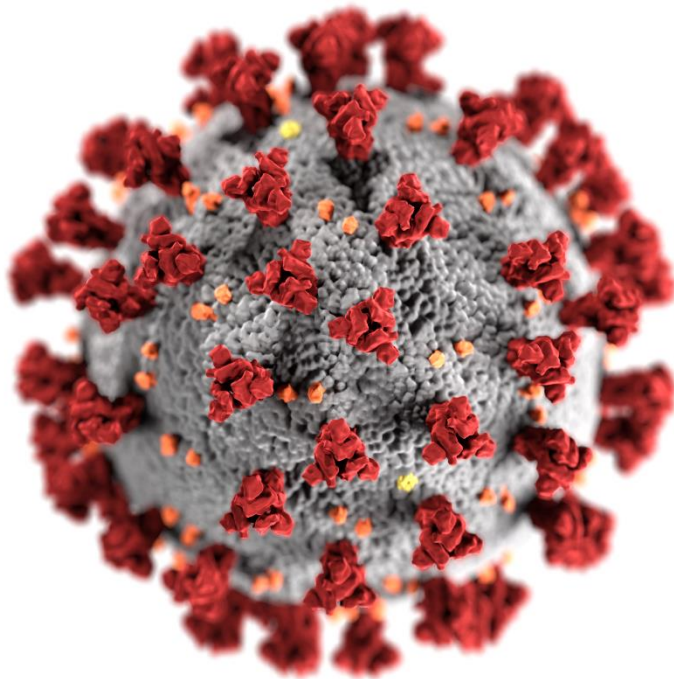


Pandemic Preaching

**Sermons and Lessons
from LMC Leaders**



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June, 2021

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Preface

The Covid 19 pandemic has had a profound effect on churches throughout the world. In the United States this has included fear among Christians over health and financial concerns, grief for lost loved ones and disruption of normal life patterns, including in-person church meetings and activities. And, of course, there has been conflict over how to respond to the pandemic in both personal and church life, often fueled by broader social and political divisions.

All of these have presented a profound challenge to pastors and congregational leaders. How can they encourage Christians in this difficult time? How can congregations work through disagreement and conflict? What has this situation revealed about how the church needs to change? How can churches stay focused on our missional kingdom agenda? Given all this, a collection of some of what has been said on these topics seems appropriate both as a historical record, as well as wisdom for the future as we move forward.

Many bishops, pastors and leaders addressed the pandemic and the issues it has raised in special statements, emails, church announcements and through other avenues. But others did preach or teach specifically on this topic. And the following are a sample of these.

All LMC credentialed leaders were asked for submissions by email over a period of several months. The following criteria were followed for inclusion in this project:

- The material is focused on the pandemic and takes it seriously.
- It has been presented in a church context.
- It makes clear use of Scripture to give guidance to believers.
- It is useful for building up the broader body of believers.
- It is congruent with LMC's mission statement, core convictions and our Confession of Faith.

I want to register my own personal lament that what was received does not reflect the rich and beautiful diversity that makes up LMC. Despite late efforts to overcome this, this defect remains. Greater efforts from the beginning will need to be exerted for similar future projects.

The materials are arranged in dated order so that the reader can have a sense of the progression of events from shutdown, to alternative ways of meeting as church, to more normal conditions at present. Sherri Martin's contribution is first, although her initial entry is a later reflection looking back on this project.

Several notes: I was impressed by the numerous uses of the Old Testament to find guidance for this time of crisis. Stephen Weaver's contribution is unique. It is an outline of material he worked through with pastors and congregational leaders in three different district meetings, with a report on the discussion from these meetings. Roger Shenk takes a different angle on the topic of the seriousness of the pandemic. Instead of confronting those prone to conspiracy theories head on, he comes alongside in an effort to bring them along. As a rule only one entry was chosen from each writer. The only partial exception to this was Karl Landis, since Nita, his wife, was a part of the second submission.

I want to thank Sherri Martin for working with me as Co-Editor. She helped in the process of selecting, editing and working with writers to clarify and refine their work. I also want to thank Susan Hochstedler for her work as copy editor and proofreader. She prompted various conversations with writers about meaning and word choices that improved what is presented here. A final thanks to Felixa V. de Kunkle who did an enormous amount of work in translating the contents of the eBook into Spanish (available in a separate edition).

Our prayer is that you will be encouraged, challenged and blessed as you read these selections - William Higgins.

Reflections

Sherri Martin, February 19, 2021
LMC, Lancaster, PA

It has been a privilege to engage with William to evaluate and review the sermons submitted for the LMC *Pandemic Preaching* resource. I've been blessed to imagine each speaker in their unique and diverse setting preaching with genuine love and compassion during a very difficult time. It was obvious that each speaker knew his or her audience. I was impressed with the biblical, historical, and life-sized narratives weaved through the sermons.

Picture after picture filled my mind. I was positively challenged to contemplate new questions and consider a broader worldview. It is my hope and prayer that as LMC engages with this resource, it will be a useful means to positively influence transformation for the sake of Christ and His Kingdom.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world, I was shaken. An image from 2020 that impacted me profoundly was ships stranded at sea. In multiple ways, the picture reflected the awful awe of standing among personal idols that had been toppled.

Stopped short.



An image forever ingrained in my mind.

A revelation.

A personal awakening.

In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin! Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. - Revelation 18:17 NIV

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come. You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.

- Revelation 4: 8, 11 NIV

The following are a series of reflections I wrote for LMC staff in the early days of the pandemic. One year after the outbreak of COVID-19, I look back and reflect. Reflections that continue to impact me even today. I do not want to ever forget.

Everyday people

March 21, 2020
Shared with LMC Staff

Reflections: Saying hello and goodbye to everyday people is a simple way to say I care. It warms my heart. Then COVID-19 came to our part of town. Right now, saying goodbye is a bit heart-wrenching. What if my everyday people get sick? No wonder Jesus says so many comforting words to His disciples. Soaking in John 14-17 is good for the soul of everyday people.

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.

- John 14:1-4 NIV

The race of faith

March 21, 2020
Shared with LMC Staff

Reflections: As a young girl in the 1920's, my Grandma pieced together a quilt top from feed-bag material. Left unfinished until I inherited it in 2017, I had an expert quilter and a sister in the Lord finish it. Now it hangs on my wall. COVID-19 might be novel but running the race of faith during extremely difficult times is not.



Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. - Hebrews 12:1-2 NKJV

Slicing it up

March 22, 2020
Shared with LMC Staff

Reflections: The Apostle Paul had an experience like no other. Instantly blinded and eyesight restored, the risen Christ stood illuminated in a vision in all His glory. Paul saw deeply into the mysterious purposes of God. As a bondservant of Christ and a prisoner in Rome, he sure knew how to pray for the church! Like much of the world, I'm hunkered down at home. **Nevertheless, am I bowing my knees before the**

Father? This question cuts deeply between the bones and marrow. When I pray for the church today, I do not want to be kicking against the goads.

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: 6 that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him. I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory. - Ephesians 3:1-15 NRSV

Neglectful and needy

March 23, 2020
Shared with LMC Staff

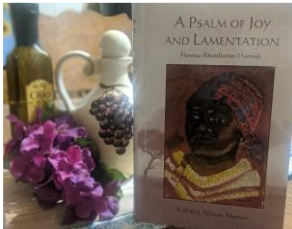
Reflections: Confession - social distancing is easy for me. Truth be told, I'm quite happy alone for long periods of time. Content in my rich inner world. So much so, that I can neglect people and things close to me. It is a weakness I need to guard against. Take my orchid plants. Both are gifts, given in love. For many months I neglected to water them. My husband Mel came along, noticed the lifeless plants, and gave them water. Look at them now! I'm so grateful that when I'm weak and lacking, others are not.



The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” - 1 Corinthians 12:21 NIV

Surprisingly comforted

March 26, 2020
Shared with LMC Staff



Reflections: Burden. Stress. Overload. Lack of sleep. Sound familiar? This morning I found myself standing in front of my bookcase just staring at my books. I don't even know why. All of a sudden a book's title jumped out at me, *A Psalm Of Joy And Lamentation*. Ah, our brothers and sisters from the global church have walked this way before us. They will help us and show us the way. That thought was like a trusted friend placing a comforting arm around my shoulder. Suddenly, I was wide awake and energized for the day.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. - 2 Corinthians 1:2-5 NIV

Blood, sweat and tears

March 31, 2020
Shared with LMC Staff

Reflections: Right in the middle of the world-wide coronavirus crisis, my Dad died. No, not from the coronavirus but from a long-term battle with heart and respiratory failure. Whenever there is acute sickness resulting in death; blood, sweat, and tears are unavoidable. The stark reality of humanity's vulnerability and mortality cannot be ignored. Tears are sometimes the sole companion of isolation, separation, and pain. Yet even when it seems a person weeps alone, the Holy Spirit is present. This morning, I was reminded of John exiled to the island of Patmos. Reminded of the heavenly vision imparted during a time of political, religious, and social upheaval. Reminded of how John wept and wept. No matter what today holds for you or me, may we join together in worshipping God because Worthy is the Lamb!



Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed to open the scroll and its seven seals." Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: "To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, forever and ever!" - Revelation 5: 5, 13 NIV

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Steps to overcoming fear

Allen Lehman, March 29, 2020

Rock Hill Mennonite Church, McConnellsburg, PA

A while back, I began to tune into my fear based life. Maybe it had to do with my July 2019 triple bypass heart surgery, but I began to monitor my emotions of fear/anxiety that acted like a hum in the back ground of my existence. This fear manifested itself in many ways like a fear of failure (a sermon that bombs), fear of what people will think, fear of conflict or fear of difficult church issues.

Maybe you are noticing fear in your own life. Today fear seems to dominate our culture. Phobias abound. Many are on anxiety medications. We have fear of sickness, fear of death, fear of loss of finances. Big fears from trauma like war, abuse in its many forms. PTSD. There is so much fear to go around that I believe it is an epidemic in this pandemic of COVID 19 which is now piled on top of all fears. How can we escape it?

Recently a colleague of mine experienced ten very hard days of Coronavirus sickness. She said that her greatest fear was not of death but what the long term affects might be and secondly, the fear of needing to enter the hospital system which she did not need. Even the Holy Spirit is noticing our dilemma and has authored at least ten Contemporary Christian songs that address this epidemic of fear. (*No Longer Slaves (to Fear)* - Bethel Music; *This is How I Fight My Battles* - Upper Room; *Fear Not* - Kristene DiMarco). Most noticeable to me is Zach Williams's song: *Fear is a Liar*. The chorus is wonderful:

<i>Fear, he is a liar</i>	<i>He will rob your rest</i>
<i>He will take your breath</i>	<i>Steal your happiness</i>
<i>Stop you in your steps</i>	<i>Cast your fear in the fire</i>
<i>Fear he is a liar</i>	<i>'Cause fear he is a liar</i>

I would like to speak to the issue of fear today. The Bible says in 2 Timothy 1:7 that "God did not give us a (an unholy spirit) of timidity, (or cowardice) but a (the Holy) spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline."

Two kinds of fear

There are only two spirits at work in the world today and that is the unholy, demonic spirit of Satan's origin or the Holy Spirit of God. Fear has its origin in Satan's dominion of darkness. Zach Williams says that "fear is a liar" and all lies come from the evil one's promptings, suggesting to us that God is a weakling and untrustworthy in all of life's struggles.

Now I want to be sure you understand that I understand we are not talking about good fear:

1. We are not talking about **holy fear** of God. This is a healthy fear. 2 Corinthians 5:11 says, "Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience."
2. Nor are we talking about **the fear of working out our salvation** with fear and trembling. Philippians 2:12b says, ". . . continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling."

3. Nor are we talking about the **healthy fear we have when confronted with a dangerous situation** when one is filled with fear and quick decisions need to be made either to fight, freeze or give flight.
4. Nor are we talking about a Christian's **normal fear and anxiousness of our own physical death, or the act of dying**. None of us relish that thought. But we know death/separation from God has been destroyed by Jesus' atoning death, resurrection and enthronement in heaven. Hebrews 2:14-15 says, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."

Today I want to focus on this bad, low grade anxiety, stress, worry and fear that may be controlling our lives more than we care to recognize. If not nipped in the bud, it blossoms into strongholds of the evil one when fear takes us to places we don't want to go.

It is helpful for me to think of this bad fear as being demonic. I find it helpful to name fear as having its origin in Satan himself. Romans 8:15 says, "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'"

Hence all the precursors to fear, namely worry, stress and anxiety, are also rooted in sinful thinking that God is just not adequate to take care of me; hence I need to do my share of carrying the responsibility for good outcomes. So if the spirit of cowardice in the face of life's struggles is not from the Holy Spirit, then that spirit needs to be resisted in the name of Jesus as James 4:7 encourages us. "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." We can overcome the demonic spirit of fear.

I'd like to suggest three steps in overcoming the unholy spirit of fear.

The first step is to simply own it

Jesus felt all our emotions and was tested in every way that we are being tested according to Hebrews 4:15 - "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin."

Jesus felt the initial suggestions to worry and to be stressed out from Satan, but he did not succumb. Gethsemane was real. At the end of the wilderness temptations, Scripture says that Satan left Jesus for a more opportune time. This was one of them! Luke 22:44 says, "And being **in anguish**, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." Jesus in this occasion identifies with us at a trauma level most of us never will need to experience. His blood pressure is high. Satan was in his face. The test was real. Nevertheless it was "not my will but thine be done."

Paul was not free from fear. Twice we see him owning his fears. 2 Corinthians 7:5 says, "For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within." 1 Corinthians 2:3 says, "I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling."

If Jesus and Paul could acknowledge that the onset of anguish and fear is a normal experience of the Christian life, then it is not sin for us to own our emotions.

Derrick Prince, author of *They Shall Expel Demons* has commented on 1 Peter 3:6 which says, "just as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear." (NAS) He called

this a "sudden fear" – "a moment of trauma at which time a demon of fear may enter your body and reside." Sarah could have been traumatized by the way her husband treated her and told Pharaoh of Egypt that she was his sister in order to spare his own life. Sarah did not fear. She is a woman of faith. Acknowledging fear and being frightened or traumatized by fear are two different things. There are fearful things that can happen to the best of God's children but acknowledging the emotion is not sinful.

It was December 2019; Laura and I were involved in a car accident. I can replay it in my mind anytime. I was going through an intersection at approximately 35 mph and a car turned into my lane without a moment to brake or turn away. We hit almost head on. Laura suffered a broken collar bone. This was a moment of sudden fear. I could have been traumatized by this accident. I still can, if I let fear in and take over. Fear is not from the Holy Spirit. I will not allow it in to rule me and determine my emotional life. I will acknowledge that it was a fearful time which caused some deeper reflection on my part concerning the love of God and his care.

Take an honest look at the high or low grade of fear that may stand behind many parts of your day - fear to make a decision, fear your children will get harmed, fear of talking to someone, worrying about a test result, fear your marriage will not hold together, fear that my sermon will bomb. Can we just admit Satan has more of a hold on our minds and emotions than we want to admit? Let's own our fears and name them. It is the only way to go to the next step. Can we at least say "I am having trouble believing that Jesus has my back on this one, will you pray for me?" Can you name one or twenty different areas in your life that has this constant drag on your emotional life? It's taking energy from you. It is damaging your health in some way.

Some people have made friends with their stress and anxiety. They name it and talk about it to others. They get attention and sympathy and in some strange way it serves them. They may not realize that their representation of Jesus to others is not winsome and inviting. Christ's yoke is not easy and his burdens are not light.

We can overcome the demonic spirit of fear. The first step is to simply own it.

The second step in overcoming fear is to pray it

Our Scripture here is Philippians 4:6-7 - "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Colossians 3:15 says, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace."

One of our spiritual rights as sons and daughters of God is to have peace be the predominant emotion ruling our lives. Much of my decision-making is determined by whether or not I have peace about it. It is an umpire for me. It is a good way to make decisions. When we are not at peace, we should ask the umpire of our hearts, "What goes here?"

Peace is one of the fruits or evidences of the Holy Spirit of God having full reign in my life. The Bible says when the Kingdom of God is present, righteousness, peace and joy is the predominant characteristic of the atmosphere. Peace of God is our goal. It will guard us against Satan's thoughts that he wants to drop in our minds which would create a foothold in our hearts. 2 Thessalonians 3:16 carries the same note, "Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way."

Let me say this again - it is helpful to me to think of bad fear as having its origin in Satan himself. Romans 8:15-16 indicates that losing our peace and being enslaved to fear is demonic activity.

"For you did not receive a (UNholy) spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the (HOLY) Spirit (that produces feelings, knowledge, a sense of) of sonship. And by him (the Holy Spirit) we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

The best way to get from anxiety and fear to peace is to turn your anxieties and fears into your prayer list. Pray them until the peace of God is in place in your emotional life. Our anxious junk must become our prayer concerns which we pray through until we arrive at the peace of God.

Someone has said that whatever it is that we fear, we will give allegiance to. Are you tired of being ruled by fear? That background constant hum of fear anxiety and stress? The old timers would say you need to pray through. I say pray until Jesus gives you his peace. Pray until we are confident that God's love includes caring for your immediate worries.

David prayed his way to peace many times. Here are some examples where the psalmist can teach us how to pray it (See Ps 3-5; 7; 9-13; 17; 25-27; 31; 35; 42-43; 54-59; 62-64; 69-71; 86; 94; 109; 120; 139-143). Use these psalms to learn how to rail against your enemies, which are not people (flesh and blood); but we war against principalities and powers in spiritual realms according to Ephesians 6:12. Jesus' model pray encourages us to pray daily "deliver us from the evil one." That is taking direct aim at the one who energizes fear-based living.

We can overcome the demonic spirit of fear. The first step in overcoming fear is to simply own it. The second step in overcoming fear is to pray it.

The third step is to displace it

We must make more time for faith to displace fear. We will never be able to wish or will it away. It is too big of an enemy. I am not one to bash nor blame believers for not having enough faith if they are not healed. I think that is spiritual abuse. I am interested in harmonizing my thinking with Jesus and how Jesus challenged his disciples in training to have more faith. It is of interest to me that at least 15 times in the Gospels, Jesus commends the common folk for their great faith. At least 10 times he calls out his disciples in training for having too little faith. Could that point to a problem among us that it is us who have been walking with Jesus as disciples that struggle in this area of stress, worry, anxiety and fear? Can it be that we have too little of faith?

I am looking at two "rock your boat" Scriptures in the Bible where Jesus chides his disciples in training by asking, "Where is your faith" and "Do you still have no faith?"

*Luke 8:22-25 - One day Jesus said to his disciples, "Let's go over to the other side of the lake." So they got into a boat and set out. As they sailed, he fell asleep. A squall came down on the lake, so that the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger. The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Master, Master, we're going to drown!" He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. **"Where is your faith?" he asked his disciples. In fear and***

amazement they asked one another, "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him."

*Mark 4:37-41 - A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. **Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion.** The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? **Do you still have no faith?**" They **were terrified** and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"*

If bad fear comes from a lack of faith, then how do we regularly get this life giving confidence or faith that God has my back 24/7? Is 1 John 4:18 trustworthy? "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."

Can it be that I can live 24/7 experiencing the love of God instead of feeling like I am being punished? Can it be that I can live 24/7 experiencing the love of God no matter what my fears are saying? Is fear a liar? What does it take to stay so close to Jesus that I rest 24/7 in his love, care and provision? How can I keep on receiving revelation from God that nothing separates me from his care 24/7? My head knows this but my emotions do not. If Jesus needed to hear the Father say two times in his earthly ministry, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased," how many more times do you and I need to hear the same voice in order to rest in his perfect love that cast out fear?

Ephesians 2:8-9 teaches us that faith is a gift. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast." How do we receive more faith since it is a gift? It has to be given by the Giver and I must get myself in a position to become the receiver.

When Peter came off with his ultra-powerful, faith-filled "You are the Christ, son of the living God," Jesus reminded him that he didn't come up with it on his own, "but by my Father in heaven."

*Matthew 16:17-19 - Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, **for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.** And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*

How did Peter get that life-changing revelation? By spending time with Jesus he was able to be filled with faith. It's no different for us. Romans 10:17 adds a piece to the puzzle answering the question - how do we displace fear with faith? It says that "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."

Resting in his love is the key to faith over fear. Worry, anxiety, stress and fear are love issues. We need regular downloads of faith, correction and encouragement from spending time with Jesus. We live in doubt about his love. Sometimes my lack of feeling loved by God has to do with not staying current with sin issues and with holding on to

grudges and unforgiveness. Anger issues, being unkind and so on, separate us from feeling loved and cared for. And so we live in a low grade hum of fear. Therefore we feel like God is constantly ready to zap us. Our conscience is not clean. Sin may be making us feel distant from God, but that too will come to light as we wait for downloads of faith. How do we make space for faith to replace fear?

Peter got revelatory insights and faith by spending time with Jesus. So can you! Your prayer and devotional life need never be a chore. You will not “do” your devotions if you know you are desperately in need of a download of faith for the day. You can now know that the only way to replace the devil’s ideas and foothold is to have faith dropped into your soul as a gift. You can’t earn it! But you can wait and receive it as you tarry.

Conclusion

May I humbly suggest something that is not new today, but hopefully it will be timely. We can overcome fear by leaning into these three steps.

- **Step one: Own your fears.** It is not sin to be aware of your emotions of stress, anxiety, worry and fear.
- **Step two: Pray your fears.** Your fears become your prayer list. Pray until the peace of God is experienced.
- **Step three: Displace your fears.** The opposite of fear is faith. Fear is best dealt with by displacing it with faith freely downloaded from spending time with Jesus and hearing his Word.

Worry, anxiety, stress and fear are omnipresent in the world and in the Church. COVID 19 is not going away soon. But we don’t have to fear it. Can we at least say that fear in general comes from the unholy spirit of Satan? Can we at least begin to own our entanglement in it? Can we pray it and displace it until revelation is gifted to us?

My prayer today for this congregation is that as of today, your fear levels will be substantially lowered. Noticeably lower! I pray that your countenance and representation of Jesus at home, at work, in your neighborhood and any place you go will be a winsome representation of Jesus and people will notice and may even ask, “What is this hope that is all over you?”

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Trusting in the God of peace

Karl Landis, April 12, 2020
Mount Joy Mennonite Church, Mount Joy, PA

Happy Easter! Today is the day when we are reminded in the most powerful way possible that no matter how awful things look, God's love and power are at work; that no matter how hopeless or discouraged we may feel, God can and will see us through; that no matter how confused we are about God's purposes, he will still astonish us with what he will accomplish. This year, we all need that reminder more deeply than we needed it a year ago.

If you know the Easter story, you know that even though he was innocent, Jesus was arrested, condemned, beaten, and killed. His enemies were relieved and his followers were devastated.

His resurrection from the dead totally astonished all of them! None of his followers ever expected to see him again on Friday or Saturday - so much so that they didn't even recognize him right away when they saw him on Sunday when he rose from the dead! It took a while for the truth to really sink in for his disciples, but when it did, it totally changed their lives, along with their understanding of who Jesus was and what he had been teaching and saying to them for the past three years. It finally started to make sense to them.

There was one more important development to come - the pouring out of the Holy Spirit to give them guidance, comfort, and power - but we'll get to that fifty days from now on Pentecost. On Easter Sunday we remember that Jesus has overcome and defeated sin and death and offers each of us hope and new life if we will only place our trust in his sacrifice on our behalf and begin to live out the new way of living made possible by his victory and by the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us.

This is a day to celebrate!

Hallelujah! HE IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED! No more mourning or darkness. This is a day for laughing and shouting! And feasting! At my house we changed the drape on our small cross from black to white to show this. Feasting means eating favorite foods: pancakes with maple syrup for breakfast (which we haven't had for two months), seafood soup for a main meal and cappuccino muffins for dessert.

I know some of us still feel like mourning because we're still under a stay at home order.

Some of us have lost work or are concerned about making ends meet. Some of us are sick or we know someone who is sick. I've heard stories about families that are separated right now because of work situations or for safety and quarantine reasons. If this isn't happening to you, it's happening to people around you.

If you've driven by our church building recently, you may have noticed that we've tried to offer encouragement to our neighbors by adding three signs to the rotation on our road sign. Maybe one of these will be especially meaningful to you today:

- God is our strong refuge - Psalm 71
- Jesus: I give you my peace - John 14
- God will watch over you - Psalm 91

I want to offer you another one that is particularly appropriate for Easter Sunday. It's at the very end of the book of Hebrews. Hebrews is a letter written to a group of people who were struggling in the face of suffering, struggling with discouragement. We don't know who wrote this letter, but its main emphasis is the uniqueness and majesty and finality of Jesus Christ. It's about how Jesus is the culmination of everything that came before him – angels, Moses, the old covenant and the whole priestly system. The writer assures people who are discouraged by suffering that they can have full confidence in God's Son and in what he has accomplished for us. He is the beginning and the end of all things.

