RENEWAL IN TRYING TIMES

An Easter homily

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"Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world," wrote Albert Camus in his 1948 novel, "The Plague," "yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky."

So, here we are: once again agape, puzzling over the arrival of a new pestilence that once again we greet with astonishment and denial: "Oh, it's just another kind of cold. OK, maybe the flu. But it will pass, and we'll get back to our lives as they were."

Except that it doesn't, and we don't. It persists. It grows. People die. Lots of people. And we are left scrambling.

We westerners have grown pretty smug about the comfortable lives we've managed to create for ourselves. The word "pestilence" sends an echo of plagues recorded in the Bible and Medieval times, something we read as history. We, after all, have so much more knowledge: germ theory, molecular genetics and all the rest."

Yet, here we sit, this advanced nation, endangered by the simplest possible organism, a virus too small to exist on its own, whose purpose is only to replicate as much as it can, but that in doing so sadly disables our lungs. Our brilliant technology is hard at work on it. But before we have any hope of it doing us any good, it turns out that the best tool that we have to stop the pandemic that is now raging across the world is the lowest technology we can imagine: simply keeping our distance from each other until the virus runs its course.

Meanwhile, we are caught in the grip of grief and fear that comes of an existential threat. As Camus put it in his novel, when the plague arrived the people were caught off guard. "When (it) breaks out, people say: "It's too stupid; it can't last for long," Camus writes.
"But though (it) may well be 'too stupid' that doesn't prevent its lasting. Stupidity has a knack of getting its way; as we should see if we were not always so much wrapped up in ourselves."

And now, here we are, with the peak of the coronavirus infection projected to arrive at around the time of Easter Sunday with all its flowers, its music, its alleluias. What are we to make of that?

We Unitarian Universalists don't subscribe to the myth of Jesus' physical resurrection, but we honor the truth of renewal in the world and in our lives that the Christian story conveys. Yet, how do we celebrate renewal in a time of escalating death, massive economic losses, political

division and uncertainty? It occurs to me that an answer may lie in that place where the Easter story and Camus's story of a plague-haunted town converge. Let's take a look.

What these two stories share is a wrenching image of people in crisis, people forced to confront what they do when the worst they can imagine comes true. Camus's town begins with denial – this newly emerging disease, they say, isn't serious: it will go away, or only affect a few people – sound familiar? Yet, it worsens and worsens. The city walls are closed and the contagion spreads.

And as it spreads, people are confronted with how to respond. Some diminish it, others seek to flee. Authorities are cautious, fearing to stir a panic, but the people instead turn listless and distant. Time drags on and the plague continues its toll. Bit by bit a kind of emptiness invades the space.

In the Easter story, Jesus gives his followers all sorts of hints that his ministry in Jerusalem is not likely to go well, and, sure enough, it doesn't. Authorities oppose him, and Jesus's disruptions of the marketplace win him no friends. Instead, they set him up for a trial whose result is predetermined. As the story careens toward its horrifying end his followers seem frozen on how to respond until finally the inevitable death sentence.

In Camus' story, the narrator, Rieux, a doctor, continues his rounds, doing what he can to relieve suffering. But many of the townspeople lose interest, go on aimless walks and drift from their companions.

They are harangued by the town priest, who tells them that the plague is the way that God will separate the chosen from the damned. "The world," he says, "is his threshing floor, and implacably he will thresh out his harvest until the wheat is separated from the chaff." Of course, in time the priest himself meets his end in the plague, and one by one most characters in the novel do as well.

The novel's misery reaches its peak when a man who had been visiting the town who Rieux had befriended, falls ill. He and Rieux had traded thoughts, hopes, expectations about the plague, the situation. With his death as a guest in Rieux's home, and news that Rieux's own wife had died, the narrator retreats into a darkness and depression.

And, of course, Jesus' story confronts death, too – prolonged, dispiriting, agonizing – and darkness for all those who followed him.But it was not the end of the story.

No, not the end. The Easter story continues in the brightness of the morning with a kind of fever dream moving through his followers in different recountings across the Gospels of how, where, and when Jesus was seen, heard, experienced, echoing over days, weeks, years.

We need not trouble over historicity. We don't know, can't know what REALLY happened 2,000 years ago. But we do know that of that tragedy a new vision was born: a vision of a kingdom of heaven on earth centered in love, demanding justice, cultivating mercy and inviting awakening.

And, of course, Camus' novel also carries its narrator beyond the disappointment of death. It offers no resurrection story, but it does argue for a vision for the good grounded in moral commitment. Rieux, the physician, reflects in the end that whatever may come, Camus writes, "we should not listen to those who tell us to sink on our knees and give up the struggle. No, we should go forward, groping our way through the darkness, stumbling perhaps at times, and try to do what good lies in our power."

Once the plague subsides, Rieux listens not with envy but true happiness to the joyous cries from lovers who are reunited, the return of jubilant crowds to the marketplace. For he knows that the plague – which for Camus was a symbol not just of disease by also of violence and war – was not banished from the world: "each of us has the plague within him; no one on earth is free of it," he wrote. Yet, there are still those who will step up when the time comes and act, to recognize, as he put it, that there are more things to admire than despair.

That seems to me a good perspective on the time we find ourselves in. In this time of contagion, we look with gratitude on those who step up, often putting their own lives at risk – health care workers, first responders, police officers, news gatherers, grocery workers, delivery folks – I could go on and on – to try to do what good lies in their power.

It is an Easter story of its own: a story of renewal and awakening of the human spirit. We have yet much to endure in the way of hardship and loss as this pandemic works its way through the world's population.But we can be grateful for what this hardship has taught us about who we are and who we can be.

And I say, "Alleluia!"