

Isaiah 42:2-12
Psalm 112
Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3
Matthew 10:7-16

The Feast of St Barnabas
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
June 6, 2021
The Rev. Karen Haig

What Will We Bring With Us?

Hello, beloveds!

Can you believe it? What a joyous day this is. I am so very delighted to see you all and I know you are delighted to see each other! It's been over 15 months since we've worshipped together and so much has happened in that time. I look forward to sharing our stories in the weeks and months ahead, and to sharing our common life once again. I am so glad and grateful to be here with you all.

So... how has this time apart really been for you? Has it been an interruption in your life, a really hard time you've tried just to get through? Has it been a time set-apart, a time for listening, learning and reflecting? Has it been a time where you've learned that you can do more than you ever dreamed? Or a time when you could do nothing but sit? Has it been a time of transformation? Whatever these past 15 months have been for you, something has shifted for all of us, and that intense isolation we all experienced, is at least, diminished. The pandemic isn't over by any stretch of the imagination, but things have definitely changed. We've changed, too. What to do now? Put it all behind us and forget it? Wipe our brows and say "Whew, we got through that one?" Say "I've been vaccinated," so it's over for me AND SO for the whole wide? I hope not.

When we began to isolate from one another I remember saying to you that even though it was necessary to shelter in place and stay away from each other, we shouldn't be drawn into thinking that what we were doing was normal. It was necessary, yes. But it wasn't normal. I watched as so many people – myself included – were lulled into fear - fear of the virus and a rather insidious fear of each other. As days and weeks and months went on without a clear understanding of how we were ever going to come out of this pandemic, our continued isolation grew that fear in many of us.

About three months into the pandemic, I found my own self in a very anxious state. So anxious, in fact, that I ended up in urgent care because my heart was pounding so hard and so fast that I really couldn't calm myself down. While it was good to find out there was nothing wrong with my heart – other than it being broken because I couldn't be with the people I love - I remained pretty anxious for a time. I finally had a conversation with a wise counselor who helped me to get at the heart of my fear. I realized I was terrified of exposing my pregnant daughter-in-law to the virus, and somehow hurting her or her baby. I was terrified of infecting my grandson or my own son. But not being with them was literally breaking my heart. While my grandson who lives

only 5 minutes away from me was growing by leaps and bounds, I was missing it all. And like all of you who waited so long to see your beloveds, I waited until everybody felt safe – or safe enough. And that was only part of the anxiety I carried. Amanda died, Roger died, Richard died, Judith and Robert died... and I couldn't be with them or their families as their priest, couldn't go into the hospitals, couldn't offer last rites, couldn't pray with their families, couldn't hold their hands as they slipped into God's loving embrace.

Most all of us have navigated myriad crises, big and small, during the pandemic, and each one of us had to find our own way. Many of you have stories just like mine – stories of missing beloved family and friends, stories of being alone in the hospital, stories of not being able to be with sick or dying family members, stories of heartache and stories of crisis. I learned long ago that the Chinese word for crisis is made up of two characters – one is danger, the other, opportunity. In crisis, danger and opportunity live side by side, both present, both at play. While crisis mostly feels terrifying – think of the things you've labeled crises in your life – there is danger and there is opportunity. In our part of the world we have likely come through the most dangerous time in the pandemic, yet I wonder if we aren't actually at a new crisis moment – a new time of danger and opportunity? Only now, the danger is different. It's not the danger of a virus we don't understand and don't know how to defend against. The danger now is our temptation to fall back into old ways, to want everything to be the way it used to be, to forget everything that happened and so to forget every gift, every learning, every reflection that would never have come to us absent the pandemic. That is a really important danger to acknowledge.

If we try to jump back into life as it always was, try to pretend we're all good and nothing ever happened, refuse to acknowledge what has happened to us and in us... how can God possibly redeem it all? God wants to make something good of everything, even this nasty pandemic, but we have to help that to happen.

