

All Shall Be Well

1 John 4:16b

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Well! We've had a wild ride the last couple of weeks, haven't we? COVID ran through our ranks like wildfire. We are not the only ones, of course. It is abroad again in our community. I know this because the Hannaford pharmacy ran out of COVID test kits, and because I have heard from other pastors throughout the state that they are beginning to see COVID cases in their churches, too.

We thought we were through with this, didn't we? And it is SO hard to go back to wearing masks and sitting apart and being suspicious of the germs that are surely on the hands and in the breath of the ones we love. I don't want to go back there. I know YOU don't want to go back. And yet here we are – taking precautions we don't want to have to take, worried about ourselves or our loved ones, and experiencing once again that shifting-sands feeling, that sense that the world isn't solid and familiar under our feet any more. We need to recover our sense of safety in the world. How do we do that?

To answer that question, I thought I would tell you the story of Julian of Norwich. It's an interesting story, and it also addresses the situation we find ourselves in. Julian was a 14th-century English mystic. She wasn't particularly well educated. She certainly didn't read or write Latin. And she wasn't high-born. And yet, she was the first woman to write an English-language book – at about the same time that Chaucer was writing the *Canterbury Tales*.

Julian lived in a time marked by the plague – the Black Death – which swept through England three times during her lifetime, wiping out huge percentages of the population with each pass. We can't be certain, but some scholars believe that Julian was married with children and that she was the only survivor of her family. We do know, because she wrote extensively about it, that when she was 30 or 31, Julian was herself very close to death. A priest was summoned to give her last rites. He stood at the foot of her bed, holding the crucifix. As Julian focused on the cross, she experienced a series of visitations from Christ, in which he revealed the nature of God to her. Julian recovered from her illness and spent the rest of her life responding to those visions.

Famously, she became an anchoress, and this is where the story gets really weird. An anchoress is a special type of hermit, a woman who chose to be imprisoned for the rest of her life, for God. There were men, too, called anchorites, but for simplicity, I will just describe what this was like for women. In the Middle Ages, great churches would often have little cells just inside their outer wall, maybe 12 or 15 feet square. Sometimes they had a small enclosed garden that could be reached from the cell, but mostly, the cells were just rooms with no adjoining garden. They typically had three windows – one window to the outdoors; one window looking into the church, from which the cross and the mass could be viewed; and another interior window through which things could be handed into and out of the cell. A woman who felt called to a secluded spiritual life, to study and pray literally all of the time for the rest of her life, would be examined by her bishop. If he was satisfied with her vocation, he would hold a funeral mass for her in the church, and then she would be escorted to the little cell, and the door would be sealed up permanently, so that she could never, ever come out again. This was a voluntary, self-imposed, life

sentence. Just speaking about this gives me a little bit of a panic attack. I do not have a call to be an anchoress.

Now, I know the first thing you are thinking is, what about food and water? And does this cell have a flush toilet over in the corner? The answer is that the anchoress would have a servant who lived in an adjacent cell that was NOT sealed up, so the servant could come and go into the church and out into the world. The servant would come to one of the interior windows of the anchoress's cell and hand in food and water and take away a full chamber pot.

Anchoresses were regarded as great spiritual voices, subject only to their bishops in matters of faith. It was a source of great prestige for a church or priory to have an anchoress. In the community, they functioned like pastoral counselors. People would come to the exterior window of the cell and ask for advice. Julian was highly regarded for her pastoral care. She also taught herself to read and write English and then wrote down her visions of Christ from that time back in her early 30s when she thought she was dying. The full version of this work is now called "Revelations of the Love of God" or "Revelations of Divine Love." In it, she paints beautiful images of God's care for us, often using family metaphors, and especially using mother-language about Jesus. For example, she describes Jesus' crucifixion as much like childbirth - necessary pain, even agony, which must be gone through in order to bring love into the world.

And that is Julian's central message. Even when the Black Death swirls through the land again and again, there is no need to worry. She wrote, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well, for there is a force of love moving through the universe that holds us fast and will never let us go."

So, how do we recover our sense of safety in the world? First John tells us, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." I love this passage, but I think I like Julian's version even better: "There is a force of love moving through the universe that holds us fast and will never let us go." If we know that, if we have experienced God's fierce and uncompromising love for us, then we KNOW that all shall be well and we are safe. We are in the palm of God's hand, and – no matter what frightening thing is going on in our world – love holds us fast.

Thanks be to God.

Amen