A Kingdom of Isolation, and it looks like I’m the queen. We are becoming royalty of isolation, all of us. That perfect girl is gone. Here I stand in the light of day, well, here I sit. I’m not used to preaching while sitting, but I’ll give it a go. That perfect girl is gone. We’ve all let go of striving for perfection, I expect. We’re just hoping to get through one more day. One more day of social distancing, one more day of adjusting to this strange new world. One more day to learn from the daffodil, let go of what is no more, and wait like the seed.

Often in our lives, just as for the daffodil, some part of us has to shrivel up and die so that some new part of us can grow and give beauty to the world.

On weekend edition, national public radio, yesterday, Scott Simon interviewed Shannon Francis, a member of the Hopi Tribe and Navajo Nation. “We believe that this is a new beginning,” she said. Her grandpa and his grandpa recorded genealogy and tracked their families through other pandemics. The knowledge was passed down from elder to grandchild.

I was struck by her words because I have been thinking of my Grandpa Norrie lately. He was alive during the great influenza pandemic of 1918, though I never heard him talk of it. I was so lucky to know my grandfather. (I knew two grandfathers, one great-grandfather, three grandmothers and two great-grandmothers) But Grandpa Norrie died when I was well into my 30’s. I lived with him and Grandma when I did my student teaching in Spokane, and we visited them often when we lived in Chelan and Wenatchee when I was first teaching. I remember 1997 the movie, Titanic, came out, and I talked to him about it. He remembered the sinking of the Titanic, which was 1912. So, he would have remembered the 1918 flu pandemic, but we never spoke of it. I didn’t think to ask.

I just finished reading The Great Influenza by John M. Barry - the epic story of the deadliest plague in history is the subtitle. And I was struck toward the end of the book when Barry wrote, “The disease has survived in memory more than in any literature. The writers of the 1920’s had little to say about it.” He goes on to talk about individual authors’ experiences of surviving the pandemic, but that their fiction rarely treated the subject. “Nearly all those who were adults during the pandemic,” wrote Barry in 2004, “have died now. Now the memory lives in the minds of those who only heard stories, who heard how their mother lost her father, how an uncle became an orphan, or heard an aunt say, ‘it was the only time I ever saw my father cry.’”

Having not been the direct recipient of the memories of my ancestors of the pandemic, I was touched by Scott Simon’s interview with Shannon Francis. She is the benefactor of such memories from her elders. And the wisdom she gained from is such a gift.

In times of pandemics, you have to go into seclusion - a time of quiet, reflection, and peace, she told us. Her mother says that Mother Earth is getting a break from humans, from mining, development, digging her up - this is a break for Mother Earth. The Natural World is going to restore herself and start the healing.
It’s a hopeful frame to put on all of this. And I find it hopeful to remember that humanity has suffered pandemics before and survived. This is not new. It may be new for those of us living now, but is not new for those who came before.

“The pandemic for some families who are losing loved ones - it is really hard - but at the same time this life cycle process continues and we have to remember that - that we belong to Mother Earth.”

Jessica chose two of the readings this morning – the one about the seed and the daffodils, and I so appreciate the wisdom in them. “The life cycle process continues and we have to remember that.” “A seed knows how to wait,” says Hope Jahren. “We can be brave and wise enough, when the right time comes to push out from under the tough skins of our souls that protect us from all that is hard and harsh” writes Ruth Gibson.

I added the reading by William Bridges because his work on transition has been important for me to understand why change is so hard for us humans. While we aspire to be like a seed and know how to wait, to be like a daffodil and judge the right time to push out from under the tough skins of our souls, we are human, and our humanness – our minds our thoughts our ruminations can get us into trouble, can lead us astray, if we don’t stay grounded in our bodies, if we don’t pay attention to that magic breath Amy told us about. We get into trouble if we don’t stay connected to our ancestors and the history that came before us. We get into trouble if we don’t listen to Mother Earth and Nature and abide by the natural rhythms of things.