We came back to church on this particular day, because today we celebrate the feast of St. Barnabas. Most of you know that Barnabas means Son of Encouragement, so you might wonder why I'm talking about crisis. Barnabas lived in a time of crisis too, a time when danger and opportunity were everywhere. I'm pretty sure I've read much of the information out there in the world about Barnabas and I still feel like I know very little. I think I know so little, because Barnabas insisted, as Jesus asked of all of us to do, on being the least and the last.

He wasn't born Barnabas. His given name was Joseph, and he was a first century Jew from Cyprus, who, after his conversion, sold everything he owned and gave all the proceeds to the Apostles. In return for that very generous gift, the Apostles gave him a new name. They called him Barnabas, because in the midst of unspeakable danger for all those involved in the fledgling first century church, he not only saw countless opportunities to serve God and God's people, but he acted on them, encouraging the faithful and deepening the life of the church. We're told Barnabas was one of the seventy-two Apostles sent out by Jesus. We know it was Barnabas who encouraged Peter, James, John and the others to allow Paul to join their community after his conversion from strong persecutor of Jesus' followers to zealot for Jesus.

You may recall that Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus didn't get him immediate acceptance from Jesus' followers. After all, *'only days before, Paul had been plotting and scheming and breathing threats and murder against them'* (Acts 9:1). But when Paul arrived in Jerusalem, even though *he was as zealous for Jesus as he'd been zealous against him*, he was not at all welcome. Things didn't go well. Listen to these words from the 9th chapter of Acts:

When he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple (Acts 9:26).

It makes sense, doesn't it? Being as wise as a serpent would indicate caution, even rejection of someone who only days before wanted to see you dead. But Barnabas, seemingly innocent as a dove, saw a faithfulness in Paul that others didn't see. It was Barnabas who told the apostles the Damascus Road story and convinced them of Paul's deep faith. And so Barnabas introduced Paul to Peter and all the rest of the faithful, and acted as a mediator until the apostles could see the truth of who Paul was. When we recognize how profoundly important Paul was in the growth of the Jesus movement, it's interesting to remember that Paul was recruited by Barnabas, not the other way around.

While there are few words written about Barnabas, the words we have describe a man who lived an exemplary life. He was among the first to insist that Gentiles be welcomed as followers of the Way, described as *'a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith'* (Acts 6:24). Barnabas was part of that first Christian community where everyone lived in common, a community that was sustained in part because Barnabas had been generous with them. But Barnabas gave so much more than money. He gave himself to God and to God's people, living according to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in his own life. Whether it meant giving his inheritance to a scrappy little community of apostles or insisting that a former persecutor be trusted in their midst, Barnabas defied expectations and encouraged everyone around him in faith. Amidst persecutions, executions and the seeming impossible task of bringing the good news of Jesus Christ into a world of people who had never even heard about him, Barnabas saw opportunity.

And what do we see? We've been through a lot. When we first began to shelter in place, we knew we were all in it together. What we didn't know was that it would go on for more than a year. And now, joyfully, gently, carefully, and sometimes even precariously, we are coming out into the world, little by little. And today, we finally find ourselves together again. How does it feel? What have you learned, what have we learned? And how would you like to move forward? What dangers do you see, and what opportunities? What will our community look like as we come back together, and how will we listen for the new thing God is calling us into?

You see, even when it seems like everything's falling apart, especially when it seems like everything's falling apart, the opportunities for us to see things in beautiful, new, creative ways are limitless! It is precisely because everything has come undone, that we have the opportunity to reimagine a world with love as its foundation, a world where we really are all in it together. Don't miss this. Don't be in a hurry to have things as they used to be. Look around you. See

these people you've longed to be with and know that each one of us has been changed. See this place you've longed to be and wonder how we will inhabit it now. We used to take all this for granted. Remember that, so it doesn't happen again.

Jesus gave those first apostles the power to proclaim the good news, that *'The kingdom of heaven has come near,'* to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons and he gives that same power of healing love to each of us. How will you use it? Will you seek people out who are different from you? Give without concern for recognition? Carry God's peace with you and offer it with abandon, never worrying about how you'll be received? You need nothing but God's love, you know - no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff – just God's love and the understanding that we all belong to each other and that together we can love the world back into wholeness. So *'Be strong and courageous; don't be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.'* Amen