

SABBATH WORSHIP SERVICE
MAY 17, 2020
BISHOP GRANT HAGIYA
SERMON

This worship service is dedicated to all of our Cal-Pac clergy, worship teams and laity who have worked so hard these last 7 weeks in caring for their congregations and holding virtual worship services during the Safer-at-Home protocols. We, as your appointed Cabinet are so grateful to you for your faithfulness and hard work during this pandemic. We hope that you all are getting some much-needed rest and Sabbath time, so we hope that you are not really watching this live, but getting some downtime. We do want to honor you and thank you for holding your church together during this challenging time at home. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

No one could have predicted the arrival of the Coronavirus and its devastating effects. I think the most insidious thing about the virus is it has robbed our Christian community of that which we do best: the physical care of those who are dying, and the making of meaning of their lives through our ritual of funerals and memorials. COVID-19 has robbed people of the care of their pastor and church community, and not allowed the surviving families to grieve properly in our faith tradition. I grieve with all of you who have lost loved ones during this period and I feel so helpless in providing any semblance of care. In loving tribute to those we have lost and to the surviving families, let me share the words that have comforted generations of the faithful:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures;

The Lord leads me beside still waters;^[a]

³ The Lord restores my soul.^[b]

The Lord leads me in paths of righteousness^[c]

for the Lord's name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,^[d]

I fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—

they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely^[e] goodness and mercy^[f] shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.^[a]

Families and loved ones: Know that we pray for you and that you are divinely loved!

What we must do now is prepare for what is coming next. It is a time for us to reflect on the effects of COVID-19 in our lives and make sense out of faithful response. Andy Crouch has provided some deep thought on this, and wonders if the pandemic will be a “blizzard” (a passing but devastating storm), a “winter” (an ongoing season of deep crisis), or the beginning of an “little ice age” (a monumental epoch that changes the very fabric of the entire planet).

I personally believe it is going to be a little bit of all three, especially in relationship to the church. It is a “blizzard” and those who wish to open the country up too soon are counting on this as reality, but with outbreaks still spiking it is a false hope that it will go away soon.

It is also a deep winter, what I believe is more realistic because it will be between 12-24 months before an effective vaccine can be developed – the only sure way for us to get back to a normal life, whatever normal means now days. Until all of us are inoculated against the devastating effects of the virus, none of us is safe. Our churches will have to continue to innovate and experiment in caring and discipling for their communities, not for a few months, but for a long season.

It is also the start of a new age, an epoch where will never be the same again. That epoch has already happened for the families who have lost loved ones to the virus. Two persons that I know who have died of the virus have left spouses and young families behind. Their lives have been forever altered, not just for a season, but for all their lives. In terms of our annual conference it has been estimated that more than 40 percent of our mainline churches will close within a 30 year time span. What if COVID-19 accelerates that outcome? What if it happens in the next 30 months, instead of 30 years?

No one knows what the future holds, but we must be prepared for all three of these timelines. It is often said that good leaders play chess, whereas average leaders or managers play checkers, simply reacting rather than being moves ahead. We want everyone to rise to be a good leader, and prepare our churches for what lies ahead. For example, combining the “blizzard” and the “season” what if our churches are allowed to open with social distancing and face masks? How many people can you fit in your sanctuary with 6 feet of distance between them, roughly two arms lengths apart? We can start taking measurements now, and then planning multiple worship services times to accommodate those who wish to return. How are you going to daily disinfect your church buildings? How will you serve Communion and do Baptisms in light of social distancing? These are all things we need to proactively plan for right now when our churches are allowed to open.

Combining a “season” and an “epoch” how will you manage both online worship services for those who are elderly or medically at-risk and should not attend in person, as well as a limited physical worship experiences? I do not believe it will be prudent to abandon the online format even after a vaccine is mass produced and administered. A virtual worship experience appeals to younger generations and people who will never set foot in our sanctuaries. Already the online platform has brought together former members who have moved away and not found a new church where they moved, and even attracted people from other countries who could never physically attend. This speaks to the epoch changes that we cannot abandon and should become permanent cultural practices for all of our churches.

During this period of social isolation and stay at home orders, we have learned so much and changed our lifestyles to such a degree that it has been transformational. I for one, do not want to go back to the way it was. I believe that the pace and speed of our lives to do more and more, to value things of the world, and to live unbalanced unnatural lives is not worth returning to. If anything, God has shown us a new way of living through this pandemic and if we can live with new eyes of faith, we have a chance at real salvation.

I was deeply struck by a short article from a professor by the name of Richard Gunderman who teaches at Indiana University. He recommends one book if we are to learn about ourselves during the social isolation and it may surprise you. It is the second most translated book in the world, next of course to the Bible: The book: Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe first published in 1719. I must admit that even though I know the story, I never actually read the book, so I decided I needed to read it and thoroughly enjoyed it.

If you remember: Robinson Crusoe’s early life had no meaning: Born to a fairly wealthy family he shuns his Father’s goal for him to be a lawyer and heads to the degrading life of a sailor. He gets captured by pirates and sold into slavery. Later he is the sole survivor of a ship wreck washing ashore on a deserted island where he spends 28 years relying on his resiliency, determination and some items he salvages from the doomed ship.

Let me highlight a few of the lessons he learns and how they apply to our time in social isolation:

First, is the folly of worldly goods: our constant emphasis on money and the acquiring of things of the world: Toilet paper of all things to hoard, and which you still can’t get in any quantity speaks to the folly of our contemporary values. As Crusoe is foraging through the marooned ship for anything he can find, he comes upon a locker of money, gold and silver. But he immediately realizes that this will do him no good