For those of you old enough to remember analog car radios with a tuning dial you probably also remember the task of trying to get that dial to the perfect location to clearly receive a channel. If you went too far in either direction you would end up with a mix of static and whatever it was that you were trying to hear. It could be a bit of a task, especially if you were driving in a new area where you were unfamiliar with the radio stations. And I realize this might be a bit of a tortured metaphor but I think life can be like this. Life is a process of finding the sweet spot in between the less desirable areas. In Aristotle’s *Eudemian Ethics* he refers to this as the middle state. He argues that it is in this middle state where true virtues lie. So, for example, he says courage is the middle way between cowardice and recklessness, whereas confidence is the middle way between self-depreciation and arrogance. I tend to agree with Aristotle, which I am sure makes him feel that his life was worthwhile. But the problem with this understanding is in the details. How do we correctly identify that middle state? Where exactly is place where confidence ends and arrogance begins? There is no algorithm that we can plug behaviors into to definitively find the answer to what it is we should call a behavior. And to further muddy the waters, people tend to label their own behavior by its virtuous name – cowards self-identify as courageous, the arrogant as confident and so on. As a result, even if we all agree with Aristotle, there will be debates about which behavior represents the middle way, because unfortunately behaviors are not as easy to identify as a radio station. And such a debate is just what we have in our rather lengthy lesson from John this morning concerning the raising of Lazarus.

The quick overview of the story is that Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha is ill and they send for Jesus. Jesus waits for two days and then announces to the Disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” The Disciples seem less than impressed with the idea and say, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” In response Jesus talks about hours of daylight and then tells the disciples that Lazarus is dead, adding that they must go “so that you may believe.” This seems to convince the disciples of the need to go and Thomas says, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” The debate subsided but it was originally fought between Jesus’ view that going to Judea was necessary, therefore requiring courage and the disciples view that it was dangerous and therefore foolhardy. Jesus’ view wins the day, and since he is the second person of the Trinity, we are going to assume he is right, but it still raises a question for us mortals and that question is how do we make decisions when we are not actually standing next to Jesus? What actions in our walk of faith are courageous and which are foolhardy?

Until a few years ago, I would have said that this is largely an unneeded debate. For as much as certain Christians like to talk about being under attack in this country, the fact remains that we generally can exercise our faith unmolested in the United States. There is no real risk that if caught being Christian we are going to be thrown to the lions or covered in pitch and used as a torch at one of Emperor Nero’s cocktail parties. But something weird happened with churches in 2020 that brought this debate to the fore and it wasn’t the death of Eddie Van Halen. The event was Covid and the thing that happened was church attendance was banned. Some of this was imposed by the government, but for the most of the time we were shut down by our bishop. If you recall when the Wisconsin Supreme Court said the state could not close churches, our bishop, Steven Miller responded by saying, “Because our citizenship is in heaven…. churches in the diocese are not authorized to offer public worship.” The argument made by Bishop Miller and others was basically that if you went to church you would die or be complicit in murder. If there was any chance of someone getting Covid while at church, the church must be closed. Now, looking back on this very real situation, the question is did we, or more specifically, did I, respond properly. I followed Bishop Miller’s injunction, not happily, but I did follow. I could, of course, argue that I took a vow to obey my Bishop and was therefore obligated, but that misses the question that needs to be asked. In the story from the Gospel when Jesus announces that they should go to Judea, the Disciples objection was that if they do, their lives would be at risk. And while I realize going to raise Lazarus from the dead and going to church are two slightly different things, they are both good, honorable, and necessary things. And so, was it courageous to shut down churches or was it cowardly? Similarly, was it courageous or cowardly that I went along with these injunctions? Is attending church something worth risking our life for, or is it something we do only when all the stars align?

Monday morning quarterbacking is always easier than making decisions at the time, but here is what I have worked out in thinking back on that strange time. I think there was a middle way between what we did as a diocese and other institutions which acted like there was no pandemic. Were many of the precautions entirely justified? Certainly, they were. Did much of the church act like a hypochondriac in a service station bathroom? Absolutely. The thing that makes me so sad and remorseful about that time is the church proudly announced to the world that it was not necessary. We could just watch it on TV or think some happy thoughts about Jesus and all would be well. But that was a lie. Being away from church was awful. No, we did not need to have a big hymn sing in a room without air circulation, but we needed community, we needed the church. And in a time when the world really needed a church, we ran and hid and told ourselves we were just following Jesus. Something could have been done. And despite all of the church’s failings let me end with something for which I am incredibly grateful and that is all of you.

Here are a few statistics and some are a bit old but they are the most current I could find. In 2019 the diocese of Milwaukee averaged 3,033 people attending on a weekly basis. In 2021 that number dropped by over 1,000 to 1,929, or around 37%. A national survey in the Spring of 2022 comparing pre and post covid church attendance found that the number of people who said they never attended church rose from 25% to 33%. If you want St. John Chrysostom’s number in that time period here it is: we averaged 65 people a week in 2019 and 66 people a week in 2021. An increase of 1.5385% (we are nothing if not mathematically precise around here). And this is why I am so thankful for all of you. Despite the failings of the church in a time of crisis, you hung in there, you kept your eye on what was important. You realized that the failings of your leadership on earth was just that – earthly failure and not the failure of God. Hopefully we are done with global pandemics for a while but I also hope that we learned some lessons. Being a Christian sometimes takes courage. And finding the sweet spot is not always easy because we humans are good at deceiving ourselves. We may not need to be like Thomas and say, “Let us also go, that we may die with him,” but we may need to do more than sit around watching our computer screens and claiming it is church. Christianity isn’t easy but we need to learn from our mistakes so that we may be God’s own this day and forevermore.