Here's how the letter ends. Receive it as God's word to us today. This is my prayer for you and for all of us:

*²⁰ Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, ²¹ equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.
- Hebrews 13:20-21*

- "Now may the God of peace . . ." the God who brings peace, and for whom peace is part of his character.
- ". . . who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus . . ." God demonstrated his power and the uniqueness of Jesus in his resurrection from dead.
- ". . . that great Shepherd of the sheep . . ." echoes of Psalm 23, "the Lord is my shepherd" and Jesus in John 10, "I am the good shepherd."
- May the God of peace . . . "equip you with everything good for doing his will . . ."

My prayer for each of us and all of us is that we would have what we need to face the challenges of today, of the week ahead. Trusting that the God of peace will equip us with everything good for doing his will.

One of the gifts of this season of having most things cancelled is a deeper awareness of our dependence on God and on each other! Lean in to that. It's always true, but we are now experiencing the reality of it more deeply.

My prayer is that our trust in God's love and grace and power would be deep enough and sturdy enough to let him worry about what we will need next week or next month. "May the God of peace . . . equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

This is not the first time Christians have faced widespread sickness and death. We just never expected it to happen to us or in our time. Like you, I imagined that our health system had answers and remedies for pretty much any problem. And yet here we are.

Facing a health crisis for which our best answer is to hide from it. To stay away from anyone who has the disease. If you have it, to stay away from anyone who doesn't. No immunity, no vaccines to protect us, yet. We don't even have a way to know for sure who has it and who doesn't or exactly how it spreads from one person to another.

This same thing has happened more times in the past than we realize – a strange new disease, people start dying, not sure how it's transmitted and the best strategy is social distancing. Here are some examples:

- 260 AD: A pandemic started in Alexandria, Egypt, killing up to one fourth of people in the Roman world
- 1300s: The bubonic plague swept through Europe, killing up to one third of population
- There were several other rounds of this over the next three hundred years!
- 1918: The Spanish flu worldwide killed up to fifty million people

Each time this has happened, Christians distinguished themselves by not panicking, by caring for the sick and needy, by caring for widows and orphans, by trusting in God's power and grace - even when facing their own sickness or death.

Here's how Martin Luther put it when another round of the bubonic plague hit Wittenberg, Germany, where he was living in the middle 1500s.

I shall ask God [to have mercy on us and] protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine and take it. I shall avoid places and [people] where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and [risk] inflicting and polluting others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence.

If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid [any] place or person, but I will go freely [wherever I can be helpful].

If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me. I have done what he has expected of me, and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others.

This is a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God.

I want to leave you with a story that was new to me this week. A story about yet another round of the bubonic plague flaring up again, one hundred years after Martin Luther, this time in a village in north central England called Eyam in 1665. Eyam was a village of no more than 800 people in 1665 (estimates range from 400 to 800).

The plague first claimed the life of the tailor, but spread quickly to his family and neighbors. The first impulse of most people was to leave town to get away from the disease. The problem is that they didn't know who was already infected and it had not yet spread to other local villages. So if they all fled Eyam, they might very well be touching off a new wave of the disease in their whole region.

The town's Anglican minister persuaded the people of Eyam to stay put and not to flee to prevent the plague from spreading to other towns and villages even though they all knew many of them would die. But they agreed to serve the people around them by quarantining themselves until the disease had passed. They put a ring of stones around the village so everyone could see a physical line they shouldn't cross. People from neighboring villages left food and other supplies by the stones so they wouldn't have to enter Eyam.

They held their worship services outside with families standing at a distance from each other. Social distancing. It took a year for the plague to spend itself in the village of Eyam. The suffering was terrible. More than 250 people died, including the wife of the Anglican minister. One woman, Elizabeth Hancock, buried her husband and all 6 of her children who all died within eight days of each other. Whole families were wiped out. Guess that about half of the villagers died in that year.

But the brave and courageous people of Eyam stood together and prevented the spread of the plague to the people around them. The present day minister in Eyam says "it was definitely the hope of heaven that kept them going in the face of incredible fear, unimaginable uncertainty, and a mounting death toll.

I am inspired by the fierce courage of these people. What a clear example of the self-sacrificing love of our Lord Jesus who said, "There is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friend (neighbor)." Jesus did this for us when he died on the cross. The people of Eyam did that when faced with the plague.

We are reminded today that, thanks be to God, those who die believing in him are raised to new life. Our hope, our trust, our faith is firmly grounded in the Lord Jesus who said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die" - John 11:25-26.

Friends, I urge you this morning to place your hope and your trust in the love and the power of God that raised our Lord Jesus from the dead.

I urge you to rest in the confidence that he will either provide you with a way out of your circumstances or with a way through them.

And I offer you this prayer of blessing: "May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, [may he] equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." Happy Easter! And God bless you!

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Grieving the gap, holding hope

Karl and Nita Landis, April 26, 2020
Mount Joy Mennonite Church, Mount Joy, PA

KARL: Hello everyone, and Happy Easter season! This is the season each year when we celebrate the amazing joy of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and all that that means for us and for the whole world. So our Easter messages so far have reminded us of the hope we have in the grace and power of God. The joy of Easter underlies all of who we are and all of what we do as followers of Jesus!

NITA: But this Easter season, the world is carrying a heavy load of COVID-19 pain and loss and fear that feels more like the *grief* of Good Friday and Holy Saturday than the triumph of the resurrection. And so this year we have an opportunity to learn more about feeling grief and holding hope at the same time, living in Good Friday and Easter Sunday simultaneously.

KARL: We usually think of grief as the painful emotions we feel when someone we love dies.

A helpful, broader definition of grief is the sense of painful loss we feel whenever there is a gap between what we want and what is. It is the pain we feel in the gap between what we expected and what actually happens.

NITA: The truth is that all of us will experience many losses in our lifetimes; even those of us with enough health and wealth to fix most of them. These losses hurt. There's no way around it. Learning what to do with our grief is a significant part of our journey with Christ.

KARL: When we use the broad definition of grief as the gap between what we wanted and what is, we can easily see how much grief is swirling in our world right now. There's grief in the gap between wanting our nation to be flourishing, but knowing that many, many people have lost their jobs and their source of income. **NITA:** Between wanting to be with our friends, but needing to stay at home. **KARL:** Or between wanting to stay home like other people, but needing to go into risky or stressful work situations. **NITA:** Between wanting to play at the playground, but Mom reminding you the playground is closed. **KARL:** Between wanting to enjoy your graduation or wedding day, but having the event cancelled or postponed. **NITA:** Between wanting to hug your elderly parents or grandparents, but not being allowed into the place they live.

KARL: And for many of us, these COVID-related griefs pile on top of grief we were already carrying. The pain of the gap between wanting a baby brother really bad, but not having one yet. **NITA:** Between waking up determined to get along with your brothers and sisters today, but fighting before breakfast. **KARL:** Between wanting clarity about what career to pursue, but having only confusion. **NITA:** Between wanting to feel loved and connected, but living with loneliness. Between wanting to be free of anxiety or addiction, but still being stuck in it.

KARL: It's important for us to pause long enough to feel and acknowledge whatever grief is clouding our days right now. **NITA:** A lot of us avoid grieving, though. Why is

that? **KARL:** Because it hurts and we don't like pain. **NITA:** Because many of us were taught when we were growing up that stopping to grieve is for weak people; that strong people buck up, get over things quickly, and move on.

KARL: Men often feel a particular pressure to do this. We also avoid grieving because we think faith-filled, mature Christians honor God by being always cheerful, always positive, never grieving

***NITA:** If we refuse to grieve, and I think it is the tendency of many of us to try to skip over grieving, we are vulnerable to physical illnesses that occur when grief gets stuck in the body rather than being released as well as the depression and despair that can grow inside when grief is unprocessed.*

KARL: We might fail to notice and respond to the pain of other people if we are always pushing grief away. And we might also fail to receive the comfort that God promises to those who mourn (Matthew 5:4).

NITA: If you are a parent, especially one with children at home, realize that you are teaching your children what to do with their grief by how you handle your own grief. You might want to think about what you are communicating to your kids about grief.

KARL: So what are we to do with our grief, with the pain in the gap between what we wanted and what is? **NITA:** Biblically, we are invited to grieve; to pay attention to what hurts and to express our pain. **KARL:** In Ecclesiastes 3 it says, "There is a time for everything ... a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance." (Ecclesiastes 3:1,4). **NITA:** Jesus himself wept in John 11 at the grave of Lazarus and in Luke 19 for his people in Jerusalem (John 11:35 and Luke 19:41).

KARL: Jesus-followers who are maturing into emotionally healthy spirituality know that scripture invites us to turn toward our grief rather than run away from it or stuff it.

***NITA:** Jesus modeled honestly facing all of human experience, including his grief when he faced the gap between what he wanted and what was.*

KARL: He wanted to avoid the unbelievable pain and shame of crucifixion, but God's plan was that Jesus die, offering forgiveness.

NITA: The Bible gives us a particular form of prayer, a way of interacting with God, for times when we are grieving. This form of prayer makes up at least one-third of the Hebrew prayer book that we know as the book of Psalms. It's called *lament*. It sounds like this:

"We had not forgotten you or been false to your covenant, O God. Our hearts had not turned back; our feet had not strayed from your path. But you crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals, a desolate place, and covered us over with deep darkness." (Psalm 44:17-19)

KARL: "How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?" (Psalm 13:1-2). **NITA:** "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!?" which was Jesus' prayer on the cross (from Psalm 22).

***KARL:** Prayers of lament give us a way to take our grief to God. Lament gives us a way to keep our conversation with God going when we are full of sorrow, frustration, or anxiety.*

NITA: Right now it would be perfectly appropriate to pray, "How long, O Lord, must we be afflicted by COVID-19? How long must we stay away from each other and wear masks? How long must we wonder what will happen to the economy and every day feel the sorrow of being separated?"

KARL: When we are lamenting, God does not frown and say, "You need to go to your room and come back when you can be pleasant." **NITA:** NO! God says, "Keep talking, daughter. Give it to me straight up son. I love you. I can handle your heartache."

KARL: This feels strange to some of us. To some of us it feels strange in the way that putting your shoe on the wrong foot feels strange. **NITA:** And to some of us it feels strange to the point of seeming just wrong to dare to talk to the King of the universe so honestly. **KARL:** We might think it's disrespectful or amounts to the complaining that made God so angry with the Israelites in the OT.

NITA: But here's the difference between complaint and lament, expressed so well by author Ann Voskamp: "Complaint is the bitter howl of unbelief in any benevolent God in this moment, a distrust in the love-beat of the Father's heart." **KARL:** "Lament is a cry of belief in a good God, a God who has His ear to our hearts, a God who transfigures the ugly into beauty."

What gaps are you grieving in our strange new reality? Are you praying prayers of lament? Or are you simply trying to distract yourself? Keeping your distance from what hurts? **NITA:** Because here's the thing, as mature, emotionally healthy followers of Jesus, we grieve.

We need to make time for grieving.

KARL: We just grieve differently. We grieve, but not as those who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

NITA: In biblical terms, HOPE is confident expectancy that God will keep his promises. It's not just a wish. It's confident expectancy that God is with us and that God is for us. **KARL:** The writer of Hebrews said, "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure" (6:19). What does an anchor do? It keeps a boat in place or connected to its place even when the wind and the water around it are choppy and when they are pushing and pulling against it.

***NITA:** One of the spiritual practices that has helped me to hold on to hope when I am grieving is memorizing the promises of God.*

I don't know about you, but for years I focused a lot more on the commandments of Scripture than on the promises. When life got hard in my early thirties, I started waking up to the promises, and I started memorizing them and saying them to myself throughout the day. As I walked down the stairs into a day that felt overwhelming, I'd speak God's word to my soul -

"So do not fear, for I am with you. Do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you ... strengthen you and help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." (Isaiah 41:10, NIV)

And now, in a time when none of us knows how this pandemic will play out and what suffering or change may lie ahead of us, we can speak God's word to our souls:

***KARL:** "When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you."
(Isaiah 43:2, NLT)*

NITA: As our spirits lay hold of the promises, our hope - our confident expectancy of God's presence and help - is strengthened. We can't see what God's help will look like, but we know that it will be given and we will not drown or be consumed, no matter what comes.

KARL: More than six hundred years ago, there lived a woman we call Julian. We don't know her real name, but we call her Julian because in her later years, she lived in a small room connected to St. Julian's church in Norwich, England. Norwich was a vibrant city, wealthy from raising sheep and producing wool.

NITA: When Julian was only six years old, people in her city started getting a really serious illness called the Black Death, known to us as bubonic plague. Julian survived, but within a year, three quarters of the people in her city were dead. The plague hung around for three years, and her city came to a standstill and lost its income from the wool trade.

KARL: Eventually and very slowly, the city recovered. But thirteen years later, when Julian was nineteen, the Black Death returned and more people died. **NITA:** Six years after that, when she was twenty-five, it came back again! Along with a cattle plague and a bad harvest.

KARL: When Julian was thirty years old, she got very sick soon after Easter. She almost died several times. Her family called their pastor to come pray with her. He brought with him a figure of Jesus on the cross that he held up for her to look at. As she looked, she began to have visions, seeing wonderful things in her mind, as clearly as if they were real.

NITA: Julian had a total of sixteen visions during her slow recovery from her illness. When she got better, she recorded the visions in a book called *Revelations of Divine Love* which is now considered a classic of Christian literature. One of the things

she heard Jesus say to her in one of the visions has become a well-known sentence that has helped many people to hold hope -

“All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing(s) shall be well.”

KARL: Given all the suffering that Julian and the people of her time endured, I find it amazing that she could be so open to living into the truth of - **NITA:** “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing(s) shall be well.”

KARL: As Julian pondered the meaning of the visions God gave her, she wrote:

“God wants us to pay attention to his words, and always to be strong in our certainty [that we will not be overcome], in well-being and in woe, for he loves us and delights in us, and so he wishes us to love him and delight in him and trust greatly in him, and all will be well.”

Friends, as wise, mature followers of Jesus, we grieve at the same time that we hold on to hope. In this time of worldwide, and personal, suffering and uncertainty we urge you to Grieve! Pray prayers of lament. Be honest about the grief you are experiencing. Don't dismiss the grief of people around you. It's real and it's part of facing great loss.

NITA: But we also urge you to Hope! Hold confidently to God's loving presence and promises. We know that the God who raised Jesus from the dead lives within us, guides us, and encourages us. So we do not need to fear. God is with us. We are not afraid, for God is for us. He will strengthen us and help us. He will uphold us with his righteous right hand.

KARL: So as you navigate your grief in the gaps between what you want and what is, may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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Why does God allow pandemics?

John Rutt, May 3, 2020
Martindale District, PA

Introduction

Good morning to all of you. Our topic this morning is very relevant, but I hope you are not tired of it. It's always appropriate and right to ask, "What does the Bible say?" What does the Bible say about the Coronavirus?

We're all facing a viral villain we can't see, an invisible and treacherous enemy that we may feel is silently stalking us. As people talk to us about the times we are in, do they see Jesus in our attitude & actions, or panic?

Are we walking in the footsteps of Jesus this morning? Is your life - is my life - one that brings glory to God? Is my life one that is filled with love for people? Is my life one of unwavering loyalty to Jesus Christ? Does my life reflect that God is still in charge?

A mother once wrote, "My three-year-old was on my heels everywhere I went. And whenever I stopped to do something & then turned back around, I'd almost trip over him. Time & time again I patiently suggested fun activities to keep him occupied.

"But he simply smiled an innocent smile & said, 'Oh that's all right, Mommy. I'd rather be in here with you.' Then he continued to bounce happily along behind me. After stepping on his toes for the fifth time, I began to lose patience.

"When I asked him why he was acting this way, he looked up with sweet green eyes & said, 'Well, Mommy, my Sunday school teacher told me to walk in Jesus' footsteps. But I can't see Him, so I'm walking in yours.'"

When people walk in our footprints, where do they end up?

Maybe we're not doing so well. We're finding it difficult to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

The images of empty shelves and empty streets almost seem apocalyptic. Since this can all be unnerving and unsettling, we want to ask and answer this question, "What does the Bible say about the coronavirus?"

A couple of details.... I just want to let everyone know these thoughts are not all original with me. God has brought me a kludge of people speaking truth to me.

This is a very relevant question. I've been asked this several times and according to Google, this question has been one of its trending searches.

This is always the right question. Whenever we're faced with issues, struggles, or questions, we should always ask, "What does the Bible say about this topic?"

*Whenever we're faced with issues, struggles, or questions, we should always ask,
"What does the Bible say about this topic?"*

Let me be totally upfront and say the Bible doesn't specifically mention the coronavirus. Now, that's a short sermon isn't it?

Well, most of you know better than to expect briefness from me, so let's dig into God's Word and see what we find. You might want to buckle up because we jump around quite a bit.

While the terms coronavirus or pandemic are not found in Scripture, the Bible does use Hebrew and Greek words for pestilence and plagues approximately 127 times.

As we survey the Scriptures, we'll discover four basic truths for today.

1. This world is different than the one God created

Viruses and pestilences are part of living in a fallen world. Before Adam and Eve made their voluntary choice to rebel against God, there were no earthquakes, hurricanes, natural disasters, coronaviruses or diseases.

But, when they sinned, creation was cursed and the earth became an environment of disease and death. Genetic disorders and multiple diseases have been unleashed to do their work of destruction. Pain and death are now part of the human experience.

Listen to God's description of the consequences of their decision in Genesis 3:17-18: "Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you..."

Adam and Eve's sin resulted in personal guilt and shame, alienation from God and others, and the disruption of nature itself. This sin was so contagious it was passed on to each of us according to Romans 5:12: "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned."

If we don't fully understand what happened in Genesis 3, we won't be able to make sense of sin or suffering. Adam and Eve are ground zero for the contagious spread of plagues, pestilence and pandemics. They are the epicenter for the sin virus which has infected all of us.

It's important to realize this is not the first time the world has faced a pandemic. Some historians suggest the Black Plague wiped out over half of Europe's population. In 1916, polio caused 6,000 deaths in the U.S. and in 1918, millions were infected with the Spanish flu, with millions of casualties worldwide. It is said to have affected over 25% of Americans in some way.

Why Does God Allow Pandemics? "The Bible tells us God's original creation was perfect. Pandemics are a result of the fall."

The second thing we can learn:

2. God can use sickness

God has used pandemics in the past. The Bible gives many examples of God using disease and disaster to accomplish His divine and sovereign purposes.

My friend shared six ways God can use sickness today.

1. Violation of health rules
2. Personal sin
3. Testing
4. Chastening
5. Suffering as part of humanity (we live in a fallen world)
6. Old age

I think of Miriam, the sister of Moses, who was inflicted with a terrible, infectious disease because of her unrepentant heart and rejection of God's leader (Numbers 12:1-15). For the sake of time, I've selected just a few of the passages that speak of epidemics or plagues.

- In Exodus 9:1-3, God uses powerful plagues to execute judgment against Egypt, and to draw the Israelites closer to Himself: "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, 'Let my people go, that they may serve me. For if you refuse to let them go and still hold them, behold, the hand of the LORD will fall with a very severe plague upon your livestock that are in the field, the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds, and the flocks.'" In verse 14, we see God did this to demonstrate His power: "So that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth."
- In Leviticus, the nation of Israel is given commands concerning how to deal with plagues and pestilence. The most important directive from God is for His people to repent. Interestingly, God also gives instruction about personal hygiene and social distancing in combating infectious diseases. In Leviticus 13:3-6, the infected person is to be isolated for seven days and if the disease has not gotten worse, he is to be quarantined an additional seven days. Where have we heard the importance of isolating for 14 days? In verse 46, we read, "He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp."
- In 2 Samuel 24:15, because of King David's sin, we read, "So the LORD sent a pestilence on Israel from the morning until the appointed time. And there died of the people from Dan to Beersheba 70,000 men."
- In Ezekiel 5:12, the nation of Judah is warned: "A third part of you shall die of pestilence and be consumed with famine in your midst."

Let me be quick to say, I don't presume to know if COVID-19 is God's judgment on mankind or not, but sin can have some immediate judgment and consequences. But consider Genesis 4:10 where God said to Cain: "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground." Is it the blood of over 61 million unborn babies that cry out against America today?

Society is so concerned about Covid-19 deaths, but who is talking about the over one million abortions annually in this country, which are considered in some states "essential, & life sustaining"? How absurd!

In 2016, the abortion ratio was 186 abortions per 1,000 live births. For Covid-19 we have to be below 50 new infections per 100,000 people before we can even do normal life things, not even talking deaths, just infections. Why does that not make the news headlines? May God have mercy on us all.

Why Does God Allow Pandemics? "God uses sickness to accomplish his purposes"

Let's summarize:

It's always relevant and right to ask, "What does the Bible Say?"

1. This world is different than the one God created. (Sickness was not part of God's creation.)

2. God can use sickness.

The third thing we can learn:

3. God will unleash a pandemic of disease in the future

The Bible says in Luke 21:11, "There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences." Jesus described pestilence as one of the signs of the "last days" of human history.

A few weeks ago, multiple news reports came the same day. These headlines appeared that gave me cause for pause...

- Awakening Volcanic Region in Iceland 'Could Cause Disruption for Centuries'
- Magnitude 4.1 Earthquake Hits Outside Fresno
- New, Larger Wave of Locusts Threatens Millions in Africa

Interestingly, the article about locusts referenced the Bible: "While much of the world focuses on the [coronavirus] pandemic...East Africa is battling the worst invasion of desert locusts in decades — a months-long 'scourge of biblical proportions.'"

I'm sure you've noticed despite our wonderful technology and many scientific advances, we have been powerless to stop volcanoes, earthquakes, locusts and pestilences, right?

Now, let's go to the Book of Revelation, where we can read twelve references to plagues and pestilence as part of the Great Tribulation period. Here are only three of them:

- 6:8: "And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth."
- 15:1: "Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished."
- 18:8: "For this reason her plagues will come in a single day, death and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her."

This leads to another question. Does this mean we are living in the last days? Here's one more short answer, "Yes, we are."

Biblically, the end times or "last days" began with the Ascension of Christ and will last until the Second Coming. The Bible uses terms like, "last days," "later times," or "the last hour" to refer to events surrounding the return of Christ.

Perhaps you've wondered, "Is the Coronavirus in Bible Prophecy?" Many pastors have tackled this subject recently. Some of what I'll share reflects insights from others (David Jeremiah & Tony Evans).

Doesn't it feel like this pandemic is something we read about in the Bible? Or to say it another way: this is the most apocalyptic thing that has ever happened to us in our lifetime. Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 24:3-8: "As He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?'

And Jesus answered them, 'See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are.... but the beginning of the birth pains.'"

I like how David Jeremiah defines a biblical sign: "An event, or symbol, or object, or place, or a person, whose existence indicates something important in God's plan for the future."

I recognize there are different views of future events among Christians. The Bible tells us this will come to a conclusion when Jesus Christ raptures born-again believers to go to Heaven with Him.

My understanding is, God's calendar could have the rapture of His church happening at any time. There may be no additional announcement. The Bible says without any warning, Jesus will return to take the born-again Christians to Heaven. Trust me...you don't want to be left behind!

While the Coronavirus may not be a sign we are in the Tribulation, it is a sign for today. What is happening in the present is a forerunner to what will happen in the future. Here are six things this pandemic teaches us.

- The vulnerability of everyone
- The credibility of the Bible
- The uncertainty of life
- The shortage of hope
- The competence of Jesus
- The urgency of salvation

So, Why Does God Allow Pandemics? "It is a sign for us for today"

It's always relevant and right to ask, "What does the Bible say?"

1. This world is different than the one God created.
2. God can use sickness.
3. God will unleash a pandemic in the future.

There's one more truth the Bible is crystal clear on:

4. Repentance is always the right response

To repent means "to turn back from sin and return to what is right." The idea is to change your mind about the direction you are heading and turn to go the right way. Another way to say it is this: to change your beliefs, so your behavior changes.

I read something that stuck with me: "God has put the whole world in a time-out!" Whenever a father puts a child in a time-out, it is because they want to change a child's beliefs and or behavior.

"The coronavirus is a merciful wake-up call to be ready for Christ's return... it is God's 'slap on the table' call for all of us to repent and realign our lives with the unlimited worth of Jesus Christ.

"Disasters are a gracious summons from God to repent and be saved while there is still time. I feel that is God's message for the world in this coronavirus outbreak. He is calling the world to repentance while there's still time."

I believe God is giving us all a time-out so He can call two groups of people to repent: lukewarm believers and unbelievers.

(A) Lukewarm believers. Listen to Joel 2:12-13: "'Yet even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.' Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and He relents over disaster."

Many of us like quoting the promise given to Israel in 2 Chronicles 7:14: "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land." God has certainly humbled us, hasn't He? Let's make sure we are seeking Him and repenting from our wicked ways.

