

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

**Revised Common Lectionary – All Saints Day
Revelation 7.9, 15-17, Psalm 34.1-9, 1 John 1.1-2, Matthew 2.2-4, 12**

**1 November 2020
Salem, Bridgeport**

“I Was Down but then God Showed Up”

I didn't live through the Great Depression or through World War II,
so maybe some of you have lived through more stressful times than this, but I certainly haven't.
First we have the pandemic.
Then there are the conflicts over how to best respond to this –on a personal, national, and international level.
Then there is the racial injustice that has been made all the more visible because of the pandemic.
Then there's one of the most contentious election seasons we've ever seen.
Then there are the devastating financial consequences of the pandemic.
Here at Salem we have the uncertainty over the sale of our property.
And added to all those group challenges, are the personal ones we are facing as individuals and as families.
So we have all these challenges.
And at the same time, we've lost so many of our coping mechanisms –
hugging our children and grandchildren, traveling to see relatives and friend, working out at the gym,
going to church!, singing in choirs, and so much more.
And with coping mechanisms stretched to their limit,
stress levels are rising, health and mental health are being affected,
conflict is increasing, addictions are on the rise, our first responders are suffering from PTSD,
and all of us are suffering from what the experts are now calling “pandemic fatigue”,
Throughout these last 7 months, I've been handling things pretty well,
but on Tuesday morning it suddenly just seemed overwhelming.

When I pray I often get clear messages from God.
Sometimes I listen; sometimes I don't.
From the beginning of the pandemic I got a strong message that Salem needed to be extra cautious.
At first I didn't listen.
I thought masks were stupid & when Liz said we needed to close our building, I thought she was crazy.
But I kept getting the message. So we were cautious.
We stayed outside for Phase 2, and worked really hard to develop protocols for returning indoors for Phase 3.
But towards the end of September, I heard God say, “not yet”.
“But it's phase 3; we have all these protocols; we've already decided.”
“No. Not yet.”
“Well, there's nothing I can do about that, God.”
An hour later I was on my way to the hospital.
Then we had our first indoor worship service and everything went really well.
On Monday we discussed air cleaners, but Ray made a good case for why it was an unnecessary expense.
“Speak up”, said God. “No”, I said. “We'll be fine. Besides, they're not in the budget.”
“Then you buy them”, said God. “Have you looked at my financial situation lately, God?
If you want me to buy them, you'll have to give me the money.”
I went home and went to bed.
I didn't sleep well, and when I awoke, I felt worse than I've felt in 7 months.

There were so many things I felt God had called me and Salem to do.

I felt we were to grow musically

and I was looking forward to working with the choir, maybe even starting a handbell choir.

I felt we were to grow our membership and become more diverse – like our scout troop had done –
in race and class and culture as well as age and sexual orientation.

And we had great plans to do that

through growing our Sunday Night Alive program and our musical theatre classes for kids.

And then the pandemic hit, and everything died, or at least shrunk.

I felt like Hagar, who had once been on top of the world, with Abraham and a child and a shining future,
before she was tossed out into the desert to die.

Sure an angel showed up with water, but Hagar was written out of the story. \

I was so depressed, I went out to walk and I just cried and cried and cried.

I called a friend who said I shouldn't give up – that God was still at work.

"Well, then, I need a sign", I said. "If you need a sign, God will give you a sign."

"I need more than a sign – I need a miracle", I said. "If you need a miracle, God will give you a miracle."

Then it was time to go for my acupuncture treatment to get my lungs back in shape.

As I laid back in the chair, I let the healing music wash over me, as the heat lamp warmed my chilled body.

I focused on my breathing. I prayed. And slowly I relaxed into a deep meditative state.

All of the sudden I saw your faces in the pews.

And then amidst your faces, I saw the strong, kind face of a black man I had never seen before.

Then my back pocket buzzed. It was my phone, vibrating with a call.

My hands and arms were full of needles, so I couldn't answer it. They'd have to leave a message.

About 10 minutes later as I walked out of the office, I pulled my phone from my back pocket.

There was a message from a man that I had never met, and never ever seen,

but I recognized his name from an online pastor's Bible study I'd joined recently,

& from what he had shared, I knew he was a deeply spiritual & kind black man from another country.

The message said, "Call me as soon as you can". I called.

The man said, "Hi, Pastor Marjo. I know we don't really know each other,

but I want you to know I've been holding you in prayer.

This morning when I was praying, God told me I needed to send my tithe to you.

I admit", he said, "that I questioned whether I had heard right. And God assured me that I had.

So I have \$1000 I need to get to you."

I'm not sure if I have ever in my life been speechless before, but all I could do was sob for joy.

I couldn't get a word out. I simply cried.

When I finally got my feelings under control, I said, "You don't know what this means to me.

And you don't have to give me any money. Your call was the answer to my prayer.

You are the sign I asked for. You are the miracle.

I had a vision of a black face in the pews, and then you called. And here is what your call meant to me.

It was God saying to me, 'Don't forget what you've been telling Salem.

Your worshipping community is SO MUCH bigger and wider and diverse than you know.

Just because you can't see the people physically in front of you, it doesn't mean they are not there,

listening to you, and worshiping with you, and praying with you, and praying for you.'

You don't have to give me any money. You just needed to call.

You – not your money – were God's answer to my prayer."

We talked for quite a while, and we prayed, and at the end, he said,

"I'm sending you the money, because last night you told God you needed it."

For a minute I was stumped, and then I remembered.

I had said, "God, if you want me to buy air cleaners, you'll have to give me the money."

I'm here today to tell you that what John of Patmos revealed is true.

As I thought about my vision and the faces in the pews, I couldn't help think of John's vision:

"⁹...there was a great multitude ... from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne ...and worship[ing] ... day and night".

As I thought about the words of my prayer, "I am dying of thirst, God!",

I couldn't help but think of John's words,

"¹⁶They will...thirst no more...¹⁷for the Lamb ... will ... guide them to springs of the water of life".

As I remembered how I cried and cried and cried that morning,

I couldn't help but think of John's words, "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes".

I am here today to tell you that what Jesus promised is true.

⁴"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted...."

I had cried my eyes out, but God blessed and comforted me.

³"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

I had been poor in spirit, but when that man called me God showed me heaven on earth.

I am here today to tell you that what the writer of first John said is true.

"²Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed...."

After God showed up in such a miraculous way, it is not only clear that I am indeed God's child now, it's also clear that I there is no way I can predict what else God has in store for me.

All I know is that I'm sure it is much more amazing than anything I can achieve or even imagine on my own.

I am here today to tell you that what we read today is true – not just for King David, but for me!

"⁴I sought the LORD, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.

⁶This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD, and was saved from every trouble."

That is my testimony, my witness, and because of what the Lord has done for me,

I can echo King David's words to you in confidence,

"⁷The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them."

"⁵Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed."

"⁹O fear the LORD, you his holy ones, for those who fear him have no want."

"⁸O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who take refuge in him."

"¹I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth...."

"³O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together."

You and I worship an AMAZING God!

There are times when we have our doubts.

There are times when we have our struggles.

There are times when we might even be ready to give up.

Those are the rainy days when we might not be able to see the sun, and yet the sun is still there.

Whatever it is that you need this day, God already knows.

God's just waiting for you to ask.

God comes where invited, and stays where welcomed.

And when God does show up to bless us and fill our need,

then Jesus said there's just one more thing to do:

"¹²Rejoice and be glad!"

REJOICE AND BE GLAD! AMEN! AND AMEN!