

Corona Chronicle

Week 42

Wednesday, Dec. 30th

The much-hated year of 2020 draws to a close. Ah, but that doesn't mean that we are wholly out of the deep, dark woods of disease, social isolation, high rates of unemployment and depression – and of course, death. As the saying goes, it is going to get darker before it gets lighter: with so many people traveling during this Christmas-New Year's period (the greatest number in airports since the start of the pandemic last March), surely another record-breaking spike in infections and hospitalizations will be upon us in about two weeks from now. But at least now medical and other hospital workers are beginning to be immunized, so that the foolishness of the many does not have to put the lives of those dedicated heroes who care for them at risk – though with the rising numbers of people being admitted to hospitals, it will still wear them out through exhaustion!

Our tally of the dead from the coronavirus in the U.S. since the start of the pandemic until today has reached 340,000. Yes, we are tired of hearing about death, but it seems important to keep a record for posterity. Someday people will wonder – what was that time like, how did you bear it? At least I *hope* they will wonder – which is to say, I hope that pandemics like this never become *common*.

How did we bear it? At this point, this question cannot be fully answered, since we have probably not yet seen the worst of it all. And I certainly do not qualify to be one to answer it, for I have not been on the “front lines.” I have been safely and snugly ensconced behind the walls of our home on Walnut Street, carrying out my clergy-duties, along with Rabbi Mark, from the other side of a Zoom screen, and occasionally on the phone. Yes, we were “live, in person” for the High Holidays, for one small wedding, and for a number of funerals (eulogizing and singing with our masks on) – but other than that, I rarely go out to any place where large numbers of people can be found except to the grocery store.

Personally, I have “borne” it by keeping up my routine of weekday morning prayers (Mondays and Thursdays with others who join on Zoom; Sundays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays on my own); by feeling connected to our community through our Friday evening and Shabbat morning services and by our recently re-started adult ed class. I have borne it by keeping up with other area clergy via the group United Interfaith Action, which has given me a window onto

what others are going through beyond our specific congregation. I have been inspired and encouraged by many of these other clergy people, and by their communally-engaged congregants, who never stop thinking about the needs of those who have lost their jobs or members of their families, about how to help families have enough to eat, enough to keep warm, etc.

I have borne it by writing these chronicles every week! Throughout each week a kind of pressure builds up in me, I start to feel uneasy, ill at ease, uncertain of how a *cantor* can be of any good during a time like this. And then I sit down to write. Usually I do not know what I am going to write about until I start – but I know it will come spilling out. I know that a few people are reading these words, but I actually have no idea how many. I hope they are helpful to our community members now. But in truth, they are at least as much missives to the *future* as they are words meant to reach anyone today. I suspect I am not very gifted as a *consoler*, nor even as an *encourager*. If I have any gift in this matter, it is rather as a *guide*, someone to help us (myself included) find a path to make it through this dark forest, to help us understand the meaning of our lives, and to point out the many remarkable sights along the way.

As I look back on this paragraph I have just written above, I dimly remember Dante, as a character in his own *Divine Comedy*, having stumbled somehow into a dark forest. (I confess I have not read Dante since sophomore year in college, but I remember the “dark woods”). He meets many frightening things, including wild beasts, but eventually he meets up with a *guide* – a revered author who lived more than thirteen centuries before Dante. This was, of course, Virgil, author of *The Aeneid* (which I also read in that same world literature class, and which I remember even less of). Of course in our day it is so easy to call up famous passages of literature with a few key strokes, and so I call up Dante now:

*Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.* (Inferno, canto 1 – H.W. Longfellow’s translation)

Virgil acts in the *Inferno* and in the *Purgatorio* as Dante’s guide through hell and purgatory. I don’t exactly see myself as guiding anyone through such dark places, but I do like to think that by prodding readers, and myself, to reflect on what is going on all around us (not just on the pandemic but also on the issues of climate- and social- justice which have also come to the fore during this era) we may find meaning in living precisely *now* – in a *difficult* rather than in an easy time.

It has surely been a *difficult* time! Not to be compared, of course, to the times of World War Two, or for us Jews, to the Holocaust. For most of us who have not been devastated by unemployment or eviction or an immediate loss in our families it has rather been just enough trouble to get us to think about the meaning of our lives and about what, and who, we most love and treasure. And hopefully the result of this reflection is to spark *gratitude* in us for each day of life in this world – which is still beautiful, even while sometimes seeming cruel and difficult.

This is the teaching of Psalm 90:12, which Mark and I usually chant together at funerals: *Teach us to treasure each day...that we may open our hearts to Your wisdom.*

Well, it sounds better chanted, with all the repetitions – for *singing* (and music and poetry) is another secret for getting through this dark forest!