It's interesting what God says in verse 13, which we don't usually quote: "When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people..." When drought and locusts and pestilence come, God calls His people to repentance. His difficulties always have the goal of repentance, restoration, and realignment.

(B) Unbelievers. I'm encouraged by a recent poll which shows one-in-five non-Christians report the crisis is causing them to read the Bible and listen to sermons online! The YouVersion Bible App reports Bible reading on its app from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday was 54% higher than it was for the same period last year. Easter Sunday was the highest in their history!

Other polls show that 9 in 10 pastors believe current events reveal we are getting closer to the return of Christ with the majority believing Jesus will return in our lifetime. This reminds me of something Ray Pritchard often says, "Live as if Jesus may come today, because one day you'll be right."

Why Else Does God Allow Pandemics? It is a "wake up call."

Conclusion

This pandemic is bad; Hell is far worse. I beg with you to repent and receive Christ now, so you don't get left behind and have to face the outpouring of God's righteous wrath.

Life is short. Hell is hot. And eternity is a long time. See this crisis as God's loving wake-up call. Pastor Nelson had a reminder on Parkview's Facebook page recently about not wasting this pandemic. Don't waste this crisis...this is an opportunity for us all to turn to God and prepare our hearts to stand before Him – before it's too late.

We must remind the lukewarm and the lost about the shortness of our earthly lives and the endlessness of eternity. If we are not prepared to deal with a virus, what will we do when we face the Day of Judgment?"

- If you're a lukewarm believer, repent and return to Christ.
- If you're a lost unbeliever, repent and receive Christ.

If you're ready to repent and receive Jesus Christ, would you close your eyes and pray this prayer? This will be the best decision you ever make!

Jesus, I admit I'm a sinner. I repent by turning from how I've been living and trust what You did on the Cross when You died in my place, shedding Your blood to pay the price for all the wrong that I've done.

I believe You died on the Cross and rose again on the third day, showing Your victory over sin, Satan, death and fear. Now I receive You into my life. I open the door to You, save me from my sins. I want to be born again. Amen

If you prayed this prayer for the first time, or if this was a rededication, tell someone today. God can use your family and friends to help you stand firm.

Closing prayer

Father God, we give you thanks for the opportunity each one of us has to live life today. We humble ourselves before you and confess we are nothing without you. Jesus, we give you thanks for the reminders the Coronavirus brings to us. May we consider our relationship with you, and make preparations today for where we will spend eternity. Father forgive our doubts and strengthen our weaknesses. We pray Jesus for the needs of everyone hearing this message today, may the Holy Spirit minister to them right now, and may you draw all of us into the center of your perfect will.

Benediction

“Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding great joy. To the only wise God our savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever.” Amen

The Coronavirus pandemic is a sickness being allowed by God as a sign and wake-up call for us. May we carefully consider our future destiny.

May God be with you until we meet again. God Bless You.

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God's purpose in letting us be shaken

William Higgins, May 17, 2020
New Danville Mennonite Church, Lancaster, PA

A number of weeks ago I saw an article entitled, "*The coronavirus pandemic is making earth vibrate less*" (CNN April 2013, by Harmeet Kaur). It talked about how since people were staying home and not using cars, trains and buses, seismologists were noticing that the earth's upper crust was actually moving less. I thought that it was very interesting that human activity can have this kind of effect on the earth, that we make it shake! But I also thought that in a way the earth is moving and shaking much more than I have ever seen it shake before. This is the kind of –

Shaking

– that Psalm 46:1-3 speaks of when it says,

"¹ God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. ² Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, ³ though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling."

This kind of shaking has to do with events that happen that leave us stunned or even traumatized. When life changes in ways that we never imagined. When things happen that we thought never would.

And that's exactly what has happened because of the coronavirus pandemic. Under the stay at home order **almost everything has come to a screeching halt**. Large cities seem deserted. Even around here (in Lancaster County), as I drove to work in mid-March through April (I work in an isolated office) there was hardly any traffic on the streets. It's like something from a post-apocalyptic movie. Businesses are closed. Schools have closed during the school year. Sporting events are shut down. Churches have stopped meeting.

And life has changed. We have to social distance. We have to wear masks. When I drove down to Georgia in April to care for my father, I actually had to check to see if there were curfews or mandatory quarantines that would stop me from getting there. Life has changed. Many have lost jobs. And for those who have jobs things are very different with many working from home. Many are lonely now, not being able to be with friends and family. Some are experiencing mental health issues that are heightened by the stresses of this situation. Something as simple as getting groceries is a far different experience than it was just a few months ago, as is also getting food from a restaurant. The world economy has been devastated. And, of course, underlying all of this, many have become sick or have lost their lives.

Such unprecedented change. And it came on us so quickly. **It can leave us feeling dazed.** It seems like the very earth under our feet has crumbled and our stability and equilibrium is gone. And the deep waters are raging all around us, as Psalm 46 pictures.

The question I'm asking is –

What is God's purpose in all this?

Let's turn to Hebrews 12:26-29. This is a passage that talks about God shaking things and so let's see what we can learn about God's purpose in shaking things.

²⁶At that time his (the Lord's) voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens."

The writer begins with a reference to the giving of the Law in Exodus 19:18. This verse says, "Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly." So, when God gave the ten commandments, God shook the earth. Next he refers to Haggai 2:6 with the phrase that begins, "yet once more ..." This passage is taken to refer to the final judgment. And in this case God will shake not only the earth, but also the heavens.

Hebrews 12:27 is the writer's exposition of Haggai 2:6 –

²⁷This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken – that is, things that have been made – in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.

So, on the final day God will shake all of creation; all that God has made; heaven and earth.

And this shaking will be a kind of **sorting process** whereby anything that can be shaken – the old creation – will be removed. It will be no more. And only those things that cannot be shaken will remain – a reference to the new creation.

Scripture talks about this coming event in several places. For instance in Isaiah 65:17 the Lord says, "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind." And Isaiah 66:22 seems to be in the writer's mind, because it says, "The new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me." The same key word and idea.

²⁸Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, ²⁹for our God is a consuming fire.

So yes, anything in this old creation, the world that we currently live in, can be shaken. But **God and God's kingdom (or new creation) cannot be shaken.** God and his new creation will remain forever.

I wanted us to look at these verses because we learn here what God is up to when he allows us to be shaken. **God uses shaking to show us what is ultimate and eternal – and what is not.** To rephrase the last part of Hebrews 12:27: God uses shaking "in order that the things that cannot be shaken may" – it says "remain." But since we're not yet at the final judgment, we can insert "be seen" or "revealed to us." When things are shaken we are enabled to see the difference between what is temporary and what is eternal. We are enabled to see the difference between what has to do with this earthly life and what has to do with God's kingdom.

Now in the examples in Hebrews, God is the one doing the shaking – in the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai and on the final day. With regard to the pandemic I cannot say that God is directly *causing* it. But I can say that God has allowed it, because it's

happening. God has allowed us to be shaken as individuals and as a people. And, as we know, whatever God allows God will use for God's own purposes and even for our good, as Romans 8:28 teaches us.

So since this is so, let me end with what I see as –

The message for us

– in all of this. Because of the pandemic we are reminded in a big way that **1. Anything in this world can be shaken.** Things do not always stay the same; there are no guarantees. Whether it's our daily routines of life; our jobs and career path; our health; our earthly relationships; or our life goals and plans for the future. All the things that we take for granted and so often give us a sense of comfort and stability – all these can change so quickly and even disappear. So this shaking shows us that they are not ultimate or eternal. This is the sorting or revealing process I've been talking about. The pandemic makes this clear to us.

2. We shouldn't be overly focused on or attached to these earthly things. All of the things I've mentioned – jobs, plans, earthly relationships, comfortable routines, health – they are all good things, even blessings of God. But like with all created things we can turn them into idols that we put in place of God. We become overly devoted to them; excessively absorbed with them. We orient our lives around them. We live our lives for these things and not for God. We can get so caught up in these things that twenty years pass by without a thought. It's like, where did my life go?

What I'm saying is that we can love them more than God or instead of God. And the shaking that's going on can reveal this to us. It can be a wakeup call. It can give us an opportunity to make some hard choices to rightly order our lives once again – or maybe for the first time.

So let's not just rush ahead to try to get through the pain and suffering of this shaking. There is pain and suffering. But in the midst of the shaking:

- Let God challenge you.
- Let God sort through some things in your heart and life.
- Let God reveal some things to you about where your true loves are.

And then finally, **3. We should supremely be focused on and love what cannot be shaken.** As Christians we know God. And in the words of Hebrews 12:28, "we have received a kingdom that cannot be shaken." We have this now! The world doesn't have this. But we do. And this should be the foundation and center of our lives. And that we have what is unshakeable in our lives should lead us to praise God. As Hebrews 12:28 also says, "thus (since this is so) let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe."

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Advancing as one

**Dave Musser, May 24, 2020
Erb Mennonite Church, Lititz, PA**

Greetings brothers and sisters in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Unity without diversity is merely uniformity. What is unity? We're going to look at that this morning. How can we remain one? How can we remain united in the midst of decisions, specifically about reopening our congregations? In case you haven't noticed there are a lot of opinions about how to reopen and what to do. And people suggesting that they won't come if certain things aren't met. Unity without diversity is merely uniformity.

As differences congregate in a congregation, many times people are driven to leave or choose to leave - wherever there are differences of opinion or differences of practice. And what we end up with is uniformity. However, when differences congregate and a vision and mission unifies diversity then we can have unity.

The church has gone through, over the centuries, many opportunities to split and divide and too often has taken that opportunity. Worshipping in the midst of diversity is difficult. It takes true humility. We're gonna look at that this morning.

Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:1-7 -

"Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you've been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all. However, he has given each one of us a special gift . . ."

The fact that he mentions here "each one of us" begins to mention diversity. We're all different. Races are different, probably based upon the pain and suffering that some races have experienced more than others, perhaps. And so this special gift, this grace that God gives is expressed in different ways. We all have different families of origin; different backgrounds. And so this grace that is given to us - this special gift - brings about diversity. The papers we read, the news channels we watch, influence us and make us different. How do we remain united as we are, each one of us, different - yet we have this special gift?

Most of my message this morning is going to be taken from 1 Corinthians. This was a church that Paul struggled to keep united. There were divisions happening within the church. We're going to look at the advice he gave to them. We're going to look at what caused the division. We're going to tie it into our culture today and specifically to COVID-19. Because some of the things that he says here to those in Corinth, he could be speaking to us as well. I want to begin in 1 Corinthians 1. He begins his book by making an appeal in verse 10. He says,

"I appeal to you dear brothers and sisters by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather be of one mind, united in thought and purpose."

United in thought and purpose - that's the common vision. But he goes on, in verse 11 he says,

"For some members of Chloe's household have told me about your quarrels, my dear brothers and sisters. Some of you are saying, 'I am a follower of Paul.' Others are saying, 'I follow Apollos,' or 'I follow Peter,' or 'I follow only Christ.'"

He begins to describe what is causing the divisions. I do not know exactly what he meant here when he said "I follow Apollos" or "I follow Peter." Perhaps it meant that individuals were going to these persons to get knowledge; to get examples of how to live their lives. And they saw one better than the other. For whatever the reason, it was creating division. And Paul said, "Let there be no divisions in the church."

Today in our culture I see a lot of people going to different places to get knowledge: different radio stations, different blogs - there's so much knowledge that we have right now on COVID-19, and a lot of it is confusing. It's to the point where some people are struggling to trust doctors, to trust scientists. I think it was two days ago the CDC came out with a new update that the coronavirus is not as contagious or at least is not as transferrable on surfaces as was once believed. So these conflicting messages can create confusion.

Perhaps it's important to note that those of you have a biology degree or maybe you're a doctor or nurse - you understand why there's conflicting messages. Because oftentimes before things are printed, there's a year or two of study. The coronavirus is not granting the privilege for that kind of study. And our doctors and researchers are doing the best they can getting us the information as quickly as possible. They're realizing as time goes on that some of the information that came out earlier - they have better information now. So there's these conflicting messages. So when we look, for example, just a practical illustration, at masks - I can go online and I can do some research and write a scientific paper based upon research that says masks don't help. And yet I could also go onto the Internet and print out charts and graphs to show that masks are important.

So when there's all this knowledge, how do we make decisions to keep people united when there's conflicting knowledge? With that knowledge I hear statements made that sadden my heart. And perhaps Paul is struggling with some of the same thing in Corinth. This is a church that has many issues. He's talking about his relationships with the Corinthians; he's talking about lawsuits among Christians; sexual sin; he talks about marriage. And then we get to chapter 8 and now he's talking about food sacrificed to idols. But before he introduces that subject he says something that applies, not only to his setting, but to ours as well. In 1 Corinthians 8:1 he says,

"Now regarding your question about food that has been offered to idols, yes we know that we all have knowledge about this issue. But while knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church. Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn't really know very much. But the person who loves God is the one whom God recognizes."

Paul had an issue. He was dealing with the Corinthians - very intelligent people - and he's flooded with knowledge. I can identify! If I get one more email encouraging me to read one more article or watch one more blog on COVID-19 - and how to go about leading in the midst of it, I will be drowned and flooded with information.

I'm not suggesting that information is not important. That knowledge is not needed. Indeed, if you go into my office I have several things hanging on my wall that would indicate that I've gone to school. And there are times when I need to refer to that knowledge. For example, insurance companies sometimes want to know if I'm educated and if I'm licensed. So it's important to have knowledge at times. But I will also admit, with a little bit of shame, that sometimes I referred to that knowledge as a way to puff me up. Indeed the NIV says, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." The NLT here interprets it a little bit different. We all like knowledge. When we're visiting with people it's nice to quote the things that we know. Too often it's to build ourselves up; it's to make us feel important.

A few weeks ago I received a phone call, it was a Tuesday. The person on the other end of the line informed me that I had been in contact with him and he had been diagnosed with COVID-19. And he said "Dave, I exposed you." That changes one's schedule. I immediately called Ella to let her know that I'd been exposed. And she asked me to self-isolate. Now at that point I could have pulled out knowledge; I could have gone online and done some research and said, "Well, the meeting that we had was outside and didn't last very long - maybe 10 minutes maybe 15 - but there was some distance between us and nobody sneezed and nobody coughed." And I could have come with documentation; scientific evidence and I could have sat down with Ella, "Look here, young lady, I am not going to self-isolate, here's the scientific evidence." I could have also gone down in our safe and pulled out our deed, that's knowledge. I could have pulled out our deed and said, "Look here, young lady, my name is on the deed. This is my house and if you want self-isolation you move, not me." All that would have been based upon knowledge.

Some of you might be pleased to know that's not how I handled it. Every doorknob I didn't touch, every snack in the middle the night that I didn't go down and open up the pantry and leave my fingerprints on, every TV show of Frasier that I watch sometimes late at night to unwind, it's in a public space - every show I missed was an act of love. Indeed in my little cubicle, up above the garage, where I was living, there's a bathroom and it was the only place where I could really get Internet connection. So my Zoom meetings were held on a commode. Now the lid was down, but it was held on a commode. And one of those Zoom meetings went 2 1/2 hours! You try sitting on that throne for 2 1/2 hours and let me tell you it is not comfortable. It was an inconvenience. It was something I did because of love.

Paul is imploring the Corinthians that love must trump knowledge. How do we have all this knowledge, then come together on a Sunday morning, where we all have ideas - masks, no masks; singing, not singing; we have so many different ideas and all the knowledge to support it. How are we ever going to have unity? By loving.

By loving those among us who might have an autoimmune system deficiency or who have anxiety. We inconvenience ourselves for their sake. But I hear statements, I get

emails - if I have to wear a mask to go to church, I'm not going. I will find a place where I don't have to. Or if we can't sing, it's not going to be church.

I had a Zoom meeting recently with a number of bishops from LMC and Keith, our moderator, was on there, and he was telling the story of the Ethiopian church during a time when they were forced to close by a communist government. And incidentally, our government has not forced us to close. We are not being persecuted. But in Ethiopia they were. And Keith reminded us that there in Ethiopia, individuals met in small groups of 5 to 7 in the middle of the night. No singing. Their focus of church became different. Now the reason they didn't sing would be different than the reason if we choose not to sing - it would be different. But it's still church. They focused on the discipling and raising up leaders. When the church came above ground it was 50,000 strong. If I remember Keith's numbers correctly before it went underground it was 5,000 strong.

This is an opportunity for the church to grow. But if we're protecting our knowledge, we will have uniformity and not unity. Because the more I put forth my knowledge, the more people who agree with me will be gathered around me. And the people who don't agree with me will be offended and driven away. Unity without diversity is merely uniformity.

It's important to recognize that everybody's hurting.

I talked with a woman who lost her father to Covid; a number of friends have also died. And this woman - she's affected by coronavirus. And then I talk to people who know no one who has gotten sick, let alone died. These individuals have lost their business or lost a lot of business. They may have pumped a tank of milk out in their lagoon. And they also are suffering. And so when we talk about this we come at it with the physical aspect and the economical aspect. And we have evidence all around to quantify and qualify the hurt and pain that everybody is experiencing. So how are we going to stay united in the midst of that when we come back together?

One of the things COVID-19 has exposed, at least to me, as I get into churches and I'm seeing things - I get this sense that those of us who have known Jesus for a long time - we begin to believe that we have rights. We have privileges. We have expectations. Church has to be the way it looked before or it's not church.

If I have to come to church and wear a mask because somebody is going to have high anxiety - that's an inconvenience - my glasses fog up. Well, mine do too. But if we're not going to choose that, if we're not going to lay our rights down and do that for our brother and sister; do that for the person who is not yet a believer, then all we will have is uniformity and not unity.

Paul deals with rights. Stay in the same book in 1 Corinthians 9. Paul deals with rights. He lays out an argument as to why he should be supported as an Apostle. Verse 11,

"Since we have planted spiritual seed among you aren't we entitled to a harvest of physical food and drink? If you support others who preach to you shouldn't we have an even greater right to be supported?" Go down to verse 13, "Don't you realize that those who work in the temple get their meals from the offerings brought to the temple and those who serve at the altar get a share of the sacrificial offerings? In the same way the Lord ordered that those who preach the good news should be supported by those who benefit from it."

He is using knowledge to back up his argument. But that is not from where he draws his conclusion. He draws his conclusion from love. Back up to verse 12 the end of it "but we have never used this right. We would rather put up with anything than be an obstacle to the good news about Christ." We would put up with anything so as to not be an obstacle to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Go down to verse 15, he says, "Yet I have never used any of these rights. Am I not writing this to suggest that I want to start now? In fact, I would rather die," he says, "than use this right."

Many of us have been going to church all our lives and many of the congregations that I oversee - this is a message to all of these congregations. People in our pews are no longer on milk and honey. They are on solid food. Yet as leaders, what we often do, is we lead in order to keep them comfortable; leading without thinking about those who have yet to know Jesus Christ. I assure you brothers and sisters, those who have been saints many, many years - decades, I love you. You will not lose your salvation if you're inconvenienced by wearing a face mask or if your leader chooses to not sing - you will not die. You will not lose your salvation. It will be OK, especially if you're doing it in order for the person in the congregation or who is not yet in the congregation, who will feel your love - without getting a sermon on your knowledge. Paul says, "even though I am a free man with no master I have become a slave to all people, to bring many to Christ."

For those who have lost loved ones it grieves my heart when they look at those who haven't and say, "Well you just want to open everything up and you don't care about life." These individuals are hurting because they've lost so much too. It grieves me when those who haven't experienced sickness or know of people who have been sick who call people names like "chicken." This is not love and we cannot remain united if we focus on only knowledge.

Stay in 1 Corinthians. The premise of this message is this -

If we're going to stay united as we reopen, we have to focus all of our behavior on love. Out of love comes our behavior.

1 Corinthians 13 is often known as the love chapter. And in conclusion I want to read this. Paul says here,

"If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels (if I have all knowledge), but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed

*my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing. Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. **It does not demand its own way.** It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. Prophecy and speaking in unknown languages and special knowledge will become useless. But love will last forever! Now our knowledge is partial and incomplete (this is so true, especially at a time like this), and even the gift of prophecy reveals only part of the whole picture! But when the time of perfection comes, these partial things will become useless. When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things. Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely. Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love."*

Prayer: Heavenly Father I pray that as decisions are made by the leaders of the congregations, that they would be made with prayer as to when to reopen and how to do so. And when we, as the people in the pew look at those decisions - that we would follow them, not based upon knowledge but based upon love. That we would crucify our rights - that sinful part of me that's still alive and is dying slowly - my way or the highway - that we would crucify that and be willing to behave so that all may come to know Christ. We have an opportunity in the church right now to reach out and create safe space as we reopen to reach out to those who have anxiety, who have no hope. Let us use this opportunity and be united in love. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

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The real hoax

**Roger Shenk, May 24, 2020
Sarasota Community Church, Sarasota, FL**

Introduction

We've all seen the videos and read the articles warning us that this pandemic is just a hoax or a conspiracy by an elite few who are trying to force a new world order, grab power, defy God, and force us all to do the same.

Some people are concerned politically that our God-given rights are being taken away. Some are concerned religiously that we are being forced to take the "mark of the beast." Others act like this virus is going to wipe us all off the map. And still others say it's much ado about nothing, that we just need to "get back to life, get back to work, get back to church, get back to freedom."

The question is: Who's right? The experts that people point to are doctors, scientists, professors, politicians, and pastors - and actors, athletes, and blue-collar workers who just say it like they see it - and they don't all agree with each other! Who's right?

And the people who believe them and promote them are our friends and family - and they don't all agree with each other! Who's right?

I'm a pastor. And I'm a friend. And I'm family. Why should anyone care about my opinion? In fact, some of you aren't listening to learn, you just wanna know if I'm on your side, or whether I'm stupid! So why say anything? Who's right anyway?

Nevertheless, people do ask for my take on it. And it's good to want to understand this from God's perspective. Let me tell you explicitly: I don't have a word from God about whether this pandemic is a hoax or whatever. But I do have a word from God about the real hoax we all face. And it speaks directly to how you should respond to this pandemic, along with any trial you face. I believe this is a word from God about the real threat and the real opportunity.

That's what I want to talk about today: The real hoax. And the real hope.

Two stories

I was reminded recently of two stories. The first feels like a Sunday School story to me, like a cute fable from the 1950s. But when I read it, it's actually a story of a great hoax, a conspiracy, a power grab, an overreach of governing authorities, a violation of people's God-given rights, an attempt to unite everyone in defiance of the Lord.

Now, that's nothing novel. It's happened a million times. But we know this story because three men accepted the confiscation of their lives and God delivered them.

In Daniel 3, we read that King Nebuchadnezzar made a golden statue and said that anyone who didn't worship it would be thrown into a blazing furnace. So, everyone worshiped it - except for three men who paid no attention to the king. They would not serve his gods or worship the idol. They defied his order.

Notably, they didn't rise up to overthrow him. They didn't demand their rights. They simply refused to be unfaithful to God.

When the king heard about it, he brought them in and gave them another chance. If they would worship his god, they would survive. If they refused, they would be thrown into a blazing furnace.

We read in verses 16-18 that,

"Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, 'King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.'"

And as we read on, we see that God *didn't* deliver them *from* the furnace, he delivered them *in* the furnace. They were bound and thrown in.

But as the king looked into the furnace to watch them burn, he saw them walking around, and along with them, a fourth man that he said looked like "a son of the gods." He was amazed and had them brought out. Everyone crowded around them and (verse 27) "they saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them."

Then Nebuchadnezzar praised the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who had sent his angel and rescued his servants!

I'm not saying we've been quarantined because we refused to worship an idol. I'm saying that whether our current crisis is a hoax, or a conspiracy, or an overreach of authority, or just a virus and human zeal for staying alive, God is with us in it. We say "we're in this together." It's also true that God is "together with us in this."

And my prayer is that, as we come out of this furnace, the world sees that our faith is not singed, and our hope is not scorched. And that all that didn't belong has been burned away. And all that remains doesn't even smell like smoke.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego said, "The God we serve is able to deliver us, and he will. And even if he doesn't, we will continue to serve him." And we can say the same!

Whatever the threat may be, God will deliver us! And even if he doesn't, we will not be shaken from our secure position. We are not afraid of what Satan can do to us, nor of what Man can do to us, nor of what a virus can do to us. We don't need to be brash, and yes, we should be prudent, but above all we will be faithful. And we will embody the conviction and determination of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: "The God we serve is able to deliver us, and he will. And even if he doesn't, we will serve him."

Much later, in Acts 5, we read that the Apostles were thrown in jail for teaching people about Jesus. An angel miraculously delivered them and they went right back to the Temple Courts to teach about Jesus. When the authorities came to arrest them again it says something peculiar that most of us skip over. It says they arrested them again but they "did not use force..."

The only thing that could possibly mean is that the Apostles went willingly. Like Jesus. They didn't "stand their ground." They didn't "put up a fight." They didn't "resist." They went.

