

LITURGY FOR SUNDAY, APRIL 5TH, 2020

Morning Prayer:

(You may wish to light a candle and have some reflective music playing in the background).

The Lord is good, a strong refuge when trouble comes.
God is close to those who trust in him. [Nahum 1:7]

O Lord, open our lips and our mouth shall proclaim your praise.
The night has passed, and the day lies open before us;
let us pray with one heart and mind.

(Pause for reflection as you offer the day to God).

As we rejoice in the gift of this new day, so may the light of your presence, O God, set our hearts on fire with love for you; now and for ever. Amen.

Readings:

PSALM 23:

The Lord is my shepherd;
I have all that I need.
He lets me rest in green meadows;
he leads me beside peaceful streams.
He renews my strength.
He guides me along right paths,
bringing honor to his name.
Even when I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will not be afraid,
for you are close beside me.
Your rod and your staff
protect and comfort me.
You prepare a feast for me
in the presence of my enemies.
You honor me by anointing my head with oil.
My cup overflows with blessings.
Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me
all the days of my life,
and I will live in the house of the Lord
forever.

ISAIAH 43:1-3:

But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:
“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”

MATTHEW 6:25-34:

That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing? Look at the birds. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren't you far more valuable to him than they are? Can all your worries add a single moment to your life? And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith? So don't worry about these things, saying, “What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?” These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today.

A Prayer in the Days of Coronavirus:

Merciful God, hear our fervent prayer for all who suffer the effects of this virus—
its infection of sickness, fear, and anxiety.

God, in your mercy:

Hear our prayer.

May those who are infected receive the proper treatment
and the comfort of your healing presence.

God, in your mercy:

Hear our prayer.

May their caregivers, families, and neighbors be shielded from the onslaught of the
virus and give solace to those who grieve the loss of loved ones.

God, in your mercy:

Hear our prayer.

Calm the anxiety and fear of those who fear its advent and protect those who are most
vulnerable to its spread—the marginalized, the un- and under-insured,
the immune-compromised, the elderly.

God, in your mercy:

Hear our prayer.

Guide those who strive to develop tests, vaccines, and cure—that their work may limit
and conquer the virus and restore communities to wholeness and health.

God, in your mercy:

Hear our prayer.

Holy One, help us rise above fear:

Assure us of your presence when we are fearful.

Calm anxieties with your Holy Spirit.

Bring healing to all in need of it.

We ask all this through the intercession of your Son, Jesus our Lord, and through the
Holy Spirit, and in the name of all that is holy, just, and compassionate.

Amen

A Reading (maybe turn this into your own words for our specific context):

PSALM 90:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High,
abides under the shadow of the Almighty.

He shall say to the Lord,
“You are my refuge and my stronghold,
my God in whom I put my trust.”

He shall deliver you from the snare of the hunter and from the deadly pestilence.
He shall cover you with his pinions,
and you shall find refuge under his wings;
his faithfulness shall be a shield and buckler.

You shall not be afraid of any terror by night,
nor of the arrow that flies by day:
Of the plague that stalks in the darkness,
nor of the sickness that lays waste at mid-day.

A thousand shall fall at your side
and ten thousand your right hand,
but it shall not come near you.

Sermon Thoughts - [What have We Gained through what We have Lost]

While some of us are going stir-crazy, others are suffering greatly, and others still are working to flatten the curve. These are some strange times. If we don't just react, but instead embrace contemplation, some new questions might come to the surface. Without minimizing the severity of the storm (medically, financially and so on), I wonder what social and spiritual rhythms might be acquired by discerning a silver lining wrapped around all the upheaval.

So this morning let's reboot.

What are some of the new ways of being that we are presently adopting because of the current situation that could become established tweaks to our new norm?

There have been a vast array of responses and reactions to Covid-19 ranging from dread to courage, stockpiling to sharing, detachment to creative engaging. How has all this changed your normal rhythm? Has the obligatory new normal caused a reboot of sorts towards a healthier direction for anything in your life? Are there any new patterns that might be beckoning you towards a more permanent stay?

Maybe your 2020 calendar had been over-scheduled, but now, with all your gigs abruptly nixed, you can breathe easier. Is that easier breathing a summons? Is this new found 'putting your feet up' and 'letting your hair down' an invite to a more stable way of existence? Maybe instead of just tolerating this current glitch in the system we could make the most of this reboot and uncover some fresh and nourishing practices that enable us to be more fully human as we move ahead.

One question we might ask:

Will our current seclusion/isolation heal us from our fascination with independence and individualism?

So many in this hour are raging against feelings of isolation and loneliness, but the truth is that rugged individualism was already at work alienating us from each other. "What is hell?" asked Elder Zosima in the book *Brothers Karamazov*. The answer? "The suffering of being no longer able to love." It is hard to love in this world, and so we often find it simpler to lock ourselves away in solitary confinement. But Terrence Malick reminds us, in his film *Tree of Life*, "Unless you love, your life will flash by." In the end it all adds up to love.

We are not islands to ourselves. We are part of the whole. All that we are and hope to be is shaped and forged by the community around us. Even Christianity itself is a received tradition. A gift of the community of faith.

What are people for? People are for sharing life with, because life is a shared experience. Life is not a solo project. You can't do it alone. You weren't meant to. During this time of plague and uncertainty, I keep hearing this phrase: "We are all in this together." And this is true. Radical individualism is a lie. You are woven into the thread of all humanity. Maybe now we can be more mindful of the distance and estrangement that were already a pandemic among us. There are some ambitious acts of connection and community happening all around us that I hope will become mainstays because of this reboot.

Another question might be:

Will our online presence turn us back to real flesh and blood encounters?

