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## PASTORAL LETTER – OCTOBER 2020

Dear friend,

We live in a strange world.

Our society has been affected by killer hornets, COVID-19, civil unrest resulting from racial tensions involving inequities and police misconduct, a hurricane, and wildfires.

Adding to this strangeness, for the first time in American history, one of the two presidential candidates did not accept his nomination at a live convention, while the other one accepted his nomination at the Rose Garden. In addition to that, professional sports are being played without the excitement that only comes with live fans in the stands booing and cheering. Instead, cutout cardboard fans have been placed in the seats, and fake cheering noise is filling the stadiums. (Someone suggested we start placing cutout worshippers in our church's pews and generating further energy by using familiar church sounds and noises in the background. We could also have a little fun with our video presentations that way.)

Silliness aside; what do we do, as people of faith, when strangeness shakes up our normal routine and disrupts our conventional life?

I have always found the words of Arthur Conan Doyle in *A Case of Identity* worth exploring. Doyle said, "*Life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent.*"

Doyle is correct. We can't think of everything. We can't truly prepare for everything. Not even an imagination as prolific as that of Stephen King could have conceived of an apocalyptic world that suddenly becomes a reality. We are living a previously unimagined existence where behavior that in years past would have been considered bizarre, such as wearing masks, social distancing, and ritual hand sanitizing, is now accepted as the norm. Quirky habits are the acceptable norm.

Jesus was apparently interested in the topic of strangeness. He thought that there are societal events so terrifying, so haunting, and so unusual that we are justified if we think the world is coming to an end.

As a matter of fact, Jesus prophesied that unusual and strange events were going to take place. In Luke 7:25-28, Jesus said:

*“There will be strange things happening to the sun, the moon, and the stars. On earth whole countries will be in despair, afraid of the roar of the sea and the raging tides. People will faint from fear as they wait for what is coming over the whole earth, for the powers in space will be driven from their courses. Then the Son of Man will appear, coming in a cloud with great power and glory. When these things begin to happen, stand up and raise your heads, because your salvation is near.”*

The Gospel of Luke, through the words of Jesus, was addressing the pain that early Jewish Christians felt upon experiencing the destruction of Jerusalem. The Temple, which was believed to be the place where the physical presence God lived, was destroyed. The Jewish community and the Jewish Christians equally believed that as long as God lived in the Temple that Jerusalem was inviolable. When the Temple was toppled by the Roman invaders, the people felt vulnerable, afraid, scared, and strange. It certainly must have felt like the world was coming to an end for the people of Luke’s time, and it certainly has felt like the world was coming to an end for many of us during these strange, apocalyptic times. Here, in our country alone, over 100,000 have died from a plague of biblical proportions.

Amid this strangeness, pain, and suffering, Luke tells us that Jewish Christians of Jerusalem made the decision to spread the gospel outside of their city. By virtue of becoming more missional and inclusive, those early Jewish Jerusalem Christians were able to expand their sphere of influence, attract Gentile Christians to their community, and preserve the Christian community. Let us recall that whatever written Gospel accounts that existed in the Jerusalem Christian community were destroyed when the Romans sacked the city in 70 AD. So, had the Jerusalem Christians not taken a more preventive approach, we probably would not have had a written record of early Christianity preserved for us.

What is fascinating about the Jerusalem Christians is that nowhere in the text does it say that they directed their cries heavenward and asked, *where have you been, God, as we endure these strange and scary times?* Apparently, for them, the question was, *where are we in regard to our faith and commitments during these strange and scary times?*

Similarly, these strange times have challenged us to reimagine what church, business, learning, restaurant, and community can become with some ingenuity and malleability. In our town, traffic barriers now are used to mark off outdoor areas for restaurants to use. Churches now hold worship services for congregants who assemble via internet platforms and digital media. Local universities are combining online classes with in-person learning. And a grassroots organization known as Rhinebeck Responds is bringing non-profit service organizations, government helpers, civic minded residents, and churches together in order to address the local economic and emotional fallout from the pandemic.

Most recently, a couple of individual Rhinebeckers have shared with me that this period of strangeness has brought upon them unexpected blessings. One of them told me that he has had meaningful conversations and special moments with his teenage boys who were sent back home from college. *“We haven't talked as long and as freely in years. What teenage boy really wants to hang out with their dad?”* he said. While another person said to me that he and his family have

gone exploring together and discovered natural swimming holes and other natural sanctuaries in the Hudson Valley. How ironic that the deadly virus also comes with blessings and positive family experiences, creating fresh and lasting memories. *"We haven't spent as much time together as a family in years,"* he said.

I sincerely hope that we embrace the strangeness of our times and come to see it as an opportunity to grow together, reimagine together, to purposely serve together, and reinvent together who we are and what we can become as an individual, a church, and a community. Because the Jerusalem Christians did that, they were able to leave for us the Gospel of Luke as part of their enduring legacy. What will be our legacy after we muddle through these strange times?

Blessings,

Pastor Luis

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