And it's not that they were being hoaxed. Not that they didn't understand what was happening. They just knew that God would deliver them. And even if he didn't, they weren't going to stop serving him.

They told the authorities: "We must obey God rather than human beings!" And for them that meant sharing the gospel. So that's what they did!

They were released, but only after being flogged. They weren't delivered *from* the trial; they were delivered *in* the trial. And it says that they went home "rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name."

Peter, who was one of them, would later write in his first letter (4:12-13),

"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in as much as you participate in the sufferings of Christ..."

The real hoax is the belief that we are called as Christians to a life without suffering. Without hardship. Without attack. Without being conspired against.

The Christian message has always been that death awaits us, but that eternal life is ours! So our response to threat is not fear, dread, suspicion and speculation. We're not surprised; instead, we rejoice! But still, I hear you. You wanna know if this is the big one, right?

Speculation & the real hoaxer

Whenever we face a gap in knowledge, we are compelled to fill the gap with speculation. And the speculation might be spot on. Or it might be way off.

Some speculations are like a rope bridge between two rock formations. Others are like a flying leap from cliff to cliff. But either way, speculations are just an attempt to fill in knowledge we don't have—to imagine how concrete realities might be connected, when we don't really know for sure.

That lack of knowledge might be caused by deception or ignorance or simple mystery. That's the intrigue of speculating! It's the joy of discovery!

Most of the conversations I hear about "what's really going on" with this pandemic are speculations. They might be spot on. And they might be way off.

So, if I ever seem less than excited about a theory you're relaying to me, just know that I'm probably filtering by asking myself: "Is this what we know for sure? Or is this just an attempt to fill the gap between things we know for sure?" And if I conclude that it's speculation, you'll probably get a response from me like, "Hmm. Interesting. Could be."

And I really don't mean that to be dismissive or placating. I'm just processing it as speculation. "Could be!" And I really do mean that. You could be right in your speculation. And you could be wrong. Because it's speculation.

Now, I don't think it's wrong to speculate. We just need to be careful about tethering our faith to speculations that may not pan out. And we need to be careful about getting sucked into the real hoax where we get tangled up in fear, dread, and suspicion.

But it's not wrong to wonder: Is this a hoax? a conspiracy? a power grab? Aren't our rights being violated? Should we be fearing an imminent One World Order and the mark of the beast? Isn't this an attack on the Church?

If we're talking about this pandemic, my answer is: "Hmm. Interesting. Could be."

But if we back out and look at this from a Biblical and eternal perspective - not just about this current crisis, but about the ongoing crisis of living with an Enemy of God named Satan who wants to destroy us and is bent on overthrowing God - ask those same questions in that frame and my answer is: Yes! Absolutely! Because that's not speculation for those who believe!

The real hoaxer is Satan! He is always conspiring against us. He is always grabbing for power. He is always trying to deny our rights. He is always trying to get Humanity to unite in defying the Lord. And yes, the Church is always under attack.

And many on earth are in cahoots with him. Some are in powerful positions politically and religiously. But many are just following the path of least resistance, and serving their own appetites, just like some of us. Just like some of our neighbors. Just like some of our friends. Just like some of our family.

This is nothing new. It shouldn't surprise us. We don't need to speculate about it. We just need to know it. Remember it. Expect it.

This earth is not our heaven

In Luke 21:10-28, Jesus said,

"Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven... [N]ations will be in anguish and perplexity... People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world... When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

The *real* hoax is the belief that nothing bad is gonna happen, that this world is our forever home, that this life is all we get, and that if we don't enjoy life, God has forsaken us.

The *real* hoax is that it's our job to set up heaven on earth, enjoy the things of this earth, and protect it all with weapons made from the things of this earth.

The *real* hoax is that this earth is our heaven.

Some of us are so worried about accidentally taking the "mark of the beast" and forfeiting our salvation. We're looking for microchips as we bow down to the golden idol of luxury and self-indulgence as if this earth is our heaven.

James 5:1-5 warns us ominously:

"Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you... You have hoarded wealth in the last days... You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence..."

The *real* hoax is that we can be self-indulgent and safe. It's a harsh word, but to those of us with an ear to hear — those of us who are tender and in the faith — he says (vs 7-8): "Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming... [B]e patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near."

The *real* hoax is the belief that the Lord's return is not imminent. And it's easy to believe that hoax! I mean, if it's really so 'imminent,' why is it taking so long?!

Peter addressed that directly in his second letter, chapter 3:3-9,

"Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come... They will say, 'Where is this 'coming' he promised?'... But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

Sure, for a time we suffer. But for every day, others are given opportunity to be saved.

But [make no mistake] the day of the Lord will come... [And when he does] The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare...But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. So then,...since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him." (2 Peter 3:10-14)

Don't believe the hoax that this world is our heaven. It's all gonna burn. Including our economy, and all our systems of governance that we call sovereign nations and sovereign states, set up to serve our sovereign selves. Don't put your trust in them. Don't believe the hoax!

Now, this isn't to say we shouldn't be good stewards. Care for it all and use it all. Just don't become attached to it at all. Enjoy the beauty, but realize it's all a wildflower. It won't last. And that's no cause for lament because "we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells."

So we live here as strangers, pursuing righteousness, and waiting.

Still, I hear the concerns: "Isn't this quarantine a subversive attack on the Church? Shouldn't we rise up and defend her?"

You can't quarantine the church

I was on a video call recently with Christian men and women from around the world. Most of us were here in the states, but one was in Myanmar and another in Ecuador. It's amazing how local "global" has become.

Similarly, Wendy's family has been zooming every Sunday night from Portland, Sarasota, and Paraguay.

Last week our church was greeted by video from a pastor in Nepal. Our world just got really small. And what we see is that, even shut in, the Church is thriving.

In fact, the *real* hoax is the belief that the Church is fragile and needs the government to prop it up. Listen! The gates of hell itself will not prevail against the Church — much less a virus or a quarantine or any governmental edict or any group of really, really rich people.

Sure, religious freedom is a beautiful thing. But it's just not essential to being Church.

I'll say that again: The freedom to assemble is not essential to being Church! Being Church is about way more than going to Church. Being Church is about taking up our cross daily and following Jesus to the death of self, believing that in him we have eternal life!

You can't quarantine eternal life! You can't quarantine faithfulness! You can't quarantine love! You can't quarantine the Church!

The "right to assemble" is great, but many in the world gather in twos and threes where it's illegal to be a Christian — and Jesus is right there in their midst! They're not so concerned about "fighting for their rights" as they are about pursuing righteousness. And the Church is growing right where they have no "right to assemble."

Listen, the *real* hoax is not that the Church is being attacked. It's the belief that human or Satanic attack has any power over it — and the belief that God will not deliver us! We do not need to defend ourselves against Satan, or kings, or anything else. God is our defender, and he will deliver us if we trust him.

Conclusion

So is it all a hoax? Yeah...but not the way most people think.

I mean sure, it might be a hoax the way people think. Go ahead and have your opinions. But the bigger concern is that it's a hoax the way most people *don't* think.

Don't let anything take your eyes off Jesus. If earthly blessings come and go, remember they are temporary. And if earthly trials come and go, remember they are temporary.

So don't be afraid and don't get tangled up in speculations. Put your faith in God and follow Jesus Christ eagerly longing for our eternal reward and living out this conviction together: "The God we serve is able to deliver us, and he will. And even if he doesn't, we will serve him."

Amen.

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What to do when it's dark, and you don't know what to do

Laurie Mellinger, June 28, 2020
West End Mennonite Fellowship, Lancaster, PA

Good morning, West End, and all our guests and visitors online. I'm Laurie Mellinger, and we're going to talk this morning about "What to do when it's dark, and you don't know what to do." One of our theme verses for the year comes from 1st Peter 2:9, which says,

"...you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light."

Still, right now, for many people in many places, and for some of us here in this service this morning, things seem pretty dark. Maybe you've lost your job and are having trouble putting food on the table; maybe someone you love is sick, or you're worried about the COVID-19 pandemic; maybe you're sick at heart about the racial injustice here in our country and around the world; maybe you're not sure what new trouble tomorrow might bring. So I want to talk a little about God's relationship with darkness. Then we'll talk about what to do when it's dark, and you don't know what to do.

Many of us have memorized the verse from 1 John 1:5, "This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all." God is light, and there is NO darkness IN Him at all. This is true, and we believe it. He called us OUT of darkness and INTO the light. So why does there still seem to be so much darkness in the world? We're going to take a little time to look at the Hebrew word for darkness, *cho-shech*.

Sometimes the Bible uses that word to mean literal darkness - the absence of light - like in Genesis 1:2, which says "darkness was over the surface of the deep." There was no sun yet, no moon, so there was no light at all... only darkness. Another example is Psalm 104:20, where the psalmist says to God, "You bring darkness, [and] it becomes night..." So, first of all, there's literal darkness.

Sometimes *cho-shech* is translated as darkness when it means sin, or distance from God. Think of John 3:19, which reads, "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." Or 1 Thessalonians 5:5: "You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness." One more like that from 1 John 2:9: "Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness." Sometimes Jeremiah, in the book of Lamentations, accuses God of using darkness as a punishment: Chapter 3 verse 2 says, "He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light," and verse 6 of the same chapter says, "He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead." So, there's also darkness as sin, or distance from God, or even as punishment—which might be part of the answer to that question of why there's still so much darkness in the world.

There are also places where *cho-shech* means uncertainty, or obscurity—darkness as a place where we don't understand, or where something is hidden from us. Yet in

each of these cases, Scripture also indicates that God knows what we don't know, and can reveal it to us. For instance, 2 Samuel 22:29 "You, LORD, are my lamp; the LORD turns my darkness into light," or Job 12:22: "He reveals the deep things of darkness and brings utter darkness into the light." There's also 1 Corinthians 4:5, "Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart." So even when we can't see, or when things are hidden from us, God CAN see and DOES know, and can reveal what we need by shining a light on it.

Maybe the most surprising way that darkness is used in the Bible, though, is that God himself can 'hide' in the darkness. Yes, God IS light, yet a number of times Scripture says that God is surrounded by darkness. Let me give you a couple of examples:

- In Exodus 20:21, the people remained at a distance while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was. So, God is light, but was surrounded by darkness.
- Looking back on that same time, God spoke through Moses in Deuteronomy 5:23, saying, "When you heard the voice out of the darkness, while the mountain was ablaze with fire, all the leaders of your tribes and your elders came to me."
- David wrote a psalm saying, "He shrouded himself in darkness, veiling his approach with dark rain clouds. Thick clouds shielded the brightness around him" (18:11-12).

So whether we're thinking of literal darkness, or whether we're thinking about sin and distance from God, or of our own uncertainty and things being hidden from us, we see that even when it looks dark, God and God's light are present.

When it looks dark, God and God's light are present

Even when we are surrounded by darkness, God is there. And God can reveal what is hidden, and shine light on what is dark. I want to invite us this morning to have hope, because even when things look dark, we know that we have been called OUT of darkness and INTO God's wonderful light. When it's dark... look for the light.

Now...when it's dark, and we can't see, and we don't know what to do...what do we do then? I'm suggesting this morning that we do four things:

- Look up (do it—look up)
- Lament to God (bow upper body, hands out and down from shoulders)
- Listen (hand to ear, cock head) for a response
- And live in love (American Sign Language symbol, crossed arms on chest).

Here they are again: Look up; lament to God; listen for a response; and live in love — love for God and love for others.

There are lots of stories in Scripture where men and women did this—like in the book of Exodus, where the people of Israel lamented as they wandered in the desert, when there was no water and nothing to eat; like Hannah in 1 Samuel 1, when she poured out her anguished prayer and desperately wanted to have a child; like King David in so many of the Psalms, where his enemies were pursuing him; like Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 20, when a vast army was approaching to attack them. But this morning I'd like to take a look at King Hezekiah, King of Judah during the time

when the rest of Israel had separated from the tribe of Judah. When things were dark and he didn't know what to do, he looked up, lamented to God, and listened for a response. Let's take a look at his story.

I'm going to read and summarize this story from 2 Kings 18 and 19. It begins,

"Hezekiah son of Ahaz began to rule over Judah in the third year of King Hoshea's reign in Israel. He was twenty-five years old when he became king..."

"Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before or after his time. He remained faithful to the LORD in everything, and he carefully obeyed all the commands the LORD had given Moses. So the LORD was with him, and Hezekiah was successful in everything he did."

Four years later, "King Shalmaneser of Assyria attacked Samaria and began a siege against it" that lasted three years before Samaria was completely taken over by King Shalmaneser, and the Israelites were exiled from their land.

Hezekiah wasn't involved—this was Israel, not Judah—but he knew this was happening, and he believed that it was because "[Israel] refused to listen to the LORD their God and obey him." Although things were dark in Israel because of their disobedience, Hezekiah and the people of Judah were safe.

About seven years later, when Hezekiah was not yet 40 years old, a new Assyrian king, Sennacherib, began to attack Hezekiah's territory in Judah. Hezekiah tried to negotiate, and sent eleven tons of silver and one ton of gold to Sennacherib as a ransom... but it was no use. Sennacherib sent a huge army to confront King Hezekiah in Jerusalem. Things looked really dark. One of the Assyrians, who spoke Hebrew, began to insult Hezekiah, and to insult Hezekiah's God, the Lord, in front of all the people. He shouted to them, "Listen to this message from the great king of Assyria! This is what the king says: Don't let Hezekiah deceive you. He will never be able to rescue you from my power. Don't let him fool you into trusting in the LORD..."

Hezekiah's representatives reported all this back to Hezekiah... Hezekiah didn't know what to do. He sent a message to Isaiah, the prophet, asking him to pray. And Isaiah listened, and returned this message to Hezekiah:

"This is what the LORD says: Do not be disturbed by this blasphemous speech against me from the Assyrian king's messengers. Listen! I myself will move against him, and the king will receive a message that he is needed at home. So he will return to his land..." (2 Kings 19:6b – 7).

So everything was going to be fine, right? But it didn't seem that way. Sennacherib *did* receive a message that he was needed at home—but before he left, he sent a letter to Hezekiah. He told Hezekiah, "Don't let your God, in whom you trust, deceive you with promises that Jerusalem will not be captured by the king of Assyria. You know perfectly well what the kings of Assyria have done wherever they have gone. They have completely destroyed everyone who stood in their way! Why should you be any

different? Have the gods of other nations rescued them—such nations as Gozan, Haran, Rezeph, and the people of Eden who were in Tel-assar? My predecessors destroyed them all!” And again... Hezekiah didn’t know what to do. He had the word of the LORD from Isaiah, which had been true, but it didn’t seem to be enough.

So Hezekiah looked up—he took the letter to the LORD’s temple and spread it out before the LORD. Then he lamented to God—he prayed,

“O LORD, God of Israel, you are enthroned between the mighty cherubim! You alone are God of all the kingdoms of the earth. You alone created the heavens and the earth. Bend down, O LORD, and listen! Open your eyes, O LORD, and see! Listen to Sennacherib’s words of defiance against the living God. It is true, LORD, that the kings of Assyria have destroyed all these nations. And they have thrown the gods of these nations into the fire and burned them. But of course the Assyrians could destroy them! They were not gods at all—only idols of wood and stone shaped by human hands. Now, O LORD our God, rescue us from his power; then all the kingdoms of the earth will know that you alone, O LORD, are God.”

Then Hezekiah waited...he listened to see how the LORD would answer him. And Isaiah sent him another word from the LORD:

“This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I have heard your prayer about King Sennacherib of Assyria.... And this is what the LORD says about the king of Assyria:

“His armies will not enter Jerusalem.

They will not even shoot an arrow at it.

They will not march outside its gates with their shields

nor build banks of earth against its walls.

The king will return to his own country

by the same road on which he came.

He will not enter this city,

says the LORD.

For my own honor and for the sake of my servant David,

I will defend this city and protect it.”

And that’s exactly what happened. The Lord moved against King Sennacherib, and “He went home to his capital of Nineveh and stayed there.”

Hezekiah was able to continue to live in love, faithful to God. In fact, he was able to say to God not long after that experience, "Remember, O LORD, how I have always been faithful to you and have served you single-mindedly, always doing what pleases you." (16:30)

Let's take another look at these four things to do when it's dark, and we don't know what to do. First, I'm inviting us to look up (look up!). Look at the situation; learn everything you can about what's going on. Look into the darkness; look for the things that are hidden. Look for God, who may be hidden in the darkness. So 'look up' stands for two things—look at the situation, and look for God.

Then, I'm inviting us to lament to God (bow, hands out and down from shoulders). Here at West End, we've been learning how to lament during these past few years, reclaiming lament as a helpful prayer practice for us as a congregation. We've learned that we can call on God; we can complain—tell God the truth about exactly what's going on, and how we feel about it; we can ask for help; and then declare our trust that God will hear and answer our prayer. In the past, we've talked about some of the Psalms, where David laments. A few weeks ago, Rebecca Mentzer led us all in a prayer of lament over racial injustice. This morning, we've seen Hezekiah's prayer of lament as well. We know that God already knows what's going on, but it's helpful for us to lay it all out before God. So we look up, and then we lament to God.

Third, we listen for a response. In Hezekiah's story, he heard God's response through Isaiah, the prophet. Sometimes we might ask someone to pray with us, and that person might listen with us for a response from God and tell us what they sense. Sometimes we'll be reading the Bible and a verse will stand out in our hearts as an answer. Sometimes God responds through a sermon, or a podcast, or a Bible study. Sometimes you hear that still, small voice for yourself, in the silence of your own heart.

I want to assure you this morning that you can wait patiently for a response from God, and that you'll know it when it comes.

I want to assure you this morning that you can wait patiently for a response from God, and that you'll know it when it comes.

John 10:1–4 records Jesus saying to his disciples,

"I tell you the truth, anyone who sneaks over the wall of a sheepfold, rather than going through the gate, must surely be a thief and a robber! But the one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep recognize his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they know his voice."

Hear that for yourself this morning: Jesus is the good shepherd, and you are one of the sheep. You recognize Jesus' voice. He knows your name, and calls you by your name. He leads you, and walks ahead of you—and you can follow him, because you know his voice. So look up, and lament to God, and then listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd, the voice of the Holy Spirit, the voice of our loving God.

When it's dark, and we don't know what to do, once we've looked up, and lamented to God, and now we're listening for a response... what then? The last step in this process is to live in love. What would Love do? What's the most loving thing you can do in the situation? Maybe it's prayer; maybe it's a text, or a phone call, or a card; maybe it's a meal, or a socially distanced visit. Maybe it's listening to someone else's lament; maybe it's offering a financial gift; maybe it's forgiving someone who hurt you, or making amends to someone you've hurt. In Matthew 22, we read that Jesus taught us, "'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments." When in doubt... live in love, to the best of your ability.

So there it is. When things seem dark, remember that God is still with you, and can even be hidden in dark places. Look up; lament to God; listen for a response; and live in love - love for God and love for others.

When things seem dark, remember that God is still with you, and can even be hidden in dark places. Look up; lament to God; listen for a response; and live in love, love for God and love for others.

As I bring this message to a close, I want to give us an opportunity to pray together as a congregation. Maybe there's already a situation you've been thinking about all morning where you feel like you can't see and don't know what to do. If so, please don't hesitate to turn down my volume for a few minutes to look up, lament to God, and listen for a response. If nothing came to mind for you individually, or for your family corporately, or if you'd just like to pray together with the rest of us, I'll lead us in some looking up and lamenting, and give us some short spaces of silence to listen for God's response. Let's pray:

God, we look to you. We look to You in the midst of this global health crisis. Things seem dark, Lord, and we don't know what to do. We feel anxious about the economy; we feel worried about our own health, and the health of those we love; we struggle as we wonder what our jobs will look like, or what school will look like, or what church will look like, going forward from here. We feel afraid, and we can't see. But God, you are light, the Light of the World, and we know that you hear us as we pray. Give us wisdom; give us assurance; give us comfort. We listen for your response. (pause) Help us to do the loving thing, whatever shows our love for you and for others.

God, we look to you. We look to You in the midst of anxiety and unrest in the United States. Things seem dark, Lord, and we don't know what to do. Some of us are filled with fear; some of us are filled with anger; some of us are confused; some of us feel helpless; some of us don't know what is true, and what is not. But God, you are Light, and in You there is no darkness at all. We know that you hear us as we pray. Show us truth; shape our hearts; teach us faith; lead us forward. We listen for your response. (pause) Help us to do the loving thing, whatever shows our love for you and for others.

God, we look to you. We look to You in the midst of a world that does not yet know who You are. Things seem dark, Lord, and we don't know what to do. We want all people to know who Jesus is, and to be set free from the darkness of sin and rebellion.

You have chosen us, equipped us, and sent us to bear fruit that lasts. You are the Potter, and we ask you to mold us; you are the Good Shepherd, and we ask you to guide us; you are the Light, and we ask you to overcome the darkness, and fill the earth with your glory. We listen for your response. (pause) Help us to do the loving thing, whatever shows our love for you and for others. Shine Your Light through us, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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Christlike living during Covid 19

2 Peter 3:1-18

Jim Heindel, August 23, 2020

Stony Brook Mennonite Church, York, PA

Covid 19 is a hot topic! What I say today some of you may or may not agree with. That's okay. If after this sermon you never want me to preach again. That's okay too. What is it? Is this the end times? How should we live?

I'll start with a quiz (I'm a retired teacher, remember):

- How many of you like chocolate?
- How many of you like peanut butter?
- How many of you like tomatoes?
- How many of you like coconut?
- How many of you like sauerkraut?
- How many of you like liver?

As you can see we are all different with different likes and different tastes.

Here's another quiz:

- How many of you think Covid 19 is for real?
- How many of you think Covid 19 is a political made-up event?
- How many of you think wearing a mask reduces the spread of Covid 19?
- How many of you like to wear a mask?
- How many of you think our current recommendations are too rigid?
- How many of you think our current recommendations are too lenient?
- How many of you think our current recommendations are just right?

Again, the results are mixed. We are all different with different opinions.

A few more questions:

- How many have thought, "Is Covid 19 one of God's plagues?"
- How many have thought since Covid 19 began, "Is this a sign of the end of time?"
- How many of you have asked yourself, "When will Christ return and end all this turmoil?"

I hope to speak to these questions in this sermon.

So, what is Covid 19?

A novel (new) virus of the coronavirus, started in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. It is possibly transmitted from animal or seafood to humans (this is still under investigation). Co = corona, Vi = virus, D = disease, Year = 2019.

Coronavirus has many strains or types, for instance, the common cold or SARS which is severe acute respiratory syndrome. Its major symptoms include fever, dry

cough and tiredness. It is spread by respiratory droplets – coughing, sneezing, etc. to those in close contact.

Here are some current statistics, as of Saturday, August 22, 2020 – 9:00 PM (Covid Data Tracker, Center for Disease Control & Prevention).

- There are 23.1 million cases worldwide
- There are 802,693 deaths worldwide (3% mortality rate)
- There are 5.7 million cases in the United States
- There are 178,692 deaths in the United States

Here are some comparisons with other events:

Worldwide data

<u>Covid 19</u>	<u>Flu 2019</u>	<u>Swine flu (2009)</u>	<u>1918 Spanish flu</u>
23.1 M	39-56M	1.4 M	500 M
802,693	650,000	274,000	17-50 M

Is it for real? You decide. With my past experience as a Respiratory Therapist dealing with people in respiratory distress, I do not want Covid 19 or any of the people I care about to get Covid 19!!

Lois has the symptoms of a dry, non-productive cough and low-grade fever. She tested for Covid 19 yesterday and the results will come by the beginning of the week. The lady she cares for through Visiting Angels developed a cough this past Wednesday, and she tested positive for Covid 19 on Friday. Another care giver from last Saturday tested positive for Covid 19.

The point is that it is highly contagious. Pray that Lois's symptoms stay mild and disappear quickly. Enough on Covid & statistics!!

Covid 19 and the end times

Have you been asked or wondered if Covid 19 is a sign of the end of times? Before I attempt to answer that, let's listen to the Scripture lesson for today. 2 Peter 3:1-18 says,

¹ Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. ² I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles.

³ Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. ⁴ They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he

promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.”⁵ But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water.⁶ By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed.⁷ By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

⁸ But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

¹¹ Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives¹² as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.¹³ But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

¹⁴ So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.¹⁵ Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him.¹⁶ He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

¹⁷ Therefore, dear friends, since you have been forewarned, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of the lawless and fall from your secure position.¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.

The end times, what do we know? The story is told of a minister who visited an elderly woman in the nursing home. The young minister said, “At your age you should be thinking about the hereafter!” The older woman said, “Oh, I do all the time. No matter where I am, in my room, down in the cafeteria or down in the recreation room, I ask myself, ‘What am I here after?’”

1. Scoffers will ask, “Where is this coming He promised?” They have been saying this for 2000 years!! Why do you think it would happen now?

