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Saint Ann's Church – Washington, DC

Homily by Msgr. James Watkins for the Fifth Sunday of Lent 2020 – March 29, 2020

When Blaise Pascal said, “All of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone,” he clearly didn’t foresee the coronavirus. One implication of the virus, however, and the social distancing necessary to slow its spread, is a nation where quiet rooms are more common. With the obvious exception of rooms that also confine children, many Americans are experiencing a strange stillness in places where their lives were once lived loudly.

This quiet can feel oppressive, so we turn to Netflix, podcasts, cable news and other diverting stimulation. In the absence of a real schedule, the days tend to run into each other, marked only by the never-ending cycle of coronavirus taskforce briefings. We set our watches by the rise of Dr. Tony Fauci in the east to learn of the latest breaking news.

To many of us, the space between ticks of the clock seems especially long. Silence is often a place where fears gather, and the current crisis offers endless opportunities for worry. There are worries about the health of elderly loved ones, about the personal consequences of the economy, about the disruption of important plans and family events, and an endless list of worries about tomorrow and next month and the months ahead. All of this creates a lot of anxiety for a lot of people. We have had to interrupt our plans and postpone everything. It’s not easy at all.

The most enterprising among us interrupt our anxiety with telework (if that’s what we do), with long, socially distanced walks and with Zoom chats among friends and relatives. But this still leaves a lot of time on our hands. And the question naturally arises: Can the quiet serve some constructive purpose? Not the kind of purpose found in reorganizing the closets or kitchen drawers, but in living a better life. Can the quiet also bring some contentment, serenity, and peace?

This is what most religions promise in times of fear – not immediate deliverance, but the hope that suffering and failure are not final. This does not release anyone from worry and heavy responsibility, but it does promise that worry and responsibility don’t need to consume us. It promises that a voice of reassurance can speak out of the silence. It promises that the stillness of a pounding heart can be replaced by the stillness of a wise trust. This perspective is not uniquely Christian, but it is illumined by the Gospel in which Jesus tells us, “Do not be afraid,”

over and over again, and to trust in the eternal love, compassion, and mercy of the heavenly Father.

In some real way, stillness and trust are the substantial elements of today's Gospel about the raising of Lazarus from the dead by our divine Lord. We just heard that Lazarus had been dead (truly "still") for four days in the tomb. The family and friends were gripped by anxiety and doubt and fear. They were weeping and sad, worried and upset. Jesus, too, weeps at the news of the death of his very good friend, Lazarus. He is also upset. But then He does something to address that sadness, along with their fear and doubt. He tells them to trust. "Take away the stone," He commands. "Take it away!"

Permit me to quote a beautiful reflection about this Gospel in light of what we've been saying, given by John Cardinal O'Connor, the former Archbishop of New York (whose 20th anniversary of death we will mark in May of this year). His Eminence was a very good and personal friend of our family and an inspiration to my vocation. In light of the times we are all going through, his thoughts are worth quoting here. He writes:

"Jesus weeps over my sins and yours ... Jesus weeps for others who have been the victims of tragedies. Jesus weeps for those who have been involved in those tragedies. Jesus weeps for all those over whom a cloud seems to settle because of a tragedy... Then follow with the Gospel. Before Jesus did anything but weep, he asked the sisters of Lazarus, the dead man, *Do you believe that I am the resurrection and the life? Do you believe that I am the light of the world? Do you believe that I can bring the dead to life?* When they say, *Yes, Lord, we believe,* then Jesus said, *Take me to the tomb of Lazarus,* where Lazarus had been buried for four days. They warned Jesus that the body would be corrupt. But what did He say? *Take away the stone.* Only when they took away the stone did Jesus say, *Lazarus, come forth,* and Lazarus was restored to a new life, greater than any he had dreamed of before.... Our Lord says, *Do you want new life? Do you want light in the darkness? Take away the stone...* Only we know if there is a stone before our hearts. Only we, with God's help, can remove that stone. Then the Lord who suffered and died for everyone in the world can say to each of us, *Rise to new life. Be filled with my Light.*"

For many, the "stone" which may presently seal us in our rooms and homes right now during this pandemic may seem so heavy to move. We say, "I can't move it away; I feel trapped inside; will I die here alone?" Within the seeming "tomb" you might be feeling right now, He weeps with you and for you, but He promises new life if you can believe in His power to raise you up. So, don't be afraid to nudge that "stone" a bit from what closes you in and keeps your heart open to His power and grace to heal, to transform, to bring some life to your weariness right now. Do it now! Take away the stone and live!