”
- We need to rely, reinstate, or perhaps initiate for the first time the practice of personal prayer: making intercession for ourselves, for people close to us, for health care workers, for our nation and its leaders, for our world and its leaders, for our neighbors near and far.
- We need to stay connected with one another by phone and email, to the elderly and infirmed among us, those for whom “social distance” can easily become “social isolation.” Even our instinct to go the more personal mile by sending a handwritten note may need to be scrutinized upon arrival.

⁶Sheri Fink, “Worst-Case Estimates for U.S. Coronavirus Deaths,” in *The New York Times* 3/13/20.

⁷See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_military_casualties_of_war.

⁸ I Samuel 3:1-18.

- We need to pay attention to people whose illnesses are more emotional and whose emotions are especially susceptible in this time.
- We need to do provide appropriate support to those for whom twelve-step groups are a lifeline, many of whom have lost their places of meeting as churches and agencies have closed.
- We need to keep people on payrolls over which we have decision-making power as long as we can and to provide the kind of strengthened safety net toward which Congress and the President seem to be moving the past few days.
- To the best of our ability, we need to keep our charitable giving flowing to institutions and agencies which have had to cancel fund raising events at precisely the time the people they serve have higher needs.
- And when we finally find that shelf in the store which has toilet paper, and have verified that it is not a mirage, we need to limit ourselves to our fair share and save stockpiling for a more plenteous time.

The columnist David Brooks spent last week reading histories of pandemics ranging as far back as the 14th century. A common theme he finds is that, with the exception of medical professionals, in our fear and fight for our own survival, we leave behind the compassion that characterizes us in more normal times. He quoted one historian who wrote: “The danger of immediate death to ourselves, [takes] away all bonds of love, all concern for one another.”⁹

This is not the case for the ant when the colony is endangered. “Consider the ant, and be wise.”

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Finally, had I gone with the title “Faith in an Age of Coronavirus,” I would have said that we need to trust God’s care for the created order and God’s promise in Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and strength,
 a very present help in trouble.
 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
 though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
 though its waters roar and foam,
 though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
 the holy habitation of the Most High.
 God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
 God will help it when the morning dawns.
 The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
 [God] utters his voice, the earth melts.
 The Lord of hosts is with us;
 the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Amen.

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⁹ David Brooks, “Pandemics Kill Compassion Too,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 2020.