Do you ever fall into this trap in your thinking? It hasn’t happened in 2,000 years, and it probably won’t happen in my life time. Remember, God’s Word formed

everything. The waters destroyed everything (except Noah & his family) Why? Because of their great wickedness. And the world and the heavens as we know them will be destroyed by fire!!

2. Yet, Scripture is very clear, Christ will return! No one knows when, only God. Jesus said in Matthew 24:36 - "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

What will end times be like? there will be wars, rumors of wars, pestilence and earthquakes. People will be disrespectful, haters of men and liars. There will be false prophets and persecution of Christians.

Jesus said this in Matthew 24:4-8 -

"Watch out that no one deceives you. ⁵ For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and will deceive many. ⁶ You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ⁷ Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸ All these are the beginning of birth pains.

Remember, God is patient. In 2 Peter 3:8-9 we learn that with the Lord 1000 years = 1 day and 1 day = 1000 years. God is not bound by our idea of time. God's promises may seem slow in coming, but God is not slow where time is concerned.

Why is God patient? Verse 9 tells us that he is not slow, but is patient – waiting, longing, wanting people to come to Him. How is our patience? With others, with God?

3. Jesus will come like a thief in the night – verse 10. Jesus said in Matthew 24:42-44:

⁴² "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. ⁴³ But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

It will be unexpected and sudden. Will you be ready?

4. The current earth and heavens will be destroyed – verse 10 and 12. Our current world is sinful. This destruction will purge all sin and lead to a new heaven and a new earth.

As it was with Noah, the water did not annihilate, it purged. So the fire does not annihilate, it purifies and transforms the creation to a new heaven and a new earth – without sin. It will be glorious. Isaiah 65:17-18 says,

*¹⁷ "See, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.*

*¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create.*

So, is Covid 19 a sign of the end? Is it a plague? Most theologians do not think Covid 19 is a plague. A plague is poured out by God. Covid 19 appears to have come from an animal or some such source. A plague will only affect non-believers. Revelation 16:1-2 says,

¹ Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, "Go, pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth." ² The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly, festering sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped its image

It is a natural event rather than a supernatural act of God. Nonetheless, God has it under control. He sees all, knows all and loves all, but allows such events to happen.

Is it a sign of the end times? David Jeremiah said, "Is this a sign of the second coming of Christ? I cannot say with any sense of certainty that it is. But neither can I say with any certainty that it is not." Certainly it is a pestilence. Luke 21:11 says, "There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven." A pestilence is a contagious or infectious epidemic that is virulent and devastating. All of these things are described as "birth pangs" and so we should expect to see more as they increase in frequency and intensity.

Here are my conclusions: Covid 19 is real. God is in control. In the midst of this pandemic, Jesus says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). David Jeremiah suggests that we be informed, but control what goes into your mind. Read one condensed report per day and avoid negativity.

But the bigger, more important question we Christians need to answer during this pandemic is this, "What kind of people ought you to be?" – verse 11. Or -

How should we be living during this time?

1. We are to live holy and godly lives (2 Peter 3, verse 11). We are to be spotless and blameless (verse 14). And we are to be at peace with Christ (verse 14). Holy, godly, spotless, blameless - that's a tall assignment. We need to constantly be striving to be more like Jesus, living a life devoted to pleasing God.

How can we do this? Through prayer, time in His Word, and time with God. We also do this by avoiding the things of this world that pull us away from God. We are to love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Here are some responses to Covid, whether you believe it's real or not; whether you believe masks & social distancing help or not; whether you believe by faith that God will protect you. As Christians, what is your responsibility? Follow the guidelines

given to us by government and medical experts. Wear a mask, social distance and clean your hands and surfaces frequently.

Do your part! We come out at different places regarding Covid 19, just like any other topic. But the question is, how do we love our brothers & sisters? How do we show others we respect and care for them? Philippians 2:3-4 says, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others." Wear your mask for others!!

God allows us to make choices – otherwise we are puppets on a string. We need to make wise choices, not always what I want, but what benefits others. Paul says in Romans 14:1-3 -

¹Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. ²One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them.

Terri is a vegetarian. I raise beef cattle. When we have a fellowship meal it is proper for me to try to bring a dish that meets Terri's needs even though I enjoy meat. She is also gluten free so providing an option that has no gluten is also important. Do I always accomplish this? Certainly not. But we are to strive to set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity as 1 Timothy 4:12 says.

2. We are to live in anticipation of his return (2 Peter 3, verses 11-12). There's an old story about a small church that was holding revival in a packed building. It was so crowded that they had to put up chairs everywhere, right up to the pulpit. The evangelist was preaching on the second coming of Christ and had really warmed up to the subject. At one point of his sermon, he leaned over toward the audience and shouted out Jesus' promise: "I am coming soon!" He marched up and down the stage some more and then leaned out again over the edge of the stage and cried out, "I am coming soon!" Several minutes went by and again he shouted out, "I am coming soon!" But this time he stepped too close to the edge and lost his balance. He fell off the stage and he landed right on the lap of a couple sitting in the front row of chairs. The husband looked at this wife and said, "Well, I guess we shouldn't be surprised. He warned us three times!"

We are pretty comfortable with our current situations! We have been blessed. We expect that our current state of affairs will continue. How much do you think about Christ's return? How eager are you for Christ to come?

It's easy to go about our daily activities, our busy lives, our earthly walk and not think about our future with Christ, heaven and the transition for human existence to divine existence. We need to look forward to the new heaven and the new earth.

But we need to avoid the extreme – have you ever met someone who only talks about heaven and the future? It leaves a bad taste in my mouth, like they have no

purpose here on earth. As Oliver Wendall Holmes Sr. said, "Some people are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good."

Is Covid 19 a sign of the end times? Embrace it. Come, Lord Jesus, come!! Be prepared (2 Peter 3, verse 17). Remember the thief in the night

3. We are to tell others (2 Peter 3, verse 15). We are to evangelize, present the truth. And we are to be patient and loving.

Look for opportunities to serve others. Provide child care for someone who needs their children cared for. Mow a neighbor's lawn. Take someone for their groceries. Or go grocery shopping for them (and pay the bill).

We have a golden opportunity – NOW! People are fearful, confused, uncertain. Things change daily (schools for example). We can provide a safe place, a calm place, a place where God can comfort and bring peace in the midst of chaos.

2 Timothy 4:2 says, "Preach the word; be prepared **in season** and out of **season**; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful **instruction**." And as someone wisely said, use words if necessary (Francis of Assisi).

4. We are to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3, verse 18). Grow up spiritually. Grow in grace. James 4:6 says, "But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'"

Grow in knowledge. Read your Bible, read study helps, understand what the Spirit is saying through the Word of God. As 1 Peter 2:2 says, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation."

Conclusions

I grieve that Covid 19 has changed so many things. I grieve. I grieve for the hugs, the closeness and the fellowship. (A few Sundays ago a combination of God speaking through the message, with my emotional turmoil, led me to tears. I needed a hug but ...)

I grieve that in the midst of a pandemic we may have unintentionally hurt each other or neglected our duty to each other. I grieve that things probably will never go back to "the good old ways." But the challenge is, what will the new ways look like? How do we adapt/change so that we continue to love and encourage each other?

Call someone this week to check up on them and encourage them. See if you can serve them in any way. (How many people have you checked with this past week? Dean, yes Dean, is faithful at calling me 1-2 times per week just to ask how I am doing. I appreciate that!)

Organize a group gathering with those who are comfortable meeting – play games at a different location; gather around a campfire to roast marshmallows; gather with a group to pray; go on a hike, write an encouragement card (and deliver it). Look for opportunities to serve others.

Here's a testimony of the power of loving your neighbors. Tammy wrote - "A huge shoutout to my mom's neighbors on Brookside Lane! Thank you so much for coming over and cleaning her garden in the front of her house! I love how you pitched in and

taught your children about community service and loving your neighbors! You are the epitome of compassion and community! We are so grateful. She/we are overwhelmed by your love! Thank you so much!”

Spread the Good News. God is good; Jesus died so you can live; comfort and peace come from God alone - even in the midst of a pandemic.

Titus 2:11-14 says,

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. ¹² It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, ¹³ while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

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Our hope!

**Jeff Linthicum, August 30, 2020
First Mennonite Church, Berne IN**

*Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened."
But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. - 1 Peter 3:13-17*

One night at dinner, a man, who had spent many summers in Maine, fascinated his companions by telling of his experiences in a little town named Flagstaff. The town was to be flooded as part of a large lake for which a dam was being built. In the months before it was to be flooded, all improvements and repairs in the whole town were stopped. What was the use of painting a house if it were to be covered with water in six months? Why repair anything when the whole village was to be wiped out? So, week by week, the whole town became more and more bedraggled, more gone to seed, more woebegone. Then he added by way of explanation: "Where there is no hope in the future, there is no power in the present."

We are pausing our sermon series on the Spirit Working (well, not really) but we are taking a pause from looking at the gifts of the Holy Spirit to address something that has been on my heart: HOPE!

Now, the reason I say that we are not really taking a break from the sermon series is because hope is infused into us by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are told in Romans 15:13 - "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Hope is evidence of the Spirit of God in our lives! So while we are taking a break from the gifts, we need to understand the desperate need we have of the Spirit in order to be hopeful people.

Now last Sunday I shared how I had spent some time with Pastor Chet who is planting a church in Cincinnati. I also took a day to pray and fast for First Mennonite Church, praying about the struggles we are facing with Covid, and also the responses I am seeing.

Where are we?

Much of what I read and hear is not hope filled, at least not displaying a hope where we are supposed to have it.

Some time ago I was listening to a podcast from Del Tackett. For those who have taken the Truth Project here, that name should ring a bell. Dr. Tackett asked the question, relating to the verse that was read this morning, "When was the last time someone asked you about the hope you have?" 1 Peter 3:15 says, "Always be prepared

to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”

There is an expectation that our hope is so evident to people that they are going to see something different in our lives so that we stick out, and it causes us to be a bit of an anomaly. Yet Dr. Tackett went on to say that Christians are no longer hopeful people, that we act and respond no different than the world around us. We can be just as critical and judgmental as anyone else in the world, if not more so. This is an indictment against us, against me!

We are living in a time when the world is looking for hope, for something that brings comfort and security and the question is, “Are we ones bringing hope into a hopeless world, or are we acting just like the world around us?”

I remember being at a leadership conference and the speaker said it is not enough to hold out where you should go. It is not enough to declare the truth and so go. You also need to explain why it is so unsustainable where you are presently and why you need to move beyond where you are (where we are) presently.

What I have heard, seen and read on social media - there is really no difference between the comments of my Christian friends and my non-Christian friends. Attitudes toward what is happening around Covid are not breaking along theological lines, but political lines. And the church of Jesus Christ needs to be careful concerning this.

One meme I saw on Facebook highlights this clearly. It was something along the lines of if you are wearing a mask in your car, you don’t need to have an ‘I am voting for Biden’ sticker on your car - we already know it.

There is actually a study that has been done tracking your news source and your reaction to masks. Those who mainly listen to Fox News are more adamant not to wear the mask and those who watch/listen to CNN are more adamant to wear a mask. Then we are taking strong stances based on our preferences and lobbing bombs at each other! The memes and snarky comments on Facebook are not revealing where a Christian’s hope is to be.

Now please do not hear this as an attack, but as what we have been observing and how our compass needle is not pointing true North, myself included.

But taking the mask situation, the divide between the rabid anti-mask crowd and the rabid pro-mask crowd, we have to understand that living life in the ditches steals the hope we are supposed to have. I have the anti-mask people declaring it is their right not to wear a mask; the government is overreaching and taking our rights away and it is just the beginning. You could easily be correct. But a mask is not persecution. To even hint that a mask mandate is persecution of the church is an insult to Christians around the world who are encountering real persecution.

I hear them say, “But we are in the end times and we cannot go along with this.” We very well may be living in the end times. There are some signs that would point us in that direction. My concern is the lack of hope that is portrayed; that if I wear a mask it is showing that I have lost hope in God. A mask should not give you hope or make you hopeless. If it does, we have a misplaced hope.

As our nation becomes more secularized, many media sources suggest that we are losing America. One of the Founding Fathers, John Adams, stated, “Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” What is happening is not a shock; and therefore, some predict that our country will break down. We need revival. We need a turning back to God in repentance, not a militant anti-mask agenda.

If the news you are watching, if the end times preachers you are hearing, are filling you with anxiety, anger, angst, turn it off! I am not saying that end times preachers pointing out how what is taking place might be the end times are wrong. But if you don't walk away filled with hope, with joy, with peace, with something greater than dread, you are only getting a partial truth.

Luke 21:28 says, "When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." For the Christian, the end of all things should not bring dread, it brings about hope and an anticipation that all that we have longed for is getting close.

Now the other extreme has been just as bad. There are those (with no health issues) that are adamant that if people are not wearing masks that they are going to kill everyone. There is a sense of hopelessness to not go out in the world where there are unmasked people.

There are Christians that have taken a vulgar word and replaced it with mask and are calling people an expletive for not wearing a mask. Is that really how we want to be seen? Is this expressing the hope we have in Jesus? Calling others names?

I am not saying that the Covid-19 is not a real pandemic. I am not saying to not use caution, but if a virus with a survival rate above 90-95% makes us afraid to love and interact with others, we should be concerned.

Christianity has a history with a number of plagues in Europe. The black plague took the lives, according to some estimates, of 30-40% of the population. And yet, it was Christians who went and served the hurting and the dying at the risk of their own lives. Why? Because their hope was not in this life. They didn't love their lives so much as to shrink from death!

We have a mandate to do the "one anothers" (love one another, encourage one another) and that doesn't go away in the face of a virus. In California in a four week stretch in the lockdown, they had a year's worth of suicide attempts. The CDC issued a report that 25% of 18 to 35-year-olds have seriously considered suicide.

There is a desperate need for hope beyond this pandemic. The thing is, we are supposed to have that hope! I have struggled with hope during this time. When we make a decision and everyone is unhappy, it was leading me to hopelessness. I was thinking, "Who am I to lead the church?" My doubt and insecurities came to the surface. I responded in ways that were not hope filled.

The solution

There is a solution for our hopelessness, and it is a refilling of the Spirit of God in our lives. It is a realigning of what is important and a refocusing of where our hope is found.

Take a minute to take a step back and ask: what has Covid revealed about me? What has it said about my priorities? If someone would look at what I am doing during this time, what does that reveal about my priorities?

Titus 2:11 says, "For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ"

Is it worldly things that are driving my life? Is it self-preservation more than serving others?

Remind yourself over and over again where our hope lies. If you can't watch the news without becoming distressed, discouraged, angry or fearful, turn it off! Have a friend tell you if there is anything of worth that you are missing. As we said, if the preachers you are listening to are not producing the fruit of the Spirit in your life, turn them off! But open God's word! Romans 15:4 says, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

We are living in the day of the devotional. We will read our devotional books, but we need to dig into God's word ourselves. God's word reminds us that our hope is not in this world.

Colossians 1:3 says, "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints— the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel."

As believers, our hope should not and cannot be in this world! This world is passing away and we need to live as aliens and foreigners in this world. Even with all the wonderful things we have in the USA - I have been to over 30 countries and I still have the deepest conviction that this is the greatest nation on the face of the earth - yet, if this country were gone tomorrow, I would grieve, but not as one who has no hope.

My hope is stored for me in heaven! 1 Peter 1:3-4 says, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you." Do we live like our hope is someplace else?

We are in trying times for our nation. It is difficult on all of us, but the difficulties should serve to reveal the hope that we have.

Romans 5:1 says, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."

Rejoice in our sufferings . . . rejoice in our sufferings . . . rejoice in our sufferings. To be honest I can't even rejoice in my inconveniences. How in the world do we rejoice in our sufferings?

Yet hear this again: hope is the evidence of the Spirit of God working in our lives! Hope for the believer becomes a testimony especially in the trying times. It is when a grape is crushed that its juice comes out. When a Christian is pressed, our hope should come out. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, etc., should be what is there. This is what the world is looking for in us.

It is when we can have joy in the midst of things that are a struggle that people begin to sit up and take notice; when it seems like everything is falling apart. When

everything is contrary to how you want it you see the world spinning into chaos, and yet you walk with a hope that this world doesn't hold sway over. Then the world will take notice.

Colossians 1:27 says, "To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." In a chaotic world we need to be the ones that show a different way! A way that reveals the glory of God! That hope that we have.

I cannot overstate the importance of this. It takes us emptying ourselves of our own wants, wishes and desires and to be filled with the Spirit of God. It takes us being willing to give up what we feel is right and/or wrong. Remember there were two trees in the Garden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (or right and wrong) and the tree of life! As Christians we are called to stand under the tree that brings life! We do that by living our lives in a way that reveals the HOPE that we have!

We can show evidence of this hope easily enough. Philippians 4:8 says, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things." Speak such things, watch such things, listen to such things, post such things!

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Defiant hope

2 Corinthians 4:6-18, Psalm 13, Job 23

Donna Becker, September 9, 2020
Landis Homes, Lititz, PA

My message title today is "Defiant Hope". I first heard this phrase a few weeks ago at a memorial service for a friend's daughter. She was just 42 years old when she died on Easter morning.

As you can imagine, this has been very difficult for her family. But as I sat at the memorial service and as I heard the pastor talk about "Defiant Hope" – I thought, yes, this is what will make this difficult journey a little bit easier. Because this family has the hope and the belief that one day they will see their daughter again in heaven. Their hope is in the salvation given to us by Jesus Christ. It won't take away all of this pain, but it will make it a little easier to bear.

So what makes this hope defiant? Well, let's look at the two words a little closer. Here are some definitions of defiant that I found: Resisting the urge to behave or to conform to what is asked or expected. Doing the opposite of what you are told to do. Openly, boldly resisting. And here are some synonyms of defiant: bold, brash, daring, brazen – I like that word! Or how about gutsy, audacious!

The definition of hope? A feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen; a feeling of trust. So some examples would be "I hope that this person will visit" or "I hope that I get that job." And the common phrases we often hear are: "Hope against hope," meaning to cling to a mere possibility. "Hope for the best" – a favorable outcome. "Hope springs eternal" – being optimistic. "Not a hope" – no chance at all.

But for Christians, the definition of hope is broader; yes, it's a desire for something to happen, and a feeling of trust. But for those who believe in God, in Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross, hope is the **confident** expectation of what God has promised, a **confident** expectation that when this life ends, there will be a better life waiting for us with God. A **confident** expectation and belief that God is always by our sides. A **confident** expectation and belief that when we pray, God hears and will answer our prayers.

So if we have this hope, this confident expectation, then why do we need to be defiant in that hope? Why do we need to be bold, brazen, daring in our hope? Because we all know that life can be difficult and challenging at times. Think about times in your life when things are going wrong – maybe you or a loved one isn't feeling well, or maybe you or someone close to you is having financial troubles. And we all know that these past months with the COVID restrictions have been especially difficult – when we can't see family and friends, when we've been isolated and lonely. I know that for me it has been overwhelming at times – worrying about getting the virus, always

remembering to wear a mask, to stay socially distant, not being able to hug a friend who may need to be comforted.

These times can cause our hope to falter, even as Christians. Yes, we know where our hope lies, but sometimes that hope feels far away, sometimes we get discouraged, sad, anxious. These are all normal feelings and reactions during times of trouble.

But this is when we need to be defiant in our hope – we need to boldly, brazenly resist the urge to sink into despair. Resist the urge to give up and give in to the negativity that we are feeling and that may be surrounding us. And it does! Think of watching or reading the news. That can be filled with bad news. Or think of people we know who are negative, always complaining.

One of the resources I found as I wrote this message said, “We need to defiantly deflect pessimism, bitterness and negativity coming at us from all angles.” The resource said it can be like putting on a shield of defiant hope armor to deflect that negativity.

And for Christians, a large part of that shield can be the Bible, God’s word. That Word can help us deflect despair and sadness and the urge to give up. Because God’s Word is filled with hope, with stories of men and women who continued to hope in God even when their lives were being torn apart or enemies were trying to defeat them.

There are many examples I could share from the Bible, examples of God’s people having hope in spite of difficult times. We can think of Hannah, a woman unable to have children, but she kept praying to God and even promised that if she had a son, she would dedicate him to God. And God heard her prayers. He gave her a son, Samuel, and Hannah kept her promise and gave Samuel to the church, to God. And then God gave her even more children.

And what about Moses, Joseph, Daniel, David, and so many others who believed God’s promises – and never gave up! I’d love to hear about the Biblical stories that give you hope.

But the first person who came to mind when I began to think about this message was Job. We probably all know the story of Job, how he was tested by Satan, with God’s permission. But until this year I had never read the whole book. In January I started a reading program to read the Bible in one year, something I have never done. So just a month ago I came to the book of Job. And it was fascinating, and a little irritating, to read how his friends talked to him (and talked, and talked, and talked ☺).

But it was also enlightening to hear Job’s words to his friends and to God. I’ve always thought of Job as a man of strong faith, so I guess I expected him to accept what was happening to him and just sit and wait for God to help him. But, no, Job didn’t just accept what was happening. He *raged* at God, he *raged* at his friends – but behind all that rage, I found hope. Prior to the chapter I’m about to read, Eliphaz has spoken three times, Bildad two times, and Zophar two times, with Job replying to them each time.

And now in chapter 23, Job is responding again to Eliphaz, who has accused Job of terrible wrongdoings. In Chapter 22, verse 5 he said to Job, “Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless?” He says Job has ignored the weary, not fed the

hungry, has deprived the widowed and fatherless. This is why God is punishing Job. So Eliphaz tells Job he must submit to God, must listen to His instructions.

Listen as I read Chapter 23, Job's response to Eliphaz's accusations. See if you can hear the hope – the Defiant Hope!

1 Then Job replied:

2 "Even today my complaint is bitter;

his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning.

3 If only I knew where to find him;

if only I could go to his dwelling!

4 I would state my case before him

and fill my mouth with arguments.

5 I would find out what he would answer me,

and consider what he would say to me.

6 Would he vigorously oppose me?

No, he would not press charges against me.

7 There the upright can establish their innocence before him,

and there I would be delivered forever from my judge.

8 "But if I go to the east, he is not there;

if I go to the west, I do not find him.

9 When he is at work in the north, I do not see him;

when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him.

10 But he knows the way that I take;

when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.

11 My feet have closely followed his steps;

I have kept to his way without turning aside.

12 I have not departed from the commands of his lips;

I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread.

13 *"But he stands alone, and who can oppose him?*

He does whatever he pleases.

14 *He carries out his decree against me,
and many such plans he still has in store.*

15 *That is why I am terrified before him;
when I think of all this, I fear him.*

16 *God has made my heart faint;
the Almighty has terrified me.*

17 *Yet I am not silenced by the darkness,
by the thick darkness that covers my face.*

Did you hear it? Did you hear the hope? Amongst all of Job's complaining and raging, and also perhaps bewilderment – why is this happening to me? - there are some words of hope.

Let's look at a few of the verses again:

3 *If only I knew where to find him;
if only I could go to his dwelling!*

4 *I would state my case before him
and fill my mouth with arguments.*

5 *I would find out what he would answer me,
and consider what he would say to me.*

6 *Would he vigorously oppose me?
No, he would not press charges against me.*

7 *There the upright can establish their innocence before him,
and there I would be delivered forever from my judge.*

Job feels like God is lost to him, he can't find God. Have you ever felt this way?

8 *"But if I go to the east, he is not there;
if I go to the west, I do not find him.*

9 When he is at work in the north, I do not see him;

when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him.

Job looks to the east, the west, the north, the south – he can't see God.

But then in verse 10 Job says this, "But he knows the way that I take" – God still knows where Job is, even if Job can't find God. And then "And when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold." There's some hope. God may be testing me, but I will come through this. And if I can find God and state my case, I will be delivered forever by my judge. The New Living Translation says, "I will be given a fair hearing." Job still believes God is fair, even as he sits in terrible pain.

And then there is more hope. Verse 17 "**YET** I am not silenced by the darkness, by the thick darkness that covers my face."

Here is a man who is in terrible pain, his life destroyed. And he can still say

- When I am tested, I will come forth as gold.
- If I could find God and state my case, I would be delivered forever by my judge.
- AND I will not be silenced by the darkness.

Job still has hope! I can imagine Job saying, "You can't beat me down, I won't give up!"

This is defiant hope – stating boldly that even if God doesn't feel close, and Job cannot find him to the east, west, north or south, Job knows God is still out there.

And if you read the rest of this book, you will see that even as Job continues to struggle and fight on through the pain and devastation that has occurred in his life, he still keeps his hope and his faith in God. And I believe because of this faith, God ultimately restores everything to Job – his family, his property and his health.

Remember one of the definitions of defiant I read in the beginning – not conforming to what is expected? In this situation, how many people would have given up the fight, saying, "I'm beaten, I give up, just leave me alone?" Or, how many would have cursed God for what He had done in Job's life? Yes, Job raged against God at times. But he didn't give up his faith; he still believed that given the chance, God would still be fair with him.

