

How is everybody out there?

How's your health? How's your spirit?

I hope you're able to stay connected to somebody.
I hope you're taking time to pray and be still.

Is it okay if we admit to one another that some of us are scared?
Or do we all have to be doing great?

Is it okay for me to admit I'm scared, that I've been having fantasies
about a life that doesn't include pandemics or complexity or risk?

Some of y'all know that before I went to seminary
I worked as a salesman at my family's junkyard for ten years.

For two nights I've had this dream that I never left the junkyard,
that I never followed this call to be your priest.

Saturday morning I woke up a half-dozen times
and every time I fell asleep I was back at Tallant Brothers
trying to help this woman who really wanted
a cd player for her car -
talk about nostalgia for simpler times!

"If only we were back in Egypt," my fears whisper to me.
"At least there we had bread to eat."

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If I can admit that to you,
can I also tell you what really helps me in these moments?

Jesus said,
"The first commandment is this: Hear, O Israel:
The Lord our God, the Lord is one;
you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your mind,
and with all your strength."

In stressful times I go back to this commandment.
Actually, less to the commandment part - to LOVE the Lord -
and more to just the statement of fact:
“Hear, O Israel! Hear, O Church!
Hear, O you scared, tiny little man!
The Lord our God, the Lord is One.”

The commandment is implied, really.
Once you’ve acknowledged that there is only one God,
only one creator of all that is, seen and unseen,
who else would you love?

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I forget that when times are easy, or even just routine.

When times are easy I think I’m smart or charming or strong enough
that I can control the outcomes in my world.

And when I start to discover that I can’t,
I find myself willing to abandon my trust in the one true God,
and reach out instead to all sorts of false gods
with whatever piece of my heart, soul, mind, and strength
I think will get me
what I think I want.

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Here’s an example:
when we taught the boys to drive
the first thing we had to learn was how to keep
from killing each other.
Some of you may remember this season of life.

I started out offering non-stop advice on what to look out for,
and strategies for how to think about situations
they hadn’t even encountered yet.

Shockingly, this did not go well.
My sons would obey me, while I was in the car,
but they didn't seem to learn much from the experience.

Finally, I had to let go of trying to control the outcome of their driving.
When I got in the passenger seat I would say a little prayer,
something along the lines of,
"God, I hand this time over to you.
If we knock a mirror off, you are with us.
If we get pulled over, you are with us.
If we have a wreck and total the car
and end up in the hospital...
no matter what happens, God is with us.

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Of course it helped. Of course it did.
I learned to talk a lot less and the boys began to learn
to make decisions behind the wheel for themselves.

It's a silly example, but it's a real one.
I couldn't help my children grow up until I surrendered them
to the only God there is.

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Most examples aren't silly,
but they come back to realizing my need for control
is equal parts idolatry and vanity.

Sometimes when I surrender to God,
things work out like I want them to, but not always.

Many of us have been in hospitals praying that honest but
complex prayer that combines "thy will be done"
with the deep longing of our hearts.

But even in those awful moments I've found there a kind of peace
when I've realized that no matter what happens
in the next few moments, minutes, hours, days,
that everything in life comes from the one true God,
and all of it - all of us, all of me,
will return to him again.

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In this stressful time it feels to me
like we are walking along the shore of a powerful ocean.

We know the wave is rising but we don't know when it will break,
or where, or how strong it will be,
or what the undertow will drag down under the surface.

I wish my sermon had answers for us.
I wish it was really an extended metaphor for
exactly what we should all be doing right now.

But those answers are known only to God.

There's a lot of discussion about the ethics of this moment.
We know the more we can do to slow the spread of the virus
the more our hospitals will be able to withstand the wave of illness
that is coming, that is here.

Doing what we can do is an ethical imperative.

But life is complicated even in a crisis,
and people's needs and motivations are much more complex
than they look from the outside.

It's easy to critique the decisions of our governor
and our other elected officials

It's easy to assume we know the motivations behind their decisions.

One of my fellow priests said that Gov. Kemp,
a lifelong member of Emmanuel Parish in Athens,
had obviously forgotten his baptismal vows.

The hubris it takes to assume you know the motivations of a person
tasked with safeguarding the lives of 10 million people....

Some folks say the ethics and the answers
to these questions we're dealing with are clear,
and maybe they're right,
but if I were a governor or president I'd find
the immediate death & suffering from the pandemic
and the potential long-term death & suffering
that could come from another depression
pretty overwhelming.

Or if I were inclined to turn my eye closer to home,
I might want to question the ethics of a city
that declares liquor stores essential businesses
but not churches...
if I were inclined to judge those things...

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In a crisis, the only ethical absolute I have found is this:
Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

As Christians our work is to accept that we have no real power
to control the outcomes of our world.

What we are called to do is to surrender our lives
to the God who is one,
and to live, and act, only from that place of surrender.

Jesus walked into Jerusalem having surrendered his fate
to the will of God.

His only act of rebellion was in proclaiming
that God alone was in control of his life.

Leave to God the judging of another's actions,
and to his wisdom understanding their motivations.

Let us follow Jesus' example,
surrendering to the absolute sovereignty of God
no matter what comes.

Some of us will be able to keep ourselves safe.
Some of us will be able to help others.
Some of us will do everything right and still get sick.
Some of us may die.

We don't know what will come of each of our efforts.
All we can do is daily surrender our lives to God
and do the best we can.

There's a prayer on page 461 of our prayer book
that seems appropriate to close this sermon.

This is another day, O Lord.
I know not what it will bring forth,
but make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be.

If I am to **stand up**, help me to stand **bravely**.
If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly.
If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently.

And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly.
Make these words more than words,
and give me the Spirit of Jesus. Amen.