‘Waiting together in the dark for something to happen’

In the Arctic, winter lasts for nine months and for much of that time people live in 24/7 darkness. The average Arctic winter temperature is -34°C, while the average Arctic summer temperature is 3-12°C. It is hard to imagine what that might be like – waiting and waiting for the first signs that the sun is returning after the long darkness.

Last week On Being – a website and podcast – provided me with a new word from a people who know the long Arctic winter. It is an Inuit word, qarrtsiluni – a word that I am not even sure how to pronounce, but the article suggested that it was a perfect word for Lent...it seems to me that it is a perfect word for this strange time we are in more broadly.

Qarrtsiluni means something like:

‘Sitting together in the dark, waiting for something to happen.’

More than ever, we all know that feeling...despite the endless news updates that roll across my phone and my iPad and my television and fill the radio...I feel like the lights have gone out and I am left squinting and peering through the gloom for signs that the sun is returning...and, I am afraid.

I am afraid of getting sick. I am afraid of what will happen if my family gets sick. I am afraid for the future of parishes I care for, and for their clergy. Last night I lay awake in the wee small hours in the dark feeling sick in the pit of my stomach as all these fears fed on each other and got worse and worse...

And then I remembered, qarrtsiluni – ‘sitting in the dark, waiting for something to happen.’ And, I thought, I know something of how these Inuit feel...alone in the darkness with their fears and anxieties.

Except it is not that. It is not ‘sitting in the dark, waiting for something to happen.’

It is ‘sitting together in the dark, waiting for something to happen.’

You see, it’s not that I am afraid of the dark...I am afraid of being alone. Perhaps that fear is what is clearing supermarket shelves as people, so convinced that they have to look out for number one and no one else, hoard toilet paper and hand sanitiser and kitchen towel and tinned food and pasta and flour and rice and meat...meat!! Why on earth would anyone feel compelled to hoard meat?? Well people have even begun hoarding over-the-counter Ventolin inhalers, making it difficult for asthma sufferers to get it without a prescription. People feel so disconnected from others that it does not cross their minds that their selfishness will hurt others. We have become so disconnected that we live in perpetual states of anxiety and depression and this is how those things manifest themselves when fear is thrown into the mix.
At times like this we need to be reminded that we are not alone, as we are in this together, ‘sitting together in the dark’. It is what followers of Jesus have done since the very earliest times...they gathered...on that Holy Saturday they gathered...they gathered in fear and in confusion...but, they gathered together in the dark, waiting for something to happen.

For now, we need to find new ways of gathering – by phone and email and Zoom and Skype and Facebook – but gather we must, so that we can rest into the love of the Body of Christ, “the perfect love that casts out fear” (1 John 4.18).

I encourage you to stay connected, via online parish events and live streamed services, and up to date with ACSQ news by subscribing to the fortnightly ‘anglican focus e-news’.

Sunday Devotions • Monday 6 April 2020 • By The Rev’d Pauline Harley

Sunday Devotion: 12 April 2020, Easter Sunday

Let us be like the two Marys

“Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.’” (Matthew 28.10)

Main Readings: Acts 10.34-43 or Jeremiah 31.1-6; Psalm 118.1-2,14-24 or ‘Hymn to the Risen Christ’; Colossians 3.1-4; Matthew 28.1-10

Supplementary Readings: Isaiah 25.6-9; Psalm 114 or ‘Hymn to the Risen Christ’; 1 Corinthians 5.6b-8; Luke 24.13-49; Psalm 113; Exodus 12.1-14; Romans 6.3-14

Last year my husband and I walked the Camino de Santiago, or The Way of St James, an ancient pilgrimage route from the foothills of the Pyrenees in France to Santiago de Compostela Cathedral in Spain, where the apostle James is said to be interred. It was overwhelming, both physically and spiritually, as we experienced the significant highs and lows of such a long and arduous journey.

In today's Gospel story, the two Marys, upon reaching Jesus' tomb, felt an earthquake and were met first by an angel and then by Jesus, who told them to go and tell his disciples that he had risen from the dead. How the exhausted Marys were able to make their way to the disciples without being completely overwhelmed by what they had experienced that morning, and in the traumatic days prior, amazes me. What incredibly strong and faith-filled women they must have been to endure the lows and highs of such a journey.

The women had gone heavyhearted to visit the tomb of a dead man whom they loved, but ended up being given the joyful task of proclaiming the news that Jesus Christ was risen. Together, the Marys were able to put their emotional upheaval aside and listen to Jesus as he said, ‘Do not be afraid’. Can we lay our own earthly cares, our emotions, aside and do the same as we celebrate Easter Sunday together today?

Let us be like the two Marys, encouraged by Jesus to run and tell others of the risen Christ.