So this is where the defiance comes in. Job isn't doing what is expected, giving up as others would do in his situation.

There is a passage in the New Testament that could have been written by Job. Listen to 2 Corinthians 4:6-18:

6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 11 For we who are alive are always being

given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. 12 So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

13 It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, 14 because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. 15 All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Yes, Job, you were struck down but not destroyed and you did not lose heart. God was always with you.

So how can we use Job's example of Defiant Hope in our lives? Because I believe that if we, like Job, can have hope in difficult circumstances, we can then be an example for those around us, especially for those who do not know God or who do not believe in Him.

One quote I found said this: "The hope is that once any of us have been impacted with the reality of hope within our lives, we like a **virus** can infect a dying world with the antidote for despair, which of course is hope." What a perfect sentiment for today's world. We have COVID infecting people all over the world. But we, as believers in God, can use another virus – the virus of hope, defiant hope – to infect the world around us, to counterbalance all of the despair and negativity and despondency we see and hear. We can be the Warriors of Hope – as one resource said – to spread the word that all is not lost. God has not given up on us or on this world. He is still there, working in our lives every day.

When I began, I told you I heard about Defiant Hope at a memorial service. As I wrote this message, I thought about this young woman's parents. They are still grieving the loss of their daughter, but in them I still see hope. And I found a quote that describes how I see their lives today. It says, "You have embodied this hope already; just by waking up you have defied all the factors that have sought your story's premature ending. There is a boldness in your breathing, a spark still within you that threatens the darkness you have known."

In other words, they are still plugging along, trying as hard as they can to get on with their lives. Yes, they hurt terribly. The mother told me, "I'm 75, it should have been me." But she also said that they are getting through this day by day, knowing that they need to keep going, for themselves and for the rest of their family.

As I watch these parents, and hear them talk about their belief that they will see their daughter again one day in heaven, their hope and their courage gives me hope. It lifts my spirits and testifies to me that God is there, God is our comforter, God has

promised us eternal life and He will keep that promise. They are my Warriors of Hope – my example of how to endure a tragedy and still keep living. Just as Job did many years ago.

So today I am asking you to be a Warrior of Hope – an ambassador for God – to spread the good news that in the midst of negativity; there is still hope. Hope in God's promises, hope in the salvation bought for us by the blood of Jesus Christ. Our world today needs this hope so much. And if we as Christians can infect others with this virus of Hope, then maybe our world could become filled with positive thoughts instead of negative thoughts, filled with love and compassion rather than hatred for others. It may have to happen just one person or one positive thought at a time, but it needs to happen, for our sake and for the generations that come after us.

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Reflections on shutdown

Wesley Penner, October 11, 2020
Millersville Mennonite Church, Millersville, PA

As you come to [Jesus], the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 2:4-5 (NIV)

In Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit entered a room in a house in Jerusalem and rested on the disciples gathered there. The Spirit took on the form as tongues of fire, and God's Spirit took up residence in the disciples. This pivotal moment in history signaled a change that Peter talks about in his letter: no longer is God's personal presence confined to a building; each believer has become a tabernacle, a tent of meeting, where Jesus is high priest and you are a priest. We are the new building, the true tabernacle, a tent with feet and shoes, a mobile sanctuary, giving praise as we live and move. Whether you're on the tractor, in your car or at the grocery store, you are a priest and a sanctuary. No matter how you dress, you are a part in the new Temple building being built on Jesus. During the shutdown our building was closed and I was reminded of this scripture.

When Millie and I returned to our work as pastors after our Sabbatical in March, our building had been closed for one Sunday already. It would be about 5 months until we returned to worshiping in our building. During that time many of us worshiped God from our homes and we gathered online until later in June when some of us would meet at our outdoor sacred space gatherings. We returned to worship in our building on August 23. That's 23 Sundays that we were away from our building and 16 Sundays with only virtual gatherings.

Even though we have returned to worship in our building, we have not returned to the same pattern of worship that we had in 2019 before Millie and I left on Sabbatical. We are changed. In what ways are you changed?

Destruction of the temple and Jerusalem

During the lock down, I was constantly reminded of the two times that God had let his Temple in Jerusalem be destroyed. When I prayed during the lockdown, I asked God about our return to worshiping in our building and my thoughts constantly returned to Israel's exile into Babylon.

The story of the exile can be found near the end of 2 Kings, also in 2 Chronicles and Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Israel's defeat to Babylon and exile was devastating to the Jewish people. The Babylonian exile took place over a 17 year period. There were three times when the army of Babylon came to Jerusalem and people were taken away into exile. During the first two events, the Temple was left standing. Before the final exile, the false prophets started preaching messages that everything was going to return to

normal and all was going to be well and God would defend them. And so the king in Jerusalem rebelled against the king of Babylon. About six years after rebelling, Babylon's army returned and destroyed everything that remained, including the Temple. Nothing returned to normal.

Jeremiah had been prophesying for years before the Babylonians came, calling the people of Israel to repent. The people refused to listen and when Nebuchadnezzar became king, he started prophesying about their coming destruction:

Therefore the LORD Almighty says this: "Because you have not listened to my words, I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon," declares the LORD, "and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

Jeremiah 25:8-11 (NIV)

Notice how God calls Nebuchadnezzar his servant. God promises to punish Babylon in their turn after the 70 years because of their own arrogance and evil deeds. As the people of God head into exile in Babylon, think of all that they lost: no longer could they gather together to worship God as one people. Also, how were the people going to make things right with God? God had taken away their ability to make offerings to atone for their sin; there was no more altar to offer sacrifices. Their identity as a people was tied to the Temple and to Jerusalem and both those had been taken away.

There were many faithful in Israel who suffered in exile. These people did not deserve exile yet they suffered through it. The purpose of this terrible event was to change the people of Israel so that they could return to right relationship with God, something the Temple could not fix.

"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." Jeremiah 31:31-34 (NIV)

The new normal

I don't like the idea of a "new normal", but it doesn't mean it won't be a reality. Jeremiah points to a new normal in his day, with a new covenant, for the people of Israel. Instead of the Law being written on stone tablets sitting in the middle of the Temple, it will now be written in their hearts and minds.

When the people of Israel returned from exile they tried as hard as possible to return to the way things had been before. They probably should've been trying to live into the new covenant that Jeremiah had talked about instead.

Like Israel's exile, when we were in lockdown, we couldn't gather in one place together. It was difficult to collect offerings, or sing songs. Part of our identity is defined by Sunday morning gathering in this church building. It was strange to worship online and apart from each other. It was during this time that I realized how much we take gathering for granted that we can gather at all, and God reminded me of the testimonies I've heard of believers in nations where the church is outlawed where believers would meet one-on-one in taxis because nowhere else was safe. Our Anabaptist ancestors could not meet in large gatherings when they were persecuted; it wasn't safe.

I was also reminded about true worship, like when Jesus talks about worship with a Samaritan woman, he tells us that true worship isn't about where it happens:

"Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks."

John 4:21-23 (NIV)

And Peter's words emphasize that point.

As you come to [Jesus], the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus

Christ. 1 Peter 2:4-5 (NIV)

When the Israelites returned from exile, they were supposed to return as a changed people, but they wanted to go back to the way it was. As we return to worship together, we should return as a changed people. If the Spirit of God is changing worship for us, it would be good to work with the Spirit to make this change. Resisting the Spirit is not good.

In Matthew 24, Jesus predicts that the Temple will yet again be destroyed, which happens almost 40 years after. The Jews in Jerusalem rebel against Rome and so Rome sends its armies to recapture the city. The Romans destroy everything and God allows the Temple to be destroyed again.

Reflections and responses

I want to give you a chance to add your own reflection or responses. As you think about Peter's words that we are each part of the holy priesthood and that we are altogether the spiritual house, what thoughts come to mind about your time away from worship in a building?

As you come to [Jesus], the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 2:4-5 (NIV)

Prayer

Heavenly Father, during these challenging days of the Covid-19 pandemic we pray for reassurances from you of your love for us. I pray that we will be faithful in listening to what you are calling us to in this new season. In the name of Jesus, the cornerstone of our spiritual house, we pray, amen.

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Did you get the invitation?

Colossians 1:23

John Harvey Groff, December 6, 2020
Strasburg Mennonite Church, Strasburg, PA

A letter

We Mennonites, especially the more conservative ones, or the descendants of the more conservative ones, have in our DNA the trait of identifying as a group by what we wear. In other words, you could tell whether you were 'in' or 'out' based upon what you wore. This is in our recent history. So, the Evil One has laid the perfect trap. When civil authority (which according to Romans 13 is ordained by God) is evil, or confused, or dysfunctional, requests that we do something good by wearing something that 'they' would wear - we refuse. We refuse because, as Mennonites, we assume that by wearing what they wear, we are approving of the rest of their lives. This assumption was taught to our grandparents 60 years ago. What our grandparents put on was a sign of their holiness and separation from the world.

This teaching of the Mennonite church has changed. It changed because we could not find dress codes in the New Testament, except the white robe of righteousness that Jesus gives us on the final day. Brothers and sisters, we are salt and light. As servants of the Lord, we need to be able to distinguish good from evil. If we refuse to do good when a worldly civil authority asks us to do it, because they are of the world, then we are in rebellion. We lose the moral right and moral high ground to refuse to do evil when our civil authorities make future laws and demand that we live by their rules.

Our conservative members think that by refusing to wear a mask, the unsaved world is seeing a people who do not fear sickness and death. However, our neighboring brothers in our inner cities are telling us otherwise. They are telling us that the unsaved world sees maskless faces and concludes that we are a people who do not fear God and are unmoved by the human suffering around them. Also, they see us as guilty of civil disobedience.

Our Bishop Board at LMC are men of integrity. They have all signed a covenant to be in the pursuit of orthodox, New Testament Christianity. It is to them that I go and inquire when my people cannot hear. It is to them I go and inquire when I am seeking what I may be misunderstanding. Ever since we withdrew from MCUSA, my trust in the Conference has increased. For me, there is no grief in submitting to them as spiritual leadership because I trust them. I know they are seeking the Lord's way for His Church.

But we Mennonites see ourselves through such rosy-colored glasses. And the refusal to do good when asked, because we feel it does no good because "so-and-so" said so? Well, that makes us look arrogant instead of humble servants in the eyes of public officials and the non-believing world.

I hope that I am wrong. But, I think this mask controversy is only an opening skirmish in a war in which immoral men may try to force their way of life on brick and mortar religious organizations. Do not damage your testimony by refusing to do good when asked. In the 1940s, at the beginning of our nation's involvement in World War II,

our bishops went to Washington, D.C. and asked for clemency from the draft by way of alternate service. They appealed to the government officials. The bishops emphasized that we were hard working, tax paying, loyal, peaceable citizens who were not a problem for the constabulary. Would the government have granted the bishops alternative service from the draft if we were viewed as a hardnosed rebellious lot who would refuse to do good if it didn't quite suit us?

Your ministry team seeks to follow the crucified and resurrected Jesus. His Spirit has been gracious and has given us clear vision. But I feel inadequate. Because somehow, I am unable to convey it to you in words you can hear. My intent is to offend no one. Please accept this nuts and bolts explanation of what we see from a ministry team perspective in the spirit that it is given.

Sincerely, John Harvey Groff

Sermon

Do we have an identity crisis as a church? If I were to ask you how belief in Jesus changes the way you relate to your world, what would you say? Our text this morning, Colossians 1:23, will help us understand who we are as we unpack its meaning. It reads:

"...if you continue in your faith. Established and firm not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the Gospel that you have heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. And of which I ____ (insert your name) ____ have become a servant."

As the brothers on the team were in planning session and were discussing where we were stopping and starting; as we worked our way through Chapter 1 of Colossians, they said, "Well Harv, it looks like verse 23 kind of stands alone as a wrap of all of Chapter 1 thus far. So whatever it is we missed, jump all over that!" But, my brothers did not miss. This verse is not here because something was missed up until now, but because in our human frailty, we sometimes don't hear it the first time. The apostle is teaching a church who is totally Gentile, with little or no Jewish influence or knowledge of God. Paul, the former Pharisee, does not teach them the true knowledge of God's law as a means of directing them. But instead, Paul focuses on who Jesus is, the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, the creator and ruler of everything. Jesus is the preserver, retainer, and sustainer of all matter that is both seen and unseen. He is the head of the body of the church. But CRUCIFIED and firstborn among the dead.

What? Crucified. How is that possible? The Muslim would say it is not. That this makes no sense that the holy and preeminent one would accept an unjust death sentence by crucifixion at the hands of the corruptible, corrupted, deceived, dysfunctional beings that he himself created.

How does being crucified and first born or first resurrected bring hope? Excellent question! The beings that God created have indeed become corrupted and dysfunctional. But they were not created that way. At first, when the happy couple walked and talked with God, all was very good. But our first parents chose to follow their own eye and their own truth. They rejected God's direct revelation. See, they chose to do what was right in their own eyes. They refused to submit to God's direct

revelation. Hell then ruled their existence. They were trapped in a prison of deceit and dysfunction from which no son of Adam could free them. They were doomed to die in their deceived rebellious state, separated from God and goodness forever. So, the creator God, the holy and pure incorruptible one, masked his holiness, glory, preeminence and perfection in corruptible, organic, dying human flesh.

Our creator masked his glory and put on humanity, why? Because he is so in love with the body, spirit and soul of humanity that he will use the unjust murder of the body of the perfect, supreme, preeminent one to trade for the soul and spirit of the otherwise doomed man. The doomed man can be saved so long as that man, by free choice and will, agrees to put Jesus on over his dying corrupt body, just as Jesus had put corruptible flesh over his brilliant glory. In order for the human to receive the gift of a living spirit and soul, he must put to death by crucifixion his selfish and rebellious will.

It is moving to me that crucifixion is the means by which Jesus bought us, because it is a slow, lingering death as the body instinctively draws one more breath. The death of my rebellious will likewise lingers, craving one more breath. The receiving man also must end the dependence on his own truth and conviction of who and what he is. Instead, the receiver must look to Jesus for his identity. He must love the human family just as Jesus, his risen and crucified Lord does. It is marvelous what happens to the lives of men and what they look like when they are freed from the slavery of self-gratification and doing what is 'right in their own eyes' and choose to live out the will of God while still on earth.

But, according to our text, we must persist and continue in the faith because our humanness brings a new challenge every day. So, to persist and continue brings to mind three words: **commitment**, **submission**, and **obedience**. These words all operate together like a planetary final drive with Jesus the crucified Christ being our example, inspiration, and power source. These units are an extremely strong and reliable means of transferring power. But, if you remove just one of the three planetary gears, the machinery flies apart. As I thought about the analogy, I really liked it. But, the analogy of a three legged stool may be easier to grasp for those of us who are not mechanically inclined. While the stool analogy does not fit as well due to the absence of a power source, it does still have the three legs. Any of which, when removed, would lead to a very wobbly experience. The goal of either analogy would be a strong and efficient transfer of power from our Source to our action in the world and a most secure place to rest or stand while we interact with our world.

Webster says that **commitment** is 1a) the giving of a charge or entrusting, 1b) the state of being committed, 2) official consignment to a prison or mental hospital, 3) a court order authorizing consignment to a prison or mental hospital, 3) a pledge to do something.

As Christians, this is what we do when we accept Christ as our Savior, we commit. We give him charge of our thought process. The world sees this as putting ourselves in a sort of prison because we turn away from selfish gratification. One popular Billy Joel song, *Only the Good Die Young* comes to mind. Worldly, ungodly voices proclaim loudly that blessing is found in licentious experience. How would we ever be able to spot the lie if not for Jesus who taught us that blessing is found in self-sacrifice and commitment, which the believer sees as freedom? Because, in Jesus we crucify the desires that separate us from God. This allows us to live uncluttered lives free from the stain of sin and its consequence and guilt.

The second gear or leg is **submission**. Webster says that submission is 1a) the act of submitting to the power of another, 1b) the state of having submitted, 2) the

state of being compliant; meekness (one of the fruits of the Spirit).

This gear or leg is one of the keys to cooperation in an orderly society characterized by individuals who are willing to lay down their preferences in order to work together. The selfish way is to demand your own way and by threat, force and intimidation, coerce those around you to accept your will. In some nations, submission is forced on people by power hungry despots who ruthlessly use weapons. In democracies such as our republic, whoever wins the majority in most states wins the authority to do it his way. In the church of the crucified Christ, we commit first of all to Him. And then also to civil authority, as long as we can possibly do so while in submission to Christ. There is quite a lot of submission taught in the New Testament and it would seem to be a teaching we need to brush up on. In the Mennonite Church, we have an authority structure: children to parents, parents to the Lord, church members to each other and team, team and council to each other, team to overseer, overseer to Board, and all to Jesus. We as a church are united by certain ordinances and tenets of the faith that are bedrock, foundational, and do not change. It is with great risk that I list some of them here, because for the list to be exhaustive it would also be tiresome for our purposes this morning. But I am talking about things like the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, that God is the creator of the universe, that there is sanctity in human life, the existence of heaven and hell, the suffering of the blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins, baptism, marriage between a man and woman, traditional non-resistance, the resurrection, the call to lead holy lives, all bedrock. All soundly based on Scripture. *Bedrock beliefs are for all Christians, in all cultures, and in all ages.*

And then there are preferences which are things like style of music and type of worship service. Some sing hymns, some acapella, some worship with a rock band, some with an organ. There are preferences in how to dress, formal or casual. You would be amazed at the number of requests that I have had over the last 8 months for some type of a dress code, or at least a request to address the dress issue. Along with all the potential alienation and misunderstanding that would bring, our track record with dress and appearance codes in the past is terrible! I remember hooting with laughter in 1972 when reading through the 1962 LMS Handbook. It said boys were not allowed to have short or flat top haircuts. I have had quite a few passionate conversations with brothers in the last half year concerning where I am mask-wise when, in the middle of the conversation, this topic is raised about dress. And the two are related. What we hear about the mask is "the first commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And that is not possible with a mask on. Because, a mask on the face is an impediment and an interference to our worship." The same comments have been made about dress. Brothers have told me that they couldn't worship because a female wore a dress that was too short, neckline too plunging, etc. But brothers, my mind has cleared this week as I prepared and meditated on this message. Our Lord Jesus, the crucified preeminent one asks us, "Where is your focus? Why are you not looking at me?" We can guarantee that as Christians, we are going to have issues with worldliness if your eyes are focused on the world. Yes, the women are beautiful and can capture the eye. Can they help us by being considerate with their dress? Yes. But where is your focus? Is it on the world or on the crucified preeminent one? Are masks annoying, new, strange, and irritating? Yes! But, where is your focus? The conservative Muslim thinks that women should be covered from head to toe in public because men cannot control their lustful eye. *And they are correct. But only because they do not possess and follow the crucified and resurrected Jesus, Hallelujah!* The Muslim has only the law and law condemns. A crucified and sinless Lord calls us to

focus on Him as He focused on the will of God while he lived on earth.

He does not condemn us but invites us to follow Him. Jesus said, "My sheep follow me for they know my voice." The Apostle Paul did not teach the Colossian church the truth of the law and its punishments because he knew the problems they had like sexual immorality, lying, deceit, laziness, gossip, slander and on and on. Yes, even things like being required to wear masks would all be solved when believers choose to commit, submit, and obey the crucified risen Jesus voluntarily. From a leadership point of view, it is extremely risky to leave the decision of what to do and how to respond to the choice of the followers. What if they reject sound judgement and revealed truth? But, this has been the posture of the Lord with his people since the dawn of creation. Tuesday, December 1st was the first day that I actually rejoiced that council overturned the recommendation (that everyone wear masks). As a result, I have the opportunity to present the word of the Lord along with the leading of the Lord. And at the same time, the team can allow our people to choose whether to accept the invitation; the Lord invites us to obedience. He tells us why we should obey. And He invites those who accept the invitation to find blessing and growth that comes with obedience. We will not look down our noses at those who do not accept. They simply miss the blessing along with continuing the strife which are the consequences of the matter. Jesus said the word of God cuts separating the joints and the marrow, but all unite when following Jesus.

The world can tell where our focus is by what we make a big deal about. Is it masks and dress, or peace with God through Jesus? Both problems will be solved when we focus on our crucified Lord and follow the voice of His word.

Please, I need you to understand the clarity of this vision was obtained by the workings and pushback from members of the team. There are no winners and losers here. I am persuaded that vision is produced by broken hearts and intense self-examination. It requires wisdom and discernment to keep bedrock and preferences in the places they belong. It is not a job for the timid. I thank every individual who reached out to me and made this message possible, specifically, all who confronted and challenged me. In fact, I feel the need to acknowledge those who are the sources for this message this morning. I must acknowledge the other pastors and wives. You see, I had prepared something far more judgmental. While it was "from the Lord and Scripturally based", I received the mildest of checked spirits from the team and wives. I told them I was disappointed but I heard them. I realized as I rewrote that this new message was much better. As for me, I needed to understand the 'judgment' before I could bring the message of an invitation. The point is, I needed the counsel of my brothers in the faith in order to avoid obstacles along the road. There are so many ways we can turn when responding to preferences. But, in the church of the crucified, resurrected Jesus, preferences should never sever relationship. Not if the focus is on Jesus.

The last leg of the stool, or last gear, is **obedience**. Did I mention that none of these parts come naturally to man? Webster says that to be obedient is to carry out a request or command or the like. Or being submissive to control and dutiful. 1 Samuel 15:22 says, "To obey is better than sacrifice." How are you feeling about your daily walk with Jesus now? This is the one that really gets me. If the speed limit on the four lane highway is 65 and I am rolling 70, am I being obedient? How many of you are being obedient while driving 741 through Strasburg? I am afraid there are a lot of sinners. And that is the point. That is what we are. None of us has any hold on righteousness, especially not the preacher. That is the reason I need the crucified Jesus. That is why I

am part of the church with a team ministry. We are not a church with a dynamic or charismatic leader with powerful convictions everyone follows. We, together, all of us, seek to live for Jesus as a community. Just as the brothers on the team submit to each other, so should you. Just as we are compliant and molded according to the word of God, so should you. None of us will find the way to peace with God by ourselves. But we have got to persist and contend for the bedrock faith. That is the source of our hope; the great hope of life lived for God and in eternity lived with Him. What a joy it is to be a minister of that hope of which _____(insert your name)_____ have become a servant. Most of the team continues to invite you to examine the recommendation and prayerfully consider our bishop's request of wearing masks indoors while at church. Remember, this is by invitation, not by law, rule or policy. The invitation is in accordance to scripture laid out by your ministry team as a small means of serving the Lord in our local community. We welcome you to test the yoke of obedience. Will the Lord forgive you if you get this wrong? I think so. But, consider the missed blessing.

Just an ending note that I learned while on the phone this past week. And that is if my people would put on a mask voluntarily and by choice, they would be free from any rules about masks. They would be free from restrictions in any of the zones. That thought rocked my world. Freedom from the law of masks through faith and submission by extending grace to others. I didn't run it by the brothers, so maybe it is a stretch. But at least it brought a smile to my face. Let's pray.

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Why should I wait for the LORD any longer?

Tim Darling, January 3, 2021
Community Mennonite Fellowship, Milton, PA

6:24 Some time later, Ben-Hadad king of Aram mobilized his entire army and marched up and laid siege to Samaria. 25 There was a great famine in the city; the siege lasted so long that a donkey's head sold for eighty shekels of silver, and a quarter of a cab of seed pods for five shekels. 26 As the king of Israel was passing by on the wall, a woman cried to him, "Help me, my lord the king!" 27 The king replied, "If the Lord does not help you, where can I get help for you? From the threshing floor? From the winepress?" 28 Then he asked her, "What's the matter?" She answered, "This woman said to me, 'Give up your son so we may eat him today, and tomorrow we'll eat my son.' 29 So we cooked my son and ate him. The next day I said to her, 'Give up your son so we may eat him,' but she had hidden him."

30 When the king heard the woman's words, he tore his robes. As he went along the wall, the people looked, and they saw that, under his robes, he had sackcloth on his body. 31 He said, "May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if the head of Elisha son of Shaphat remains on his shoulders today!"

32 Now Elisha was sitting in his house, and the elders were sitting with him. The king sent a messenger ahead, but before he arrived, Elisha said to the elders, "Don't you see how this murderer is sending someone to cut off my head? Look, when the messenger comes, shut the door and hold it shut against him. Is not the sound of his master's footsteps behind him?" 33 While he was still talking to them, the messenger came down to him.

The king said, "This disaster is from the Lord. Why should I wait for the Lord any longer?" 7 Elisha replied, "Hear the word of the Lord. This is what the Lord says: About this time tomorrow, a seah of the finest flour will sell for a shekel and two seahs of barley for a shekel at the gate of Samaria." 2 The officer on whose arm the king was leaning said to the man of God, "Look, even if the Lord should open the floodgates of the heavens, could this happen?" "You will see it with your own eyes," answered Elisha, "but you will not eat any of it!" - 2 Kings 6:24-7:2

This is king Joram, son of Ahab, the last of the line of Omri. These are wicked kings to begin with, but Elisha seems to be making a little headway with this one. I can't help wondering if Ahab's repentance near the end of his life is continuing to bear fruit. Thus far Elisha's been saving the king from war with the Syrians by warning him of ambushes. His intervention enraged the king of Syria and he sent an army against Elisha, so the prophet miraculously struck them with temporary blindness. Thus far not a violent blow has fallen. Elisha's in the stronghold of the capital city of Samaria where he has access to the king and the Elders of the city.