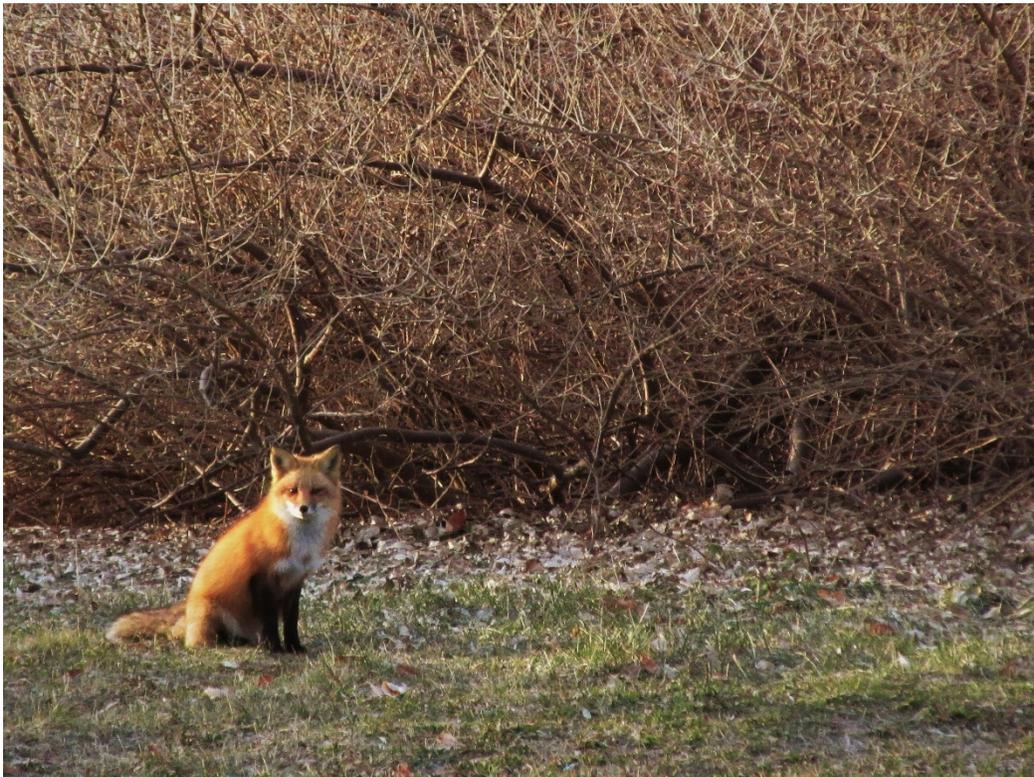
And then there is the forest itself – and the hills and the mountains, the rivers, the lakes, the rolling New England farm fields, the meadows, the ocean breaking in white foam on our beaches and stretching to the horizon...there is the beauty and wonder of Nature all around us. *This* has been, after the love of my family and warmth of our TBE community, what has most sustained me thus far. Yesterday Mark and I drove to a local beach to watch a full moon rise (so early – moonrise was at 3:57 PM!). We also enjoyed a resplendent sunset in the other direction. And then this morning, greedy as I sometimes am for more natural spectacles, I got up before dawn to watch the moon *set* from the vantage point of Fall River's Bicentennial Park, right on the Taunton River where no buildings or trees would obstruct my view. But as it turned out, the moon simply faded into the pink haze on the horizon, and my "spectacle" was anything but. So I decided, since I was already there, and the sun was rising, I could at least take a walk along the waterfront.

I had my camera of course. Heading southwest from the Iwo Jima Memorial along the river, one passes by a fenced-in area where National Grid has positioned their large electrical transformers. The fence is to keep people out, since there is apparently some danger of electrocution in there. But in recent years a family of red foxes has found that it is a perfect place to take up residence. They have a large field with a nice clump of brush in the middle (where they seem to have dug their den). Those pesky humans never come in to disturb them (except for the

occasional National Grid worker), and the kinds of things they like to eat (they are omnivores) are readily found. You can walk by this place hundreds of times without ever seeing these gorgeous creatures. But dawn is a good time to encounter one. And this morning was my time!

I have only a small camera with a zoom lens – nothing fancy. So I had to hold the camera up to the fence, trying to shoot in between the chain links, and I tried my best to use my primitive zoom, holding my breath so I would not blur the picture by breathing...it took many tries, but finally I got *one* clear image of one of these beautiful animals. Not a scary wild beast as in Dante's dark forest, but an intelligent and sensitive creature who has figured out how to live in harmony with us noisy, clamorous ones. How have I borne this era? I might ask, rather, how all the rest of creation has borne *me*, and all the rest of us homo sapiens?

We don't know the answer to this, or how much longer this forbearance will endure – but in the meantime, we might take this time as an opportunity to learn better how to *love* and to be humble before all creatures.



Red fox resident of fenced-off National Grid lot near Bicentennial Park, Fall River