

March 8th was the last time we were gathered in this room. That day we sang together, we shook hands, we hugged, we laughed, we watched clips from a truly great movie called Jo Jo Rabbit and learned about Psalm 1. We were in the beginning of Lent. And then it all stopped. We had everything ready to go for March 15th. For a long time, those bulletins sat on the organ and the pulpit. We found one the other day. And then things went quiet.

We might ask ourselves, *how often does it happen that churches close their doors due to something other than a church actually stopping?* In American history, I honestly have no idea. Did some close during the Civil War? Did some close during the Revolutionary War? If they closed, did they stay closed for many months? I don't know. Maybe what we have been going through in the last almost 7 months is incredibly rare. I would guess that none of us have experienced this strange thing before, having our church closed by other circumstances than our own choosing.

In the Bible, we actually see this happen twice, for our ancestors in ancient Israel. Solomon's Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians 2600 years ago. The place of worship was shut. After being closed down for more than 80 years, it did reopen. But then it happened again, almost 2200 years ago. This time things were closed down for 3 and 1/2 years. When they were able to re-open it lead to a

holiday called Hanukkah, the re-dedication of the Sanctuary. There are beautiful legends and stories that developed about these two times. Normally there would be a fire on the altar, and candles or oil lamps would be burning, at all times. When the Temple was first destroyed, there was a legend that the fire was put down into a cistern, to continue to burn while the people were away. After all those years, they found the remnants of the fire. It was out, but there was something left. They brought it out, and put it on the new altar, and suddenly it started to burn again. Ness Gadol. A great miracle.

When things were defiled and shut down in the time of the Maccabees, when they reopened, there was not enough oil for the Menorah to burn, as was needed. It would take 8 days to make new pure olive oil. But again, Ness Gadol, a great miracle. The tiny bit of oil burned even longer than was needed, 8 days until the new oil could be prepared.

We do not have such stories in the Church. Our churches are rarely closed by outside forces, like a disease. But now we know what that is like. We might know it again. We don't know. But we can know this: our Sanctuary sat empty for just over 200 days. There was no candle on the altar. We didn't hide away some fire. But during the 200 days, I would come out into the sanctuary, and look around, from time to time. It was very still. And I would think of

these other stories. And I smiled. God's fire never goes out. It always gives off its warmth and light, gifts for all the world. But I also remembered the teachings of our brother Paul: we are the Body of Christ, we are the Living Temple. God's Spirit doesn't need bricks in order to live somewhere. It needs us. We are the carriers of God's Presence. And we have work to do. May God's warmth and light shine through us, for the sake of others. AMEN.