

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

So, if God loves each and every one of us (and I believe God does), and IF God has a dream for how all creation should work together (and I believe God does), and if God has the almighty power to create various opportunities for us (and I believe God does), then wouldn't it be likely that God would insert him/or herself into our daily lives as a positive, joyful resource? Wouldn't it make sense that God would offer us myriad and multiple choices from which to choose, each of which could then lead to a fruitful outcome? So, this is my personal theology. You may disagree with me at any time...I'm just your priest and coach. But we've known each other long enough now that I feel comfortable sharing what I believe with you. We've been through thick and thin together, and we will have some more years, some more Easter seasons together, to consider just what the Easter message of scripture really is. Jesus, our direct connection to God has been raised from death, and has returned to live among us and remind us that new life is available through God's grace, and that new adventures and new challenges are our destiny, if God has anything to say about it.

This is my personal Easter belief. Now, let's go back a minute...we have discussed this before: The word belief, to believe, has undergone some changes in the past 200 years or so. The concept of believing has changed from what our ancestors, and the Bible translators of past generations meant. The word 'believe' is a cognate of the Germanic word 'beliebt', or beloved. What we believe is then what is beloved to us, what we feel so strongly in our hearts. It is more common these days to think that we can only believe what can be scientifically proven, and, for obvious reasons, that pretty much eliminates God. Our spiritual beliefs can't really be proven by scientific method, or by computer model, but if they exist at all, they are woven into the fabric of our hearts. They are beloved to us. They just seem right and true, perhaps because God has shared them with us. I can't point to data which prove Jesus was raised from the grave, and even the circumstantial evidence is a bit sketchy, but it is an image, a relevant truth, which is beloved to me. I believe it, not because I can prove it, but because my personal relationship with God, and God's love, has made this Easter message burn in my heart, and be beloved, *beliebt*, to me.

As you know, I think, fifty years ago I was teaching in the public schools. I was teaching German to 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders in North Syracuse. In those days, upon graduating from college and having taken the required education courses and done your time as a student teacher, you were given 'provisional certification' and were able to be hired by a school district as a daily teacher. But you had five years to earn your 'permanent certification' in New York State by successfully taking 30 graduate hours. There weren't many guidelines...heck you could take a three hour course in golf. But considering the teaching landscape, I had the feeling that I should complete my English degree while I was taking all these courses, since I would probably wind up teaching that somewhere and sometime. I had no problem with the cost of the courses, particularly if I took them at Oswego State, since I had had student teachers assigned to me, and for each such student teacher, you got a free course. But the question was: what English course should I take? What was being offered? What night of the week would the course be taught?

Now, things are much different today, but back then there was an open registration day before each semester, and you needed to go to the campus, and into the gym where there were tables set up for each of the courses from which you needed to make a selection. It was like shopping. And I really hate shopping. I was overwhelmed. And anxious. I really didn't know what I was looking for, or how to go about choosing. It was similar to my reluctance to stop and ask directions when I'm driving somewhere. I put on the pretention of someone who was aloof and making a measured selection, but really, I was just wandering around randomly trying to seem inconspicuous. It occurred to me that I should have engaged a faculty advisor, or that I should have at least looked at a course catalogue. But it was really too late for that. I needed to choose a course right away before all the English graduate courses were filled up. My first and foremost

wish was to flee...to just head back out the door and out of Oswego altogether...and just as I was about to bail, I looked down at the table next to which I was randomly standing, at the list of those who had signed up for some course there, I saw the name 'Gale LaPlante'! Of all the thousands of names written on hundreds of slips of paper on dozens of tables in that gymnasium, that one name jumped out at me: Gale LaPlante! (That was Gale's last name before she married me.) Well, I didn't care what course it was, when it met, or whether it was a good fit for my purposes. If my friend Gale was in that class, it was where and when I wanted to be.

Turns out, it was a class in advanced English grammar, and Gale and I sat together each evening, studied together, and had a great time. We found that we each knew things about grammar which helped the other, and did so well in this difficult course that we exempted the final exam. We were the only two in the class whose grades were so consistently high, that no matter what we did on the final, we would each still have received an A+. The professor told us that we didn't even need to come that evening when the final was given. Would it surprise you to know that we came to class that evening anyway...just so we had an excuse to spend the evening together? So, looking back on this time of my life, I believe that God created this beloved opportunity for me...that's the point of telling you this story. It's an Easter story. It's a story about grace and mercy. And it's a story about Jesus' second coming, as it's called. For by making the choice that I did, Christ, the grace of God and the champion of second chances and new life, was able to come into my life and plow me in the glorious place I am today.

In our narrative from Acts of the Apostles, we hear of a way in which God provides a chance and a choice for St. Paul. He and his companions, along with some other inmates, are being held in a dark, dank, smelly Roman jail. His only real crime has been preaching the good news of Christ, which is inconvenient to some, and a heresy to others. And then suddenly during the night there is an earthquake which frees them. Now, we are not told that the earthquake was an act of God, but we can infer that. But the interesting, even curious thing, is the choice that Paul makes when given the chance. Rather than fleeing his imprisonment, after which he would be 'on the run' from his accusers, he takes the opportunity to stay. Would you have made that same choice? Fact is, though, by staying there in the prison, by making that response to God's opportunities, his incarceration becomes a blessing to others. The jailer, and his whole family, are so inspired by Paul's choice, that they become baptized believers. God takes Paul's choice, and creates new opportunities. Not according to some micro-managed plan, but rather according to a dream, that in each and every instance of creation there is an opportunity for new life. That is the Easter message, isn't it? The choices we make, given the array of chances and opportunities God creates, open new and redemptive doors, and the result is a true and enduring blessing.

As we conclude our special readings for the season of Easter today, so too do we conclude our six weeks of readings from the Revelation to St. John. In fact, we find ourselves today at the end of the Book of Revelation and the end of the very Bible itself. And how does it end? With an invitation. And with the word *COME*. In the vision John has been shown of the future, where the past has been wiped away and a new civilization has been created, a new "Jerusalem" if you will, where the precepts of God's own mind will rule forever, the call goes out across the whole universe to *COME*. God says come, Jesus the Lamb says come, Jesus the bright morning star says come, all the saints say come, the church says come, the Holy Spirit says come. Come together. And how does everyone respond to the invitation? How do those who thirst for new life respond? They, too, call out *COME*. Let the future come; let the way the truth and the life come; let our refreshment come. Come and *Become*. Love and be *Beloved*. Leave wickedness and greed and evil and despair and loneliness behind and become. Leave the horror of crucifixion behind and come and Believe and Become. Believe and become the beloved community. Behold, says the Lord, I am coming soon. And those who have endured, those who have washed themselves clean, those who believe in the beloved, say together: Come quickly, Lord Jesus, come quickly! Amen.