

“Ambiguity”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

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Loss disrupts lives.

And right now, we are collectively carrying the weight of enormous loss.

In a matter of days, the world as we have known it is gone.

Most of us have been here before at some point in our lives.

For the oldest among us, there are the memories of World War II. Global war demanded sacrifices of multiple kinds from so many.

For others, you lived through the wide-ranging changes wrought by the 1960's. From Civil Rights, to women's rights, to new sexual freedoms, and the impact of the Vietnam War, our culture was never quite the same.

More recently, there was 9/11. On that day, we knew only some of the facts. We knew the Towers had fallen, that the Pentagon was struck, that a plane had crashed in a Pennsylvania field. We did not yet know the full measure of loss. Not all the names of those who had died. Not the reasons why. We did not know what would become of air travel, of border security, of new wars that would rage on ... still.

But loss does not always need to be global to be disruptive.

As individuals our world is changed again and again by loss.

A friend moves away. Our company closes.

Someone we love dies.

We are no strangers to loss.

Do you remember when you first felt heartbroken by loss? For me, I about age 8. The cat I loved—a cat whose fur I knew by scent, sight, and touch—died. As the neighbor told my mom the news, I melted to the ground, immediately becoming acquainted with an emotion that by now has become so familiar.

It was the first time I learned what it was like to wake in the morning and then *remember*. This 'thing' had happened. The world was not how I expected it to be. Something was gone. Something I missed and wanted back.

In a matter of days, we have collectively been buried by an avalanche of loss. We are disoriented and uncertain about the impact of what has happened. We know that it's more than a temporary inconvenience. It's something bigger. We have lost the world we knew. Rather, we live in a new world, one we do not yet know, one that has, in fact, not yet taken shape. All is uncertain, ambiguous.

Uncertainty and ambiguity are similar, but not quite the same. Uncertainty is a failure of reliability. It is a loss of confidence. It is stepping on the wood of an old dock and not being sure it will hold your weight. We are swamped with such uncertainty. Where is it safe to step or to touch? Who does and does not have the virus? If I take a trip to the store, will there be onions, bread, or toilet paper? Uncertainty has always been an inevitable part of life to some degree. But suddenly, it shifted from the quiet hum of the refrigerator in the background to the roar of a jet engine passing close overhead . . . drowning out voices, vibrating our very bones.

Ambiguity is a bit different than uncertainty. Ambiguity refuses to concede clarity. Ambiguity teases and taunts with multiple possibilities. It could be fine. We could be fine. Spring came early. The first flowers are emerging. No one we know is sick. But. But, the ubiquitous charts on the news tell us it is not ok. People are dying. A man and then a woman have died here in Massachusetts. More will follow. Maybe, yes, *probably* someone we know.

The deep breaths we now draw collide with the fear of lungs filling, craving breath, needing a ventilator which may or may not be there.

In his poem, "Respiration", Jamaal May [no relation], links together breath, fear, and gratitude. May writes: "A lot of it lives in the trachea, you know. But not so much that you won't need more muscle: the diaphragm, a fist clenching at the bottom." Breath, we forget, is not simply a passive floating of respiration in and out. Breath rises and falls with *muscle*, with a drive so deep that our efforts to hold our breath are so often futile.

Indeed, breath can remake worlds—tossing soil into the air, scattering insects . . . spreading microscopic viruses across continents. With such power, does breath make us gods then?

Having recognized the power of breath, May describes how he moves differently through the world. "I walk more softly now/into gardens or up the steps of old houses/ with impatiens stuffed in their window boxes."

And we too move differently in the world.

Some move more quickly—searching, searching for the elusive certainty of what there is to know, of what we can confidently *know* is right. We search for certainty by following the news, by washing our hands, by calling our family, our friends. These we know we can do. Of these we are certain.

But the uncertainty—the ambiguity—remains. Because it is not clear, we cannot move confidently through the world. We cannot settle on a direction in which to move our hopes, our dreams, our expectations. The future is opaque. The future withholds its shape and substance, insisting that only the passage of time will bring us to the future.

For now, we live here, in this moment. We hold our collective breath, wondering what news will arrive.

In our lifetimes, we have all known the arrival of devastating news. We have all known loss. This does not make such moments of loss and upheaval any easier. But it may make them familiar. We feel again the ache, the sudden remembering when we wake up, or the unpredictability of our thinking, our mood. We recognize it for what it is.

Perhaps we might also remember how the days after a loss passed until slowly, slowly it was a bit better. The morning was a bit easier. We felt a bit more confident, capable to make it through the day. And, the new world, the different world, began to take shape. We began to know our way around again.

Today, the road ahead is foggy and ambiguous. There is a lot of uncertainty about our collective physical and financial safety. I say this not as an alarmist, but to affirm what we know. Such honesty calls us to be gentle with ourselves and with others. It's not a normal time and it's hard. I cried twice yesterday. Ok, I cried nearly the whole way through while writing this sermon. I am so sad and afraid—for those living in fear for their life or the life of one they love, for those afraid of eviction or being able to eat, for those incarcerated in prisons with very minimal access to healthcare, for those imprisoned in their home with an abusive partner, sibling, or parent. I am sad for the young children who cannot understand. I am so sad for the high school and college seniors for all the lost experiences of reaching a hard-won destination. I am sad for those who will not be able to gather together in-person to grieve those who die. These and so many other losses pile upon our minds and hearts.

And. Spring arrived this week. The sky is blue in China, freed momentarily from intense pollution. Across the globe neighbors are building networks of support for those unable to leave home. We can feel the invisible connective tissue of human caring knitting us

together in new ways. *All* is not lost. Friends call friends. We wander the wooded paths of our neighborhood. We thank the people who stock the stores, make the deliveries, and courageously tend the sick. We are buoyed by our love for each other, for our capacity to take another breath, and for our ability to move through this world noticing what remains.

In the children's book *Saturday* by Oge Mora, a mother and daughter look forward to a special Saturday. Then, like falling dominoes their plans fall apart for different reasons. As the mother "crumples" in despair at the "ruined" day, the daughter assures her mother: "Today was special, today was splendid, Saturday's are wonderful, because I spend them with you."

Amidst the losses we now experience, I wonder if might also reframe our current experience from total "ruin" to also see the unambiguous wonder that remains around us. All is not lost. We are here today, breathing deeply, connected to one another in this digital web.

Seeing the wonder that remains may not be enough to quiet the ache of loss, but it might just be enough to help us make it through. This week, a colleague reminded me of the Rev. Ken Sawyer's words after the death of 18-year old Lauren Dunne Astley—that sometimes we need others to hold the hope for us. Perhaps right now, we are each holding a piece of our collective hope. Together we hold the hope for what will remain, for what will emerge after this global foe has been defeated. Together we hope for the love, the communities, and the care for the earth that will remain.

Amidst today's grief and ambiguity, may we together hold the hope for the world that will one day be.

So may it be.
Amen.