Bridges transition model begins with letting go, the ending, the thing we’ve lost. Right now, it is freedom to leave our homes, gather in groups, worship in church. Some have lost their health and some their lives. We are sacrificing our freedom to mitigate the damage, but just because we are choosing these particular letting go’s, doesn’t make the grief at their loss any less great. There is uncertainty and fear, emotional upheaval in this first step of letting go.

That uncertainty and fear continues into the next stage of Bridge’s model, called THE NEUTRAL ZONE. This is where we are right now. It is uncomfortable, and we need to spend some time here – it’s sometimes called “the fertile void.” This stage is confusing, disorienting, and frustrating. We know what we’ve let go of, we know what we’ve lost, but we have no idea what is next, what new beginning will come of it. This is the seed stage. The seed is alive while it waits. Each beginning, writes Hope Jahren, is the end of a waiting.

The new beginning is the final stage in this model – the place we all want to get to and know and learn and start. This stage can be exciting, energizing and committing – it is something completely new. Something we can envision in the earlier stages.

Since we’re currently living in the neutral zone, I can’t tell you about the new beginnings, as much as I’d like to! I don’t know any more than you know what is next, when it will begin, when Easter will come – the date on the calendar is April 12, but the date Nature will allow us to venture forth again is most uncertain.

But in this neutral zone, lies our opportunity. This is our opportunity. We may not have chosen this opportunity, we may not want this opportunity, but that doesn’t not make it an opportunity. We have a chance to check in with our magic breath. We can still connect with our people. I learned on a zoom check in this week with members of the congregation that mine is not the only family doing a weekly zoom check in. At church we’ve added a coffee hour this morning to follow worship which Jessica told you about in her welcome. The link is in your weekly bulletin.
And of course, as Barry writes about the 1918 pandemic, these plagues disproportionately affect the poorest and least resourced among us – and I’m mindful that as we increase our use of computer technology to connect with one another, that not all our people have access to such technology. So our Pastoral Care team have begun making old fashioned telephone calls to reach those who may not be able to participate in worship online. And we encourage you each Sunday during the time we would have greeted our neighbors were we all together in the sanctuary, to consider who you might call and connect with today.

We have the opportunity to learn what came before – I can tell you that I will be asking my parents if they remember their parents ever talking about the 1918 pandemic, and I’ve been reading, and I’ve been re-watching some of my favorite shows. Downtown Abbey features that 1918 influenza in its historical drama, which I didn’t pay much attention to when I first watched the series, but am now primed to see it.

And we can connect with the Earth. I have been out walking in my neighborhood more lately than before. I took a bike ride last week – I rode my bike like I had done when I was a kid – just for fun, not to get anywhere, not for exercise, but for fun – going up hills so I could fly down them. I see my neighbors on the other side of the street and notice their yards and flowers. The little park in my neighborhood seems full of life, even though there is orange warning tape around the playground... My husband is growing seeds in our living room with a grow light and our time outside seems even more precious than before.

As is often the case, when I sit down to write a sermon, I had no idea what I could possibly say to you this week. But I have learned to trust the process over time. I have learned to listen to the universe. And indeed, I’ve surprised myself that I think I have something useful to suggest:

- Pay attention to your magic breath. Connect with your body.
- Connect with your people. Reach out to others who may be isolated and find a way to deepen the connections you have.
- Learn from human history. Remember how you have successfully dealt with difficult times in your life, and learn from your ancestors how they dealt with trials and tribulations generations before.
- And connect with Mother Earth. Learn from the daffodils. Practice being a seed and wait until the right time to venture forth. Bask in the beauty and watch the earth heal.

Our people have before us endured pandemics. People will survive this one. Our lives have changed. We have to let go of what was before as we explore this uncomfortable and painful neutral zone. Only by spending time here, waiting like a seed, growing a tough green skin to protect our blossom, only after some unknown amount of time, will we push up out of the ground into a new beginning.

But for now, our only job is to let go and loosen up. Relax our muscles, put down the weight of the world you’ve been carrying -it is not yours alone to carry. Tap into your holy, magic breath and let mother earth heal and ease this pain.