Our incapacity to be physically present has educated us in roundabout ways to engage with each other in classrooms, workplaces, and church. The power of technology has delivered the goods even through our mandatory detainment, and all of us are grateful for it. Who doesn't love church in a lounge chair?

But can you still feel the lack? There is a poverty within the technological revolution. While the digital realms are experiencing an evolution, we must not forget that the Word became flesh. Flesh and blood. Touch. Encounter. He is present when two or three are gathered. Healing prayer through the laying on of hands. Feeling the divine embrace in the hug of a friend who understands. Seeing your pain reflected in an empathetic face as you explain a hardship. The holy kiss of the New Testament (translated in our time to the passing of the peace). There is no substitute for these things.

I pray we emerge from this season awakened to the shortfalls of social media and pining after a social faith. Christianity at its core is about presence — both the presence of God (with us) and presence to one another. Maybe we are once again being called to be active participants in our faith, not just passive consumers of religion. The whole New Testament can take on new meaning. The "one another" passages and verses like Hebrews 10:25, "not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near" might gain new traction. May all our social distancing in this time of virus create a deep longing to gather together around a shared meal and a common cup. Anything less than that is not normal.

One more question:

Have we found our way back to nature?

Almost overnight we dropped our smart phones and once again discovered that there is an outside. Suddenly we have materialized from our media comas and developed the art of bike riding, walking trails, and immersing ourselves in the great outdoors.

Within our limitations there are often gifts. One of the contributions of the current quarantine is giving the environment a sabbath from us. Emission rates have dropped as congested roads have transformed into ghost towns. Less cars. Less electricity. Less paper. Less waste. Less gas. Less coal. And sometimes less is more. Although devastating for the oil industry as a whole, at least creation got to breathe some fresh air.

Another contribution of the imposed seclusion is that we have grown a bit bored with our glowing screens just long enough to hear the call of the wild. Like little kids, we are being invited to play outside. For many, there is more time to take a stroll with your spouse, walk the dog, or visit your local park. That need to feel the sun on our skin could become second nature. May all of this remind us that we are not machines with complicated computer systems, but we are dust of the earth animated by God. To be disconnected too long from our natural surroundings creates a pathology of the soul. Proper soul-tending can't always happen indoors. This time of isolation may have granted us a chance to hear creation's chorus anew, and we can join with Bob Dylan in saying, "*In the fury of the moment, I can see the master's hand; in every leaf that trembles, in every grain of sand.*"

Above all else, may this season of hardship call us to remember that God in Christ shares our humanity, disease, and death that He might heal us and gives us the hope of resurrection!

A Time For Communion:

We meet in the presence of God who knows our needs, hears our cries, feels our pain, and heals our wounds. The weight of grief bears heavily upon us, but it is a load we need not bear alone. Let us offer our burdens to Jesus, Lord of life and death, of the present and of the future.

We bring before you, Lord, our confusion in the face of shock, our despair in the face of tragedy, and our helplessness in the face of death.

Lift from us our burden, and in your power, renew us.

We bring before you, Lord, the tears of sorrow, cries for help, and the vulnerability of our pain.

Lift from us our burden, and in your power, renew us.

We bring before you, Lord, our sense of frustration, feelings of powerlessness, and our fear of the future.

Lift from us our burden, and in your power, renew us.

God of the desolate and despairing, your son Jesus Christ, was forced to carry the instrument of his own death – the cross that became for us the source of life and healing. Transform us in our suffering that, in the pain we bear, You might be for us a fount of life and a spring of hope; through Him who died for us, yet is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

May the light of Christ, rising in glory, banish all darkness from our hearts and minds. Lord, by your cross and resurrection you have defeated death, and set your people free. You are the Savior of the world!

[PARTAKE OF THE BREAD AND WINE]

Lighten our darkness, Lord, we pray, and in your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of the night, for the love of your only Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer in a time of anxiety:

It seems that I return to you most easily when I need comfort, O God.

Here I am again, knowing that you are waiting for me with love and warming light.

In the shadow of your wings I find respite and relief that feeds my innermost self and renews my soul. Day and night, you are my refuge.

These uncertain days of news conferences and quarantines tempt me to assume the worst for my loved ones, myself, and my community. "Pandemic" is a frightening word, and I can easily feel confused or helpless to respond. Now I am relying on you to lead and guide me, to put my anxiety in its place. Help me see it as a human response that keeps me conscious of the seriousness of this moment, but do not let it overwhelm my spirit. Buoyed by your love, I choose each day to let peace reign in me. Breathing deeply of your calm, I repeat, again and again, "You are here."

Good and gracious Companion, my family and friends need tranquility and assurance. Help me to offer them your tenderness. Those in my community who are suffering need care. Help me to be generous and to keep contact with the forgotten. Our world calls for cooperation among national leaders, scientists, health care providers, and all who are instrumental in overcoming this crisis. May my prayers and support be with them all.

I have come back to you, and I will return, knowing that your open arms will never fail. God of hope, may your love blanket the earth, as you teach us to live more generously today than yesterday. May my anxiety be transformed into love.

Benediction (based on Ephesians 3:16-21):

I ask God to strengthen you by the power of the Spirit—
not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength—
that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in.

And I ask God that
with both feet planted firmly on love
you'll be able to take in with all Christians
the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love.

Reach out and experience the breadth!
Test its length!
Plumb the depths!
Rise to the heights!
Live full lives—full in the fullness of God.

God can do anything, you know—
far more than you could ever imagine or guess
or request in your wildest dreams!
Not by pushing us around
but by working within us,
through the power of God's Spirit.

All glory to the God of Creation!
All glory to the Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ!
And all glory to the Spirit of God, at work among us and within us!

Amen!