

**We Are Called by Name**  
**A Sermon for Northbrae Community Church**  
**March 22, 2020**

**Scripture Isaiah 43: 2 (NRSV)**

But now thus says the LORD,  
he who created you, O Jacob,  
he who formed you, O Israel:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.

Yesterday my little family, reunited as our community—our state—our nation—our world continues to shelter in place to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, we drove out to the Berkeley marina to take our encouraged outdoor exercise. On the way down we drove past ACME bakery #1, on the corner of Cedar and San Pablo. Perhaps you know it. It's beside Bartovelle Café and across from Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant. For a very long time, my crew has called this intersection “the corner of bread and wine.”

ACME has mostly sold to restaurant for its almost 35 years, but locals know that you can line up at a counter there at the corner of bread and wine and pick up the freshest baguette in town. It's a Berkeley institution. You may have seen the line out front on weekends, people lined up 20-plus deep, waiting their turns outside the door.

Of course, in Berkeley ACME is an essential business. Of course, people were still in line to get bread. But rather than being pushed up against each other as they usually are, the shoppers had 6 feet of space between each other. This distancing caused the line to trail out of the parking lot and around the corner and down the street. Berkeley.

Life is different right now. For the time being. We don't know what the time being means right now. Which is unsettling. Most of the projections that we find in the news are based on data modeling. But they are mathematical projections. Most of the true numbers for that modeling count not on mathematics, but on human behavior. We do not know what our future holds, and for now, life is different.

But wait a moment: Life—life itself—is not different. Instead, the way we must view life—our lives together—has come into focus with a new clarity. That is different.

In the last few months, before our seemingly sudden shift in focus, I wandered around noticing how very much the world I live in is human made. I am housed, clothed, fed by the work of other people. Our cities, our schools, our places of worship— human beings made them. We can create a path in the forest, lay irrigation in the desert. We can clear a forest for pastureland or carve a temple into the rock.

Even when I am in the wilderness, I can see the work of other people in the way water is directed, in the paths and guideposts of people who walked far before me.

I think even so many of our trials as people and nations are human wrought. From the intimate disaster of poverty, to national nightmare of war, these are the work of mankind. Even the disastrous fires we are seeing, the hurricanes, the rising seas. The severity of them that we see right now is caused in part by our own hands. In the old insurance policies from generations ago until this century, firestorms, tornadoes, and the like were called “acts of God,” as if to say no human being had a hand in creating kind of catastrophe.

Right now, we are facing one of the great challenges of our time. It is a tiny thing by itself, an itchy-bitsy little virus. If you’ve seen illustrations of it, you’ve seen its symmetry, its beauty. It is dangerous. It’s dangerous because that living thing mutated, it changed, it evolved into a form that we have not encountered. And our own evolution has not yet developed the immunity pattern for it.

We will. That is the way evolution goes. We will begin to develop immunity, as individuals and as herds. And we will use our extraordinary hands and minds to develop vaccines. The coronavirus, too, will likely evolve over time. If it follows patterns that have come before, it will weaken.

This is not “the new normal.” This is a time out of the ordinary, when we must pay a closer kind of attention. Look how much our health and wellbeing depend on each other! Look at the graciousness that we are offering to one another.

Yes, it’s hard. It’s frightening. Each of us is vulnerable, and I don’t have enough fingers and toes to count all the people I love how are more at risk than I am. I will do what I can to protect them. I know each and every one here, connected by a thin stream of electricity, each of us here is engaged in helping every one of us stay healthy, safe, and loved.

The charter for Compassion, an organization started by Karen Armstrong, sent out this message to us in our confinement:

Years ago, anthropologist Margaret Mead was asked by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilization in a culture. The student expected Mead to talk about fishhooks or clay pots or grinding stones.

But no, Mead said that the first sign of civilization in ancient culture was a femur (thighbone) that had been broken and then healed. Mead explained that in the animal kingdom if you break your leg, you die. You cannot run from danger, get to the river for a drink or hunt for food. You are meat for prowling beasts. No animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal.

A broken femur that has healed is evidence that someone has taken time to stay with the one who fell, has bound up the wound, has carried the person to safety and has tended that person through recovery. Helping someone else through difficulty is where civilization starts, Mead said.

We are at our best when we serve others. Be civilized.

This too is what being human brings us: We can heal one another. We can teach one another. We can bring laughter and love and care.

You probably have heard in the news that the COVID-19 pandemic is a threat like we haven't seen before— but we have seen it. Not this novel variation of the virus, no, but we have seen it before. Thousands of times, and in thousands of ways.

We know the story of viruses, bacteria, the plagues and sweating sicknesses, that came on ships, and in caravans, through sharing the city's water pumps, and through the smallpox-infected blankets. We know this happens, that disease can be transmitted through our ignorance, and even through our intention.

Even our language reflects our experience: the word quarantine —which is another word for this shelter in place order we are under for the time being—comes from Italian *quaranta giorni*, literally "space of forty days," the time that ships suspected of carrying disease had to dock off the coast before entering an Italian harbor.

In 1923, a doctor named William Carols Williams published a book of poetry called *Spring and All*. The title poem starts:

By the road to the contagious hospital  
under the surge of the blue  
mottled clouds driven from the  
northeast—a cold wind. Beyond, the  
waste of broad, muddy fields  
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water  
the scattering of tall trees...

It is bleak, it is bleak long winter. Long winter, no life to be seen in such a long time. And that famous line of poetry: "By the road to the contagious hospital..." It occurs to me when I read this today that this poet doctor must have seen the contagion of the deadly influenza outbreak in 1918 and 1919. He must have treated patients, he must have helped to heal some, he must have signed certificates of death for others. No American would have escaped the fear and heart ache of that time.

And yet the poem, in its bleakness, turns and begins to observe the small unfurling of vulnerable life, the inevitable, insatiable urge for life that the world offers to us every single day. It is hard sometimes to remember that life is the impulse within all creation that is most demanding. This song of life pulses through us.

Now it is our turn to do everything we can to aid that call for life, wherever we find it. We will face difficult times in the next few months, but if we can follow the call, and work to bring it to others, we will answer our history with a **yes** that each and every one of us needs. Let this be the call that heals, not just from this virus, but from the illnesses of spirit and of society that in our haste and indifference we have allowed to consume us.

At times like this as we reach for the hand sanitizer, as we offer six feet of distance to each other—as we shop for one another, as we gather in safe ways and at distances—at times like this we need to return to the insights of the poets. Williams ends "Spring and All" thus:

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish  
dazed spring approaches-

They enter the new world naked,  
cold, uncertain of all  
save that they enter. All about them  
the cold, familiar wind-

Now the grass, tomorrow  
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf  
One by one objects are defined-  
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of  
entrance-Still, the profound change  
has come upon them: rooted, they  
grip down and begin to awaken

Feel the metaphor of rebirth, growth, of “Spring and All” as Williams leads us out of the crisis presented in his first line.

This rebirth, this growth, it is around us too. Open your eyes in the way Jesus taught us not just to look, but to see. Open your ears not just to listen but to hear. See the blooming way we are helping each other. Hear the loving care that is all around us. This coming from within our humanity. When we are called by name by the God of Love, this is how we respond in kind.

Yes. We are awakened. We have been called. Let us act for each other.

Spring and All (1923)

By William Carlos Williams

By the road to the contagious hospital  
under the surge of the blue  
mottled clouds driven from the  
northeast-a cold wind. Beyond, the  
waste of broad, muddy fields  
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water  
the scattering of tall trees

All along the road the reddish  
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy  
stuff of bushes and small trees  
with dead, brown leaves under them  
leafless vines-

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish  
dazed spring approaches-

They enter the new world naked,  
cold, uncertain of all  
save that they enter. All about them  
the cold, familiar wind-

Now the grass, tomorrow  
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf  
One by one objects are defined-  
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of  
entrance-Still, the profound change  
has come upon them: rooted, they  
grip down and begin to awaken