

March 17, 2020 | The Third Sunday in Lent

Preached during in the early stages of the novel Coronavirus pandemic. Our first fully digital worship service.

OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

**Give thanks in all circumstances**, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor based on John 4. -45

## PRELUDE

In the 1920's, when Old South Church was contemplating the introduction of a radio ministry – airing services over the airwaves – our senior minister of the time, George Gordon, was rather opposed to the idea. The reason? He was not convinced that listeners at home would comport themselves with proper reverence. They might not dress for church! Instead of sitting up straight, they might slouch! What if, God forbid, they succumbed to sipping coffee during the service?

Just sayin'.

## PRAYER

Gracious and holy God, come near to each of us. So near as to oil the hinges of our hearts doors, that they may swing gently and easily to welcome your coming.

## SERMON

The long, probing, sometimes uncomfortable, somewhat testy exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is no chinwag. Chinwag: a long and pleasant conversation between friends. Chinwag: idle chatter amongst pals. This exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is no chinwag. The two aren't friends. They're not neighbors, and they're not family. The exchange is sometimes tense. The two circle each other, sparing.

Note this: Among the many topics raised between them is where to worship. Hmm. There's a timely question. The Samaritans – then and still today – claim that Mt Gerizim is the holiest site of all. It is there, say the Samaritans that we should worship. After all, Moses decreed its sanctity and it was upon Mt Gerizim that Abraham came close to sacrificing his only son Isaac.

Alternately, the Jews of Jesus' day, held that the true locale for worship was the temple in Jerusalem. So, imagine the people of ancient Palestine off to worship for Shabbat. Half of them go that way to Mt Gerizim. Another group, that way, to the Temple.

Who knew today's lectionary reading – landing as it does, in the midst of pandemic and social distancing – would be about where to gather for worship?!

Happily for us – for we who are dispersed, unable to gather at any, single holy space – Jesus decrees that true worship need not be associated with any particular location, no matter how sacred or venerable.

Here we are then – not by our own brilliance or faithfulness, but by an act of fate – living out Jesus’ teachings: dispersed, yet gathered. In diaspora, yet tuned into to screens from kitchen and bedroom, living room and hotel room, car and train. Here we are: gathered, not in body, but present and worshipping in spirit.

We may be following Jesus’ teaching, but let’s admit this: what is happening here and across the world, is profoundly disconcerting and disquieting; the breadth of social disruption is staggering and worrying. It feels dystopian. We don’t know how bad it will get or who will be taken from us.

Nevertheless, all of that notwithstanding – we have much for which to give thanks. Moreover, we have a responsibility to give thanks. St. Paul admonishes us to give thanks in all circumstances, presumably, (perhaps especially) amidst the circumstance of pandemic.

I have a list of that for which I am deeply thankful in this strange and worrying season. Maybe my list will spark your own list. Perhaps you will be moved, in the coming days, to pause, turn off the news, stop counting the new cases, and make a list of that for which you are thankful.

Here is my list.

I give God thanks for the members of Old South Church’s COVID-19 Blue Ribbon Task Force. Comprised of experts in medicine, public health and government, these people took time from harried lives – time from work and family – to talk, confer, advise and to help us make the best decision possible, with the information we had; the hard decision, I dare say, the holy decision, to suspend in-person worship and other gatherings until we find ourselves on the other side of this pandemic. Because of this Task Force, our decision was informed by science, math, reason, and good citizenship. Because of this Task Force, we made the decision early enough to adjust plans and programming. I give God thanks for Brad, Nancy K., David D., David B, Hillary, Lisa & Kyle, Allen & Laurel, Phil, Steve, Ralph, Rich.

I give God thanks to you who support this church’s ministries. It is by your generosity that among our staff is a full-time communications expert. Jamie is here, now, behind the camera. In the past few days, she has worked tirelessly to comb through all our messaging (Website, social media, outdoor signage) to bring them into conformity with this strange, new normal.

I give God thanks for you who support the ministries of this church!

I give God thanks for my colleagues on the staff of this church. You, Old South, could not be better served than by this team. Your staff swung into action with competence, compassion, and creativity, all working together, working overtime, as we shift to a whole new way of doing things.

I give God thanks for the daffodils in our church garden. They know nothing of this contagion. I like that about them. A few of them are up now: bright and cheerful, brave and resolute.

I give God thanks that in this season of pandemic, we are well served by medical and public health officials; and that via email, the worldwide Web, television, and radio we have ready access to desperately needed information.

I give God thanks for our own members, doctors and nurses, who are in the trenches, on the front lines, battling with professionalism, kindness, courage, and sacrifice.

I give God thanks for the resources of our Christian faith, for psalms that by turns, rail and rage, comfort and sooth. I give God thanks for sacred music, and sacred story, and familiar prayers. These are the church's treasure: sacred resources formed and burnished over two millennia; formed and burnished by ancestors who have known their own share of terror and grief. They are there for our use, binding us with the saints across time

And this, in this season of pandemic, as we are reminded of human fragility in the face of calamity – with our mortality an indisputable presence -- I give God thanks for the hope of heaven.

I give God thanks for each of the members of my family, whom I fiercely love.

Finally, I give God thanks for old friends who, in a season of pandemic reach out for a good chinwag. I've had a couple of those in the past few days. Long, rambling, pleasant conversations comprised of idle chatter, catching up, good gossip, and sentences that begin "Oh, remember the time...". They make me glad, these chinwags. They make me smile. They bring me joy. They do me good.

For these, and so very much more, even today, especially today, I give God my high thanksgiving.