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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA
June 21, 2020
Year A, Proper 7, Revised Common Lectionary, Track 2
[Jeremiah 20:7-13](#)
[Psalm 69: 8-11, \(12-17\), 18-20](#)
[Romans 6:1b-11](#)
[Matthew 10:24-39](#)

In the name of Jesus Christ, who was, and is, and is to come: Amen.

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Sometime when I was younger I remember being shown a chemistry demonstration. It started with what looked like a plain, clear glass of water. And then the teacher dropped a tiny grain of salt into the water—and almost instantly the water was filled with spiky crystals, growing in every direction until the glass was completely full. It turns out that what looked like plain water was actually a supersaturated solution of sodium acetate. That's a salt you can make using plain baking soda and vinegar. Heat the water up to a high temperature and you can dissolve a larger amount of this salt in it than usual. As the water cools back down to room temperature, the salt remains dissolved as long as it's undisturbed. But that solution is highly unstable. Those crystals are just waiting for the tiniest disturbance to fall out of the solution and become solid again. All it takes is a little grain dropped in, and suddenly what was hidden is revealed.

Sometimes world events feel kind of like that. Sometimes what seems like a single, isolated event suddenly makes a lot happen—or, rather, that one event is enough to bring to the surface the tension and instability that was there but hidden all along.

Back in 1914 many Europeans thought their society was too civilized and scientific to descend into war ever again. Then a 19-year-old Bosnian radical shot an archduke named Franz Ferdinand, and that one event triggered a cascade of alliances that spiraled into the First World War and left 15 million people dead.

Sometime around six months ago in China a randomly mutated virus leapt from an animal to a human, and that one event led to a worldwide pandemic that has exposed not only the inadequacies of many of our health systems but also the inequities in many of our economic and social ones.

Three and a half weeks ago a Minneapolis police officer suffocated a Black man named George Floyd, and that one event has triggered a cascade of protests and demands for change that have the potential to transform this country's self-

understanding and perhaps change some of the ways some Americans can take for granted opportunities that others are never given.

I think one thing that has been happening over the past few weeks is that many Americans, particularly but not exclusively white ones, have been discovering that what we might have been able to believe was a placid little glass of water, was actually a highly unstable solution. That what we might have been able to think, or allow ourselves to think, was a happy and harmonious narrative of our society and our place in it, is actually a tenuous construction on a shaky foundation, with no small amount of violence hidden just below the surface. That historical realities like the murder and exploitation of Native Americans, the enslavement of people from Africa and their descendants, the conquest of more than half the territory of Mexico, and the prejudice against immigrants from Asia and the Global South on the part of European colonists and their successors are not just stories from a long time ago but foundational events whose effects are living and active today. To admit that is in no way to deny the noble principles embedded in this country's founding documents or the aspirations of so many Americans who have helped promote democratic government and human rights here and around the world. But it is to say that those principles have often been honored in the breach as much as in the observance, or flat-out applied to some people and not to others.

I came of age in the 1990s, at a time when the narrative I soaked up all around me was one of never-ending progress. The Cold War was over, and the good guys had won. Commentators were writing about "the end of history." The future looked like the inevitable worldwide spread of truth, justice, and of course the American way. McDonald's and Starbucks and the Gap were expanding everywhere. The newly born Internet would bring truth and transparency everywhere as authoritarian governments would find it impossible to control the flow of information and their citizens would demand blue jeans and Disney movies.

Of course that narrative didn't last. The contested election in 2000 was a prelude to the trauma of September 11, 2001. We went to war in Iraq. We saw our government committing human rights abuses in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo and killing civilians in drone strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan. We have seen increasing political gridlock and polarization, conspiracy theories, fake news. The Internet has turned out to be able to spread not just truth but also falsehoods and propaganda. And over the last five years or so we've seen more and more overt bigotry in public discourse, and more and more overt subversion of democratic norms in our governance.

Now some of the disenchantment in that narrative, my narrative, came out of the ordinary process of disillusionment that comes with growing up. But some of it has been a collective societal narrative being exploded by reality. For many people in this country, that societal narrative never existed. There is no golden age to go back

to. There is only the work of living out the gospel of Jesus in our own place and time.

Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace, and he brings the peace that passes all understanding. And yet he told his friends also that he had come not to bring peace, but a sword. And it's true. Because the mere presence of Jesus in the world, the way he lived and loved, was enough to reveal the forces of violence and sin that underlie our whole human story. The love of power, the drive to exclude or to dominate, to gain temporary prosperity for some at the cost of others, to sever the bonds of love that God intends to link us with one another and all creation. These forces of division sent Jesus to the cross. Like a grain of salt falling into a solution, he didn't create them, but he exposed what was already there. Those divisions have to be exposed in order to be healed.

We who follow Jesus today aren't exempt from history or from playing our part in it. We aren't exempt from danger or uncertainty. After all, as he says, the disciple isn't above the teacher—and our teacher faced plenty of trouble. But he also says to us today, "Don't be afraid." Not "Don't be afraid because you'll never be hurt," but "Don't be afraid of those who can kill the body but not the soul." Not "You will have an easy life in this world," but "God knows the hairs of your head." Not "hold on to your life and keep safe at all costs," but "those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Don't be afraid, he says. God's love is with us, and that is all we will ever need.