This story is more about the king than Elisha.

Now, the Syrian King has given up raids and small attacks and assaulted the capital.

- Divine warnings about raids from the Syrians should have been a hint of God's protection
- The blinding and restored sight of the Syrian army should have been a hint of God's protection
- Elisha's mercy to the invading army should have been a hint of God's divine mercy

Every indication thus far in his dealings with the Syrians has been to show him that God will protect Israel if Joram will trust Him. The king's own actions to the contrary are an indication of how far down his faith lives and, according to the flow of the book of Kings, an indicator of the reasons for God's actions in years to come.

Samaria is in dire straits, there's no doubt about it. The city has been surrounded by the enemy and they've stayed so long food is running short. This has always been the goal of a siege. Jerusalem does well with water, but it's a very dense city, so food is an issue.

Consider that you could get a tasty donkey's head for nearly three times what was paid to Judas for Jesus.

Many translations translate what you get for five pieces of silver as "dove's dung." That's because the original Hebrew says "dove's dung." It was used in dire times for food, but sometimes it might be used for fuel. If you're reading NIV they're reflecting the fact that ancient Akkadians referred to the inedible pods of Acacia seeds as dove's dung. In any case, not an appetizing meal.

But this is not the extremity.

The extremity is in the story of two mothers making a pact to eat their children. Today we'll cook my baby and eat him; tomorrow we'll cook yours. But then you hide your son. No fair! This story gives us a feel for the real problem with food.

These two women call to mind another story in Kings. You remember Solomon's story. This story is a dark reflection of that one.

In that story two women fight over the life of a child where in this one they fight over a child's death. In Solomon's story the loving mother was the primary speaker, in this one the murderous mother is the speaker. In the earlier story the women are prostitutes embracing life. In this one it is mothers embracing death. In that one a woman was willing to sacrifice her own life for the life of a baby, but in this one she is willing to sacrifice the life of the baby for herself.

The king is a dark reflection of Solomon. He has little faith and less wisdom. But he is not without a heart. We can see the compassion he has for his people in three things. One, he stopped and listened to the women and their problem. The second is that their story grieved him so that he tore his robe. Finally, as he walks away the people can see that even before the women spoke with him, he was wearing sackcloth under his robe. Nobody would ever have known about this except for his public display of grief. He was carrying the burden of the plight of his people privately before he was willing to let anyone see him carry it publicly.

He finally reaches his tipping point. He mistakes Elisha's divine knowledge and power for instigation. He decides that he's waited long enough for the LORD and if Elisha's playing games, then Elisha will pay the price with his head.

But Elisha is sitting with the Elders and foresees the coming of the messenger to kill him. So while the messenger is outside the door banging to get in, he's shouting the King's message: Why should I wait for the LORD any longer?

Now to read this story, we might not think it's all that inspiring. There isn't much here to lift our spirits: war, starvation, inflation, cannibalism, grief, anger and threats of death. Obviously in many biblical stories there are positive examples and in some there are negative examples. That means some stories give us examples we should follow. For the most part, this one's the other kind - what not to do.

In times of dire distress don't breathe threats against God's prophet and don't eat people. But of course, these are symptoms of the problem. The real issue is in the heart - don't lose hope.

The hopeful part of this story is in the next passage. We'll deal with that later. In the meantime, this passage deals with the reality of situations in which people tend to lose hope.

The Bible does not paint a nice picture. It does not sugar-coat the extremity of the situation. People were frustrated. They were struggling. They were desperate. Sound familiar?

The people had no resource. They went to the king for help and he said frankly he had none to give. They were left to their own devices for solving their problems. So they bought inedible food and did things that should not even be considered let alone debated and practiced.

The king was grieving for his city. He wore his royal robes on the surface, but underneath he was mourning. In the meantime, he was being presented with problems he could not fully solve. And he was waiting. His father had rejected God for most of his life till the end. Perhaps he was trying to bend his faith in the direction of his dad's last inclinations. But it was being stretched thin. Finally he lost patience.

I find it interesting that we have no word about Elisha's stance on the situation. We're not told that he said the king should wait on God. We're not told any message of hope Elisha subscribed to at this point. But the king is under the impression that Elisha is holding out hope in the LORD and the king is tired of waiting. So he'll shoot the messenger.

The Bible is clear in its portrayal of the desperation of the city for a reason. Sometimes we become desperate. Sometimes our circumstances make us think they're governed more by chaos than by a loving and compassionate God. Our hearts are at the point of abandonment of all we've held to all this time. We all lose patience. We all lose hope occasionally. All our faith sometimes grows weak. Sometimes the situation calls into question everything we thought we knew about God. Sometimes the situation around us shouts that there is no reason to trust, no reason to believe, no reason to hope. And the king's cry is the cry of all of us at one point or another: Why should I wait for the LORD any longer?

Almost a year ago we were hearing how this virus had taken root and was spreading. There were all kinds of speculation about where it came from. It didn't take long for the whole world to be engulfed by it.

Every country, and in our country every state, began taking measures to stem the flow. The measures taken were patterned on the extreme measures some places took during the days of the Black Plague back during the middle ages. Isolate yourself, isolate your community.

Out of situations like this fear rises over faith like oil on water. And just like oil on water, it can ignite with the means to extinguish the flame directly underneath.

Over the months the fear has changed. It might have started as a fear that a person might get the virus and die. Since then, we've known situations that went both ways. Some have gotten the virus and have died, but many more have gotten it and to a degree have recovered. We all know people who have recovered and a few of us are close to folks who have died from the virus. The fear became that our vulnerability was creating an atmosphere of manipulation. No doubt that's true. There have always been and will always be vultures hovering to benefit from the trouble of others.

Throughout we've been encouraged not to allow fear to overcome our faith. It's a hard balance to find.

When is a claim of caution actually a lack of faith? When is a claim of faith really just a lack of discipline?

When the information we have conflicts, is the choosing of information we prefer just that, a way of doing what we please in spite of other information we've chosen to ignore? When is stubbornness just a screen for fear of manipulation? When are we allowing our caution to leak over into an extremity? We've all dealt with these questions and dozens of others more tailored to our circumstances.

Sometimes it's hard to discern what we ourselves are feeling, let alone how others are feeling and how we should advise those who need help. Sometimes when we're called on to help others we are left with the king's words: If the LORD does not help you, where can I get help for you?

In the end, the situation has the potential to cause fear, to cause recklessness, to sap our faith, to confuse and to confound our best efforts at wisdom. We're left with the words of the king: Why should I wait for the LORD any longer? In some cases, we might even just wonder not whether we should, but if we even can.

This global crisis has caused distress on so many levels it's hard to get a grasp on it. We're like the people of Samaria, wondering what to do when there seems to be nothing truly helpful that we can do.

- So we pray and people still get sick
- And we pray and some still die
- And then we're talking with folks and find that the virus is closer to home than we even knew
- And the folks who get sick were also the folks who were careful
- And folks who are not careful seem to be doing ok
- And then there's another round of shutdowns
- And then folks we love are out of work again
- And we still can't travel freely

We're balancing livelihood against health and there doesn't seem to be a good answer.

Why should I wait for the LORD any longer? **Because the LORD is the only one who has any answers.**

There is only one person who knows the end from the beginning. There is only one person who saw this coming and sees how it will end. There's only one person who knows ultimately how it will affect me and my circumstances.

Only He can know how all the measures being taken by all the people in all the countries will ultimately work together for good or ill. All the things I cannot see, He can see.

You'll see at another time just how God had the solution to this problem all worked out, but nobody could have foreseen it. If you want to look ahead, just read the next chapter, but we'll talk about that too. In the meantime, just know that in the moments of darkness, as the people of Samaria would attest, the light may be hard to find, but we know where it is. It is in the glory of God.

Because we just don't know how all this is affecting other people.

Remember, the king was wearing his royal robes, but underneath he was in mourning for his people. I may be frustrated, but there are some among us who are downright devastated. They have family who has died. They themselves have been thrown out of work completely. Some have had long term effects on their health. Some have had to care for whole families full of sick people all at once.

People need our prayers and, in some cases, our help. Mostly, though we wait on the LORD in prayer because He is in the best position to help. Some things, like the deep stress that people feel even if they haven't been affected physically or fiscally, only God can see and reach. Sometimes, and this is a key, people don't even know the depth to which they are being affected. We try to be strong and don't want to complain, but all of us carry things beneath the surface, like sackcloth under a royal robe.

Because patience is a necessary resource in times like this. When the king sent to kill Elisha, the solution to the problem was only a day away. He was acting out of frustration and could have just waited another day. Part of the dynamic of finite people serving an infinite God is that our clocks are not in synch. For him a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like a day. A moment to us can seem like an eternity, but for God it's all the same. Part of redeeming the image of God in humanity is reacquainting humans with divine time.

You don't know what God is going to accomplish out of the crisis. I don't think God sent the Syrians against Israel, but He did see the circumstances and He was moving things for His purposes. I don't want to go into His solution to the problem too much, that's a story for another message, but that means, for the moment, we're in the same situation the people of Samaria were in. We just don't know.

I am reminded again and again about the car accident my sister and brother were in, that brought to light the fact that she had Leukemia. As a result it was caught early enough to allow her to receive treatment and to recover fully. The situation was not pleasant, but God brought good from it.

Possibly you can already see some good coming out of this crisis. I don't want to speak too soon, but it's possible.

The time will come that we will look back and know that 2020 is the year everything changed, and God will have done something unexpected and likely even wonderful with a thing that was a mystery and a misery for us at the time.

One of the great questions of the ages is why bad things happen, why God allows suffering. Augustine of Hippo has one of the best answers to this question that I've ever heard: God judged it better to bring good out of evil than to suffer no evil to exist. In the same way that he makes good people out of bad people, he can make good things come from bad circumstances.

One thing we can know, and this from the most general of theological ideas:

God will get glory out of this.

- Whatever the health ramifications
- Whatever the economic ramifications
- Whatever the psychological ramifications
- Whatever the social ramifications
- Whatever the political ramifications

God will get the glory, and in the end, we will see it with our own eyes and give Him praise for what He did.

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Leadership in a time of rampant idolatry

Stephen Weaver, January 2021
In different meetings with the three Pequea Districts, PA

⁸ For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. - 2 Corinthians 13:8

¹ I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ - I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away! - ² I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh. ³ For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. ⁴ For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. ⁵ We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, ⁶ being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete. ⁷ Look at what is before your eyes. - 2 Corinthians 10.1-7

¹ O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? - Galatians 3.1

Jesus battled lies, conspiracy theories and threats from a place of weakness. He was able to do this because he knew that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God (John 13:3). This is our inheritance as well. However, many in our congregations are not aware of the scope, power and glory of the kingdom, such that they are tempted by the ideologies and idolatries of the world. As Jesus faced mounting opposition, we do well to see how he parries the challenges under the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit and the Word are the same today for our settings.

Matthew 11:20-24 - The hard-heartedness of the neighboring towns

²⁵ At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Summary of discussion with district leaders: On this point (hard-heartedness), the discussion centered around a lack of self-awareness or emotional intelligence on the part of congregants as to how they were coming across to their leaders (and secular neighbors) when they parrot prevailing ideologies or idolatries. Pastors would lead with, "Can you tell me how your position [anti-mask] contributes

to authentic Christian witness?" The congregant would respond, "We're standing up for what we believe in against the government." "And how is not wearing a mask bringing people into relationship with Jesus?" Usually, the conversation would end at that point ... The "yoke" that Jesus is offering here is intimacy with the Father, which results in an outpouring of love for God, and neighbor. We are not asked to "take a stand." We are asked to bring the salvation of God to a hell-bound world. Resisting the authorities on spurious grounds does not help our witness. Capernaum and Bethsaida and other towns had a self-awareness that was false. They would pay dearly for this not only in rejecting Jesus but also in the ideological battles that would follow in the Galilean War as recorded by Josephus. The Way of the Cross embraces lost neighbor with the love of the Father, not in embracing political ideologies.

Matthew 12:1-15 - Opposition from legalists

¹⁵ And many followed him, and he healed them all ¹⁶ and ordered them not to make him known. ¹⁷ This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: ¹⁸ "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. ¹⁹ He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; ²⁰ a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; ²¹ and in his name the Gentiles will hope."

Summary of discussion with district leaders: Leaders faced opposition from legalists when they were asked, "Where is mask-wearing sanctioned in the Scriptures?" Here, leaders were faced with a rule-keeping version of Christianity, not a Christianity rooted in the love of God for neighbor. Jesus, under the anointing of the Spirit, carried out the will of the Father by reaching out to seek and to save those whom the religious spirits of the day had ostracized and marginalized. Anti-maskers have been characterized by a callousness to the weak and the physically vulnerable, not realizing perhaps that this was jeopardizing the witness of the local setting in the community. Jesus confronted this religious callousness on the Sabbath, front and center in the synagogue.

Matthew 12:22-32 - Conspiracy theories about Jesus

³⁰ Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. ³¹ Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ³² And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

Summary of discussion with district leaders: Discussion of this passage centered around how Jesus created an artificial distance between himself as incarnate God and the Spirit in order to demonstrate the triumph of the Truth. Contemporary people are used to believing that the truth revolves around them, their opinions, and interpretations, responding to leaders, "Well, that's just your opinion." Here, Jesus is saying, like he did to Pilate later, that, no, there is such a thing as Truth. That Truth will judge history, people's postures and all conspiracy theories for all time. We are called to a life of believing trust in Truth, not to a life of negativity and cynicism that traffics in conspiracy

theories created to prop up our political ideologies. This goes for conspiracies of the Left or the Right.

Matthew 12:33-36 - A tree is known by its fruit

³⁵ The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. ³⁶ I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, ³⁷ for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

Summary of discussion with district leaders: Discussion focused on how leaders are being judged for so-called bad fruit: "You are driving people away from church at a time when they need to be in church!" No, we are taking temporary precautions on the outside chance that some neighbor would benefit. The witness of the church cannot be stopped by whether we hold services in person or not. The metaphor of fruit in the Gospels is always predicated on something that bears fruit and a harvest in the long-term, not temporary, inconsequential inconveniences.

Matthew 12:38-45 - Religious people want their religious ways of being affirmed

^{39a} An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign ...

Summary of discussion with district leaders: This centered around the artifact of Sunday morning church service. We all were surprised at how congregants clung obstinately to this tradition and opposed any perception of the new opportunities presented to reach out and love neighbor afforded by the pandemic. Instead of leaning in in unity to face the crisis, people clung to tradition and berated their leaders for not conducting "church" as it has always been conducted. "How do we know that you have heard from God about this?!" was a common complaint. They wanted a sign; they were not recognizing the authority of the leadership office, nor that governing authorities had their good in mind (Romans 13). No sign will be given except the sign of Jonah. The proud, self-righteous, self-serving person will have to have their ego deconstructed in the "belly of the whale" if they want to be a follower of Jesus. There is no other way.

Matthew 12:46-50 - "Your family system is outside - they want to talk to you ..."

Summary of discussion with district leaders: Leaders felt besieged by family systems. It seems that certain narratives around the temporal circumstances permeated family systems. These powerful congregational systems would then rise up against the leaders in order to undermine their pastoral guidance and authority.

Matthew 13:1-17 - Parable of the sower; Why Jesus uses parables

¹⁵ “For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.”

¹⁸ “Hear then the parable of the sower: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom **and does not comprehend it**, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ **yet he has no root in himself**, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, **immediately he falls away**. ²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, **but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word**, and it proves unfruitful. ²³ As for what was sown on good soil, this is the **one who hears the word and comprehends it**. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

Notice the probabilities. Notice the hazards. What are they? What is a common thread between the first category and the fourth category (hint: *συνημι*, *syniemi* – to comprehend). The fight for the soul of the Church is white hot. You will need to employ every one of the postures of Jesus under the power of the Holy Spirit. And God forbid you get seduced by any of these idolatries/ideologies.

A parable following this one is about the wheat and the weeds. What is different about that Holy Spirit posture than this one? What is the same?

Summary of discussion with district leaders: Our times together ended in the holy fear that perhaps our people had grown hard-hearted. There was a sorrowful and repentant spirit as we realized that our work at teaching and formation could not compete with the likes of AM radio and social media. Just the sheer volume of media drowns out the still, small voice of Christian witness rooted in the wisdom of Scripture and the centuries of witness. We were left with the strong impression that a sermon or a Sunday school class was no competition for the 24/7 news cycle. Unless our folks were “re-evangelized” they would miss the Gospel due to the pervasiveness of the spirit of the age.

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Surviving the wilderness

Philip Yoder, January 17, 2021
First Mennonite Church, Middlebury, IN

Exodus 15:22-16:4

22 Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. 23 When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah.) 24 So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?" 25 Then Moses cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became fit to drink. There the Lord issued a ruling and instruction for them and put them to the test. 26 He said, "If you listen carefully to the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, who heals you." 27 Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water.

16 The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. 2 In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. 3 The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death." 4 Then the Lord said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions."

I want to preach two sermons related to living in this new year, a year that is already filled with uncertainty and with hardships for many. Many things that we considered normal just a year ago have changed. Things that we thought were unshakable, have been shaken. Life is different now than it was just a year ago, and for many, life will probably never return to the way it was. What I want to do with these sermons is to look at how, in the past, God led His people through very uncertain times, more specifically, how God's people went through the wilderness.

There are several Wilderness encounters that are recorded in the Bible, and probably more than we realize, if we were to list them. The two that all of us are familiar with are Israel's forty years of wandering in the wilderness, and Jesus' forty days in the wilderness just prior to beginning His ministry. Neither of these was a pleasant experience, in fact, both involved suffering and testing, and called for patience

and endurance, but both were essential in preparing His people for what God was doing in the world and for what God wanted to do through His people.

This morning I want to take a quick glance at three wildernesses. The first of these is -

1. The wilderness of Israel

The Israelites had been in Egypt for 400 years. They had been made slaves there and were crying out to God in their misery. And God delivered them. God delivered them because of His great compassion, but also because they were His chosen people, and God had other plans for them. When God brought Israel out of Egypt, they came to the Red Sea, and a crisis quickly emerged. The Egyptian army was pursuing them with the intent of returning them to a life of bondage and oppression. God used that crisis to teach the Israelites a very important lesson, "God is with you and God will save you!"

We remember the story, don't we? God parted the waters of the Red Sea, and the people passed through on dry ground. And as soon as the Israelites crossed through the sea, the sea closed behind them, drowning the Egyptians. The closing of the sea was not only to protect the Israelites from the Egyptians, but just as important, it was to prevent the Israelites from ever going back into that life of bondage. God had planned something better for His people, and now, they must prepare for it.

And so, God brought Israel into the wilderness, and there they were there for 40 years, on a journey that could have taken as little as a couple of weeks. But it was not some mistake that they were there that long. It was not because Moses lost the map or because in his haste to leave Egypt, he forgot the GPS. It was God's plan all along to bring His chosen people into the wilderness to teach them how to live as God's people, and if it takes forty years, that is how long they will be there. Remember, God looks at things from the perspective of eternity.

I know the wilderness is no fun. It is a desert. It is uncomfortable being there. There is no food there. There is no security there. But that is the very reason God took the Israelites there. They must learn to trust God and to depend on God for everything they need. They must learn to live by faith, a lesson not easily learned, even for God's chosen people, but a lesson that must be learned. There were some very important lessons Israel needed to learn, and they could only be learned in a dry, barren, wasteland. And so, God brought His people to a place where faith could be learned. Faith is essential to survive in a wilderness.

In spite of Israel's blindness, and unfaithfulness, and rebellion, and failures, I believe the 40 years Israel spent in the wilderness were the most significant years of Israel's long history. It was there in the wilderness, the Israelites met God. It was there in the wilderness, they received the Ten Commandments and the Law, and they learned that God has standards and cares about how His people live. It was there that their identity as a people of God was formed. It was there in the wilderness, they learned to trust God and depend on God for everything they need.

Israel learned much about God and learned to live with God in the wilderness. The lessons were not easy, but oh my, they were of ultimate importance. It was in the wilderness that Israel learned these ten things about God:

1. **GOD PROVIDES FOR HIS PEOPLE.** God provided food, water, and provided His people with clothes and shoes that didn't wear out. God provides everything His people need.

2. **GOD GUIDES HIS PEOPLE.** God appeared in a pillar of fire at night and a cloud at day. God also sent an angel ahead of the people to lead them and to protect them (Exodus 23:20). God guided His people through the wilderness.
3. **GOD DELIVERS AND SAVES HIS PEOPLE.** God delivered His people out of bondage in Egypt. And when the death Angel went through Egypt, God saved His people from death.
4. **GOD HEALS.** God specifically says this about Himself in Exodus 15:26, "I am the Lord who heals you." When Israel ran into venomous snakes on their sojourn, God provided a way for their healing (Numbers 21).
5. **GOD HAS STANDARDS AND CARES ABOUT HOW HIS PEOPLE LIVE.** One of the first things God did in the wilderness was to give the Ten Commandments and the Law to His people.
6. **GOD DEMANDS WORSHIP AND REVERENCE FROM HIS PEOPLE.** The first 3 commandments commanded reverence for God with no idols to share the honor, respect, reverence, and worship, that belongs to God alone.
7. **GOD JUDGES SIN AND REBELLION IN HIS PEOPLE.** Numbers 14 (the report of the spies who explored the land) and Numbers 21 (venomous snakes) are two examples of the people rebelling against Moses and against God. God did not turn a blind eye to their sin and rebellion but brought judgement on them. God's plan was for His people to be a holy people, to be like God, and when they were not, judgement followed.
8. **GOD IS MERCIFUL TO HIS PEOPLE.** In spite of Israel's rebellion and unfaithfulness, God did not destroy them, but declares that He forgives them (Numbers 14:20).
9. **GOD FIGHTS THE BATTLES FOR HIS PEOPLE.** At the Red Sea, God said "Do not be afraid . . . The Lord will fight for you, you need only to be still" (Exodus 14:13-14), and again in Exodus 23:20-30 God repeated that same promise when He was giving instructions about going into the land and taking the land.
10. **GOD IS FAITHFUL.** God will keep His promises, will be faithful to His promises, in spite of the unfaithfulness of His people.

Much of our understanding of God comes from these lessons Israel learned in her wilderness experience. And all ten of these lessons have overwhelming implications for us even today.

Israel's wilderness experience, and the lessons they learned there were so important that God commanded the Israelites to keep three festivals every year (Exodus 23:14-17) so they would never forget those lessons.

1. ***The Passover / Feast of Unleavened Bread*** was to remind them that God delivers His people.
2. ***The Feast of First Fruits*** was to remind them that God provides, and that their food comes from God.
3. ***The Feast of Tabernacles*** was to remind them that God protects His people.

All three of these festivals came directly from Israel's wilderness experience and were intended to teach every generation that would follow these important lessons learned in the wilderness.

But we also remember that Israel did not do so good in the wilderness. The people spent more time looking back, demanding to go back to Egypt, than they did looking forward to the Promised Land where God was taking them.

The people spent more time looking down at the dry, barren, wasteland, than they did looking up, up to a God who was providing manna and water for them, and

protecting them from their enemies, and keeping their clothes from wearing out. And in doing so, they revealed their lack of faith in their hearts.

The great tragedy of the Israelite's wilderness experience was that they failed to see that God brought them into the wilderness to prepare them to live in the Promised Land. They never set their sights on the Promised Land, and more tragic than that, they never learned to fix their eyes on God who was with them, and was leading them, and had a plan to greatly bless them. They failed to develop a vision of being the chosen people of God, chosen for a particular purpose and mission, chosen to represent God to the nations. They failed to see that they were children of a Heavenly Father who would provide for their every need and had some larger plan to bless them beyond their wildest imaginations. Instead, they looked around and saw the harshness of the wilderness and cursed it. And the longing of their hearts was to go back into bondage, because that is the way life used to be, it was what had been their normal.

Israel is for us an example of how not to go through a wilderness. But it is not the only example that we have in the Bible of how to go through a wilderness. The second wilderness we notice today is -

2. The wilderness of Jesus

Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness preparing for His ministry. Jesus' way of dealing with the wilderness and what He did with the wilderness was ultimately different from Israel's wilderness experience.

Mark 1:9-13

9 At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." 12 At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, 13 and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

Now to the natural way of thinking, because the wilderness is such an uncomfortable and inhospitable place, we think we should avoid it, that surely, God would not want His children to have to endure such an uncomfortable place. After all, God wants to bless us and fill our lives with good things, right? But the Scriptures tell us that after Jesus' baptism, the same Spirit that descended on Him at His baptism, sent Him into the wilderness, and there, to fast and pray and to be tempted by the Devil. During those forty days, Jesus was preparing for His ministry.

The wilderness is a place of testing. It was for Jesus and it was for Israel. The three temptations of Jesus were more than just personal temptations for Him. They were temptations to alter the kind of ministry he would have and the kind of Kingdom He would bring into the world.

1. Would Jesus attract a following through giving them free bread, would His Kingdom be something of a welfare program where people wouldn't need to work for their bread?
2. Would Jesus fascinate people with magic and dazzle people by doing miraculous stunts?

3. Would Jesus establish a political kingdom and rule over people by force, and be just another rival kingdom in this world, rather than reigning in the hearts of people who invite Him to be there and are then transformed by His presence in them?

Jesus rejected these temptations and chose God's way, the way of the cross instead. The cross was chosen by Jesus in the wilderness long before Pilate sentenced Him to a cross on Good Friday. Jesus knew that neither He, nor anybody else, could ever fix what is fundamentally wrong with this world - which is sin - through welfare, magic, or politics. The root problem is sin, and sin must be dealt with.

- It was in the wilderness, through prayer and fasting and through times of testing, that Jesus' ministry came into focus. And it was through these that it became very clear to Jesus the kind of ministry He must have, and the kind of Messiah He must be.
- It was there in the wilderness that Jesus committed Himself to do the Father's will.
- It was there in the wilderness that Jesus gained a clear vision and set his sights on the cross and on the salvation of the world.
- It was there in the wilderness that Jesus became laser-focused and prepared Himself for what lay ahead.
- It was there in the wilderness that Jesus relationship with His Father was defined and grounded.
- It was there in the wilderness, that the foundations for Jesus ministry and for His Kingdom were firmly established and cemented.

And when Jesus walked out of the wilderness, there was no question as to what His Kingdom would look like, there was no looking back to the way things used to be, and there was no looking away from His Father's plan and will.

I believe that the most important days of Jesus' ministry were the forty days He spent in the wilderness preparing for ministry and committing Himself to God's plan. Jesus knew the importance of preparation and the essential role of the wilderness in preparing. Preparing for anything is important, especially preparing to be God's people in this world! Abraham Lincoln once said, "If I have three hours to chop down the tree, I will spend the first two sharpening the axe."

Jesus understood that the wilderness is not the destination, it is the first step of the journey; preparing for what lay ahead is essential. Jesus is a good example of what to do in a wilderness; pray, fast, and develop a vision of the future, and commit oneself to God's will.

Here is a major difference between the way Jesus and Israel went through their respective wildernesses. Jesus was forward focused, preparing Himself for God's mission and for the Kingdom which was coming. Israel was backward looking, focusing on "the good life" (as they now remembered it) that they had in Egypt.

There are other wilderness experiences in the Bible, some in a physical wilderness, and more in a spiritual wilderness. There have been many wilderness experiences throughout history for God's people. And we too, have our times in a wilderness. Wildernesses are not limited to a sojourn in a physical wasteland, in fact, most are spiritual wildernesses. They may come through persecution, an accident, the loss of one's health, the loss of a loved one, loss of a job, a broken relationship, a natural disaster, a financial crisis, a national crisis, but always they come with the intent for us to learn how to live as God's people in a new and often difficult situation. And they always come with a test - "Have we learned to live by faith?"

3. Could the coronavirus pandemic be a form of a modern-day wilderness?

I am implying that it is, and that is why I mention it here in this sermon, although, I guess it depends on how you define a wilderness. This past year, in many ways, has felt to me like a trip through a wilderness, although I hope it doesn't last for 40 years! For many, these are times of uncertainty and distress with the loss of jobs, the loss of loved ones, lost times of fellowship and worship, and a loss of all sense of normalcy. It may not look like Israel's wilderness or Jesus' wilderness, but it has been filled with uncertainty, unfamiliarity, and barrenness. So, how are we to go through this? Will we aimlessly flounder our way through it, or are we trusting God to guide us through it, trusting that God has some plan to use it (and us) for His purposes?

The wilderness is a very uncomfortable and unsettling place to be, that is for sure. Nothing is familiar, nothing is comfortable, nothing is convenient, and there is no security there, other than the God who takes His people there. Those who find themselves in a wilderness are cast into the hands of God for their very survival. But here is one of the important lessons of the wilderness – *God is the only true security there is!* Nobody chooses to go through a wilderness, and yet from a Biblical perspective, wildernesses have an important place in spiritual formation, in refocusing the heart, in teaching people how to live by faith, teaching God's people how to live as God's people, and preparing them for the future.

The big question is: what do we do with our wilderness? Do we trust that God has brought us here and is leading us through it? Do we believe that God is taking us some place? Do we find ourselves being drawn closer to God, trusting Him for our needs, and do we believe that He has some purpose in leading us through this crisis. Have we fixed our eyes on God or are we, like Israel was, fixated on the uncomfortableness of our surroundings? Do we look back to the way things used to be and do we long to go back? Or in faith, do we believe that God wants us to refocus our lives and reorient our lives more toward Him and to His Kingdom?

I think the reason we know so little of how to go through the wilderness in our own spiritual journeys is that we have been taught to seek God's physical and material blessings more than the transformation of the heart or the formation of faith. We have been taught to condemn barrenness and to see it as a sign of God's absence, or even as God's punishment. We have been taught to interpret God's blessings as prosperity, or ecstasy, or affluence, but not regeneration, transformation, and the maturing of faith. We have been taught to seek emotional highs and exciting experiences. Those certainly feel good, we talk about them, we bless them, and we want more of them, but they rarely change us. We have been taught that God is our Father, which is true, but we have then assumed that God wants to open the windows of heaven and make life easy and comfortable and pour more stuff into our lives than we possibly know what to do with, instead of removing the clutter from our lives so we can focus on what has eternal value. God, like all good fathers, is more concerned with who His children are becoming than that His children's lives are paved with ease and comfort and drowning in stuff.

So, how are we going through our wilderness, through this coronavirus wilderness? The world is constantly screaming at us to curse the times we live in, to be overcome with fear, and long to go back to what used to be. But God invites us to fix our eyes on Him, to trust Him in all things, to allow God to refocus our vision, to remake our hearts, and to prepare us for a future that at this moment, only God can see. I invite you to

join with me as we go through this new year, to become forward focused, to fix our eyes on Jesus, to live by faith, to prepare for the future, to overcome the fears of this world, to reorient our lives to the Eternal Kingdom of God.

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Hold tight but let go

**Jim Hostetter, February 14, 2021
Community Mennonite Fellowship, Milton, PA**

I've heard it said that answering a question that nobody is asking is a waste of time. That's not because the answer doesn't matter, but because answers make sense in light of the right question. Today, I invite you to join me. Join me in asking the question you've probably been asking over and over this past year: "What does God want us to do right now with all this crazy?"

Tubing behind a fast boat is one of Aubrie's favorite summer activities. She is daring, determined and fierce and there are few challenges she won't try out. She learned to tube behind the boat of Larry. "Hold onto the rope," he would say, "and when the boat takes off just hold tight until the tube gets on plane. After that it should be easy." And it worked. She was a natural.

She would even be known to tempt fate by holding her hand to her mouth and faking a yawn as Larry throttled forward. I thought she was crazy. The challenge was on. And let's just say that Larry knows how to create just the right wave to wipe out even the most courageous. It's a fun little game they play.

But then there was this one time, she was trying a new tube. Well, not new, it was different. This tube was partially deflated. Just a bit. When the boat shot out of the water, the tube was supposed to also shoot out of the water. It didn't! Instead, the front of the tube caught the water and dove like a torpedo headed for bottom. The more the boat pulled, the deeper it descended.

In a split second, Aubrie was holding onto a tube that threatened her life. The drag of the water over her body was intense and the feeling of panic, fear, breathlessness, and confusion was overpowering. In the confusion she initially did what she was trained to do when instinct takes over - hold on tight. Fortunately she realized the solution was easy: "Just let go of the rope." Just let go. She lived, we circled back to see if she was ready for another try. She wasn't. She was weary, panicked, and in need of a break.

The struggle is real. You see where I'm going here, don't you? Is life driving you deeper and deeper this past year? You hold tight but it only seems to make matters worse. Your training was something you often trusted until this year, but now are your instincts taking you down a dangerous path? You may even be asking, "How do I get off this crazy-train?" or tube. The analogy could go on and on. And maybe that's far enough. But I learned a simple and powerful lesson that day. Although "holding on" is often the right thing to do, sometimes the right thing is to "let go."

"Ok, genius - how do I know the difference?" you ask. Knowing the difference is what we Christians call "discernment". And this past year has required lots of it!!

To say that 2020 was confusing would be an understatement. It seemed we were forced to make decisions, take sides, choose a path. And then do it again. And then do it again. And then do it all over again. Did it stop yet?

I have found myself asking, how we are supposed to know what is right or what is important? Specifically, do we as Christians have a good framework for navigating

confusing times? Maybe we could use a booster shot! Maybe we need to be vaccinated against the world's angst and ways. Maybe we need some antibodies to fight against the lies masquerading as truth.

Let's be refreshed today by God's Word. Join me in -

Ephesians 3:14-19

14 When I think of all this, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father

This refers to the mystery Paul talks about being revealed - and great riches and blessings, and endless treasures (spiritual, not physical) and God's presence and Paul's suffering. And he falls to his knees -

15 the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. 16 I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit.

Inner strength sounds good lately. How do I get it? "Through his Spirit."

17 Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him.

Trust is required and trust involves surrender. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. Roots draw up nutrients for life. Roots anchor us.

18 And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is.

I'm convinced we struggle with understanding God's love. Pastor Tim challenged us last week to look to "the example of the highest love." God shows us how to love. It's just so difficult sometimes!

19 May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully.

Yup!

Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.

Life and power. Isn't that ultimately what we long for here on earth? Godly life and godly power. Even if it isn't what we are chasing - it's what we need. It's worth "holding tightly."

I wonder if we are all carrying around heavy stuff and we don't even realize it. And it's often just below the surface. Hurts, sensitivities, tensions, anger, anxiety, fears - fear is powerful! Stress, the need to be right, unforgiveness, pride. These things steal from the "fullness of life and power" We must let them go!

I've heard it said several times in the past few months that the Covid pandemic did not create the turmoil of 2020 but revealed preexisting conditions already plaguing

American culture. The events and isolation of 2020 just created a pressure cooker that pumped up so much of the tensions already there.

God was not taken by surprise, like I was this year. He knew it was coming and He has a plan. Knowing how God wants us to respond is absolutely critical to experiencing the "fullness of life and power."

Covid isn't the real problem here and the real answer will not be found in politics, a vaccine, or our small minds.

"New normal," "uncertain times," "going forward," "in this time of Covid" - each of these now a cliché - point to a shakeup.

Things changed, and things are still getting reworked. I think of it as muddy water. Over time dirty water settles. In layers. There's a reordering that takes place. That's what is happening to each of us now.

This is the opportunity provided to us by this past year. So much got shaken up, changed and challenged that there will be a reordering of our lives and priorities going forward. We redeem this opportunity by ensuring that it is God reordering it. Let the good stuff settle on top. Shouldn't God guide this recalibration? Not culture, not economics, not fears?

So let's ask this question: What are God's priorities? Well, spoiler alert - the nation, the church and maybe even our church are struggling with these. The good news is that you are called to "weed your own garden" first. Then you can worry about all those other people that need fixin'. Church, our eyes may have been opened this past year. We know things must change. Status quo isn't OK. I hear many brothers and sisters expressing a call they sense lately, a call to walk closer to God - pressing into His heart. That is where true, lasting change starts and continues.

Love, unity and truth. These are three priorities we read about today and we hold tightly to these. Ephesians 4:1-3 says -

1 Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God

- even "in this time of Covid." God's children have a calling on their life and it comes from GOD - and it's beautiful. We are in this world at this moment for a reason.

2 Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love.

Humble, gentle, patient, allowance for faults, love. These are not the words that typify so much of what I have seen and heard in the world this past year, in America, and even in the church. But it's our call, because it's God's priority for the church.

3 Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.

Now this gets tricky for me. "Every effort to stay united." What does that mean? Because there are lots of people out there doing dumb things and making lots of

"noise." I have to stay united with them? First, this applies to the church (universal church) - all the true believers. In other words, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

So, it does not require me to remain united in the Spirit with the world. Actually, we are warned against this in many places. James 4:4 says. "You adulterers! Don't you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God." It applies specifically to being united as the "body of Christ," the church. So that focuses the matter a bit.

Now let's get down to making this hit home. How do we stay united in the Spirit and bound together with peace? It is a matter of the Spirit (which is why the world can't do it). So we walk more in the Spirit (less in the flesh). It begins with humility (verse 2) and gentleness (which is why the world and church struggles - pride!). It requires a value on peace.

Look, peace is easier with people you agree with, right? Peace is more difficult with those you disagree with. But God makes a way for peace within the body of Christ despite differences.

So Ephesians teaches us that unity requires the Spirit, humility, and valuing peace.

4 For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. 5 There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all.

That's a lot of "ones." And that's a lot of "alls." For lots of ALLS to become ONES requires great unity. All under God's singular umbrella. It's God's desire for the church that all His children are unified. Do you hear that church?

Our hearts should break for the disunity in the body. It hurts our Father when his children fight. But biblical unity does not come through diminishing the truth. Truth, unity and love are meant to exist in unison. But this can be a bit tricky to understand.

Let's try something: What's your favorite ice cream – who likes vanilla? Raise your hands. Another question - Can a person get to heaven apart from Christ? Raise your hands if you say no. Should we have to wear masks in public? Lol . . .not even going there.

There was great diversity of answers on the first question - with grace. We don't care if opinions differ. There was complete unity of opinion on the second. It's a core belief of Christianity. We felt tension and uncertainty when I asked the third question – the makings of disunity.

What this reveals is three types of beliefs: **1. Personal preferences** - your favorite ice cream flavor, Steelers or Eagles, iOS or android, YouTube or TikTok, Stihl or Husqvarna, Starbucks or Dunkin. These are preferences that matter to the person, but don't carry spiritual significance. These we should hold very loosely.

2. Essential Biblical convictions. These are core beliefs of Biblical Christianity. Jesus as the only way to heaven, we could all agree on this. Other examples are God as Trinity; that all mankind is in sin, broken and in need of salvation; that humans were created man and woman and we are set apart from the other animals; and that Jesus

died and rose again from the dead. You get the idea. It is unifying as the body leans into these beliefs. There's just no room for compromise on these matters

3. Then there's the personal convictions. These are the ones that cause trouble. These are beliefs that we hold, many times deeply. We come to believe them through our pursuit of truth and scripture. But there are legitimate ways for another believer to read the same Bible. We can serve the same God and come to another conclusion.

For example, wearing a mask in public. Is there anybody who doesn't have an opinion on this, lol? And yet people aren't all in alignment. Even in the church. Even in this church. So what do we do? Do we all just do our own thing?

So I told you I would make this easier for us. Here we go:

- Allowing our personal preferences to bring division is foolishness. Hold these loosely.
- Allowing essential Biblical convictions to be compromised is foolishness. Hold these tightly.
- Our personal convictions must be doused in humility, love, and peace so that they do not become a means by which the enemy can create division in the body and take our eyes off of our God.

If you or I are contributing to division based upon our personal convictions we should take great caution. This is dangerous ground. Grace is required.

In 2020 I watched as our personal preferences were fed a steady smorgasbord of digital fast food. I watched as essential biblical convictions continued to erode in the public square and even in American churches at an alarming rate. I watched as personal convictions became excuses for riots, family feuds, and church upheaval.

I am NOT innocent, but I will not go forward without committing to fidelity to God's unquestionable truths, pursuing greater biblical clarity on the disputable matters, and keeping my personal preferences in check.

We need our brothers and sisters and they need us. We need unity. Godly unity will never happen by compromising core Biblical truth, but by rallying around it. Tremendous freedom is found within this way of considering truth. We can hold tightly to the core truth of God and His plan, while we can contentedly and with peace hold other truths, knowing that we could be wrong and another may be right and that's ok.

Back to Ephesians (skipping ahead to verse 11)

11 Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. 12 Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ.

13 This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

Or NOT. The unity happens through the continual equipping, doing and building up of the Church. The maturing is not a foregone conclusion. It is what will happen as God's people do things God's way. And look at the result...

14 Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. 15 Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. 16 He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.

The words are so rich, they speak for themselves. "Speak the truth in love." Grow more like Christ in every way. The whole body fit together perfectly. Each part doing its work helping the others grow. A healthy, growing, loving body. Did you hear that? What a wonderful plan God has for His church! This is the truth.

Let's try something. Do you like Pepsi or Coke? Statistics tell us that more people like Coke. Some questions get answered by polling the masses.

As you can guess this has very limited application when it comes to matters of "truth." Or it should. On social media it is the outcry of the masses that creates the power or pressure. A person can get "cancelled" for stating a belief that a vocal social mob disagrees with. Phrases like be on "the right side of history" get thrown around as a benchmark of rightness.

But at the very root of that phrase is the idea that mankind determines right and wrong. A future generation will look back and judge the morality of a previous moment by their own current standards. How can we live by an ever changing standard like that? Talk about "being tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching"!

Do the masses get to determine Truth with a capital T? NO! That is our Father's job and ours is to understand it and live it. Plain and simple!

Biblical Christians believe in absolute truth: truth that is true no matter whether a person or the masses agree with it or not. It is true because God said it is true. Our job is to discover it, NOT create it. Don't "search within;" instead, search within (the Bible).

Why is it so easy to follow culture? Because there is a natural current going. A flow. It's easy to just jump on board and let it carry us. It is not easy to swim against it.

Matthew 7:13-14 warns us, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

Sheer numbers of people believing something proves very little. These verses tell us that often the "masses" will be headed the wrong way - down the broad road with a wide gate. Truth is found down the narrow road with a small gate.

"Why?" you ask, "do you feel a need to point this out?" It appears that increasingly Christian beliefs are being challenged in the public square. Increasingly popular opinion is opposed to Biblical truth. And for some of us we want to fight back. Honorably of course. We want to show "them" their error and point out "the right way." Or should we just run away and hide? Maybe build a bunker and stock up on MREs (meals ready to

eat)? Do we know what to do with a world that is rapidly changing - in many ways away from God?

A few years back I was hit right in the face with this clash of cultural beliefs and godly beliefs. And I didn't do so well with it. At that point I was still a public school teacher and I was just growing increasingly frustrated with what I was being asked to do or say and what I could no longer do or say. And I talked a lot and I expressed myself. And said my part and pushed back. And things didn't change because the forces were larger cultural forces that don't shift that easily.

And I got angry, bothered, frustrated, I don't know - foggy. This continued for several years. I had a hard time letting things go. I honestly was allowing it to steal my God-given peace and joy. I had a hold on this rope that kept dragging me deeper and deeper under water. It even started to manifest itself physically: insomnia began to set in (that was new); getting my brain to shut down and rest became increasingly difficult; I'd come home to my family already emptied emotionally and impatient. Keely had no idea what to do with me. It was a humbling time for me.

God used this experience to show me lots of stuff. I am weak. I need Him. I don't know better than God. I have to trust Him, holding tightly to Him. All I can do is what He asks me to do and trust Him to work it out. The results of the battle? I had to let go (ah, the freedom). To love people right where they are, broken and all. To hold tightly to truth but stop being a "white knuckler." Oh, the peace to be at a different place now.

And the events of this past year have only reinforced the need for me to have reordered priorities and focus. As the mud is settling, I pray I can find myself living more like Jesus.

We don't need to hold onto control. The moment I make plans, they change. Hold onto the future? Ha! The past? Broken. I don't want to go back to normal. It was broken. Fear? As I fear God, I fear less of everything else. Anger? It feels so good, the adrenaline, conviction, pride, ahhhhh - so powerful. And yet it seldom brings about God's goodness. **Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires.** (James 1:20).

Things are broken to be sure. America continues to become more post-Christian each year. But God is in control. I should not join the world, and yet I do not have to defeat it either. Oh, sweet surrender.

Check out Ephesians as it continues -

17 With the Lord's authority I say this: Live no longer as the Gentiles do, for they are hopelessly confused. 18 Their minds are full of darkness; they wander far from the life God gives because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against him. 19 They have no sense of shame. They live for lustful pleasure and eagerly practice every kind of impurity.

20 But that isn't what you learned about Christ. 21 Since you have heard about Jesus and have learned the truth that comes from him, 22 throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. 23 Instead, let

the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. 24 Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy.

We need to be renewed - renewed by the Spirit in our thoughts and attitudes. We have a new nature - godly, righteous, holy, beautiful. Don't let it be marred by anger. Or the deception that we can live outside of God's plan and still be joyful.

Ephesians continues with some commands - pointing people to right living. Stop lying. Quit stealing. Work. Give to those in need. Use words for God's work, not tearing down. Live in a way that pleases God's Holy Spirit.

This presents a very clear picture of God's plan to define right and wrong. The culture is wrong - we do not get to define our own morality. Neither does the "happiness" test define what's right. Even if EVERYONE on Twitter and TikTok says so.

Chapter 5 ends with a strong verse -

31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. 32 Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.

This verse makes so much sense in light of recent times. We are called to right living. And we have permission to call sin "sin" whether the world likes it or not.

Anger should not be defining our reactions to the crazy or the lies or the confusion.

Kindness. Kindness is soft. Anger is easy. Kindness feels like vulnerability. Anger is walled up. Tenderhearted sounds like weakness to me. YES? Weakness of **self** protection - which is strength in the **Lord** as protector.

Forgiving. We will be forgiving wrongs up to the day we die. Never stop forgiving.

If you would go back over Ephesians and look closer, you could notice a pattern. It's important. There are things we are told to let go and things we are told to hold onto. If we would generalize, what we find looks like this: Let go of the things of this world. Hold tight to the things of God's Kingdom (the unseen), which is our true HOME.

This may not be easy. I'll be working on this till the day I die. But I want the good stuff. I long to walk with other believers. Brothers and sisters in Christ. Shoulder to shoulder. Praying for a broken self and broken world. Walking in God's Spirit. Studying His Word. Shining the hope of Jesus on people who long to be set free.

These are crazy times. Are they end times? Who knows? But God's call to the end times church is the same as the first church and every church between. It's a call to be the Church. SO LET'S BE THE CHURCH.

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Where do we go from here?

James Westmoreland Jr., March 17, 2021
Devotional for this eBook, Coatesville, PA

While we are in this pandemic and it seems still fairly new to the world, it is not new to God. Some of us, the church, are wondering what God will do now that it is upon us and how should we proceed? Because we have been in this pandemic for a year, the things that I am going to say may be a little repetitive, but I think we need to consider what the country and world are still going through and repeat what the Bible says about them historically, use common sense now, and look to God for what we should do and how we should proceed spiritually.

Although this pandemic is new to us today, there have been several times in the Bible where "pandemics" have been recorded as well as several times throughout world history. The question we should be asking ourselves as God's church should be, "Where do we go from here?" Instead of playing the blame-game or asking, "How did we get here?" or "What is the world coming to?" we should be asking the Lord, "Where do we go from here?" With our hearts and eyes pointed upward, we should be seeking His will at a time when the world needs to hear from Him.

For the Christian, we need to stick to the fight, if you will! We need to look for ways that God is speaking to us, as in times past. The Holy Spirit has and will show us many ways in which we can humbly serve Him by serving others during this time -- from the large scale service of each country's government, to the state to state needs, to the "small" scale needs that each church or organization does every day around the world in the name of the Lord. Remember, the only Jesus people may see is the Jesus they see in me! I hear of this kind of service each week while attending church and imagine that the same type of service is being reported and happening all over the world through God's servants being faithful. Grow where you are planted!

When all of this broke out, I was freaking out like everyone else. My mind was racing, trying to think of everything - from how did this get started to how to proceed with it. The only thing that settled my spirit was praying and spending time alone with God. I began to realize that it is not "new" in world history (the Bubonic Plague, the Black Death, etc.). It is only "new" to us today! That led me to look at the history of pandemics for the last 100 years. Look up the 1918 influenza pandemic. Many of the reactions to COVID-19 were much like the reactions of 1918!

In Scripture there are many passages dealing with pandemics - Exodus 9, Luke 7, 1 Samuel 4, and many more. According to Merriam Webster, the word "pandemic" is our word for the biblical words "pestilence" and "plague" (synonyms). And although we did not call it a pandemic, AIDS was a pandemic! The Christian message was the same then as many are saying today - love! If I may say this, God will handle COVID-19 and all of its fears, worries, griefs, pains and deaths that we have all been through. But will the church, Christians, serve each other and the world the way Christ did and is calling us to do now? I attend a very small church in South East Pennsylvania. We do all that we can to serve each other and serve the communities in which we live in any way that we can. Isn't that what the church and individuals were/are called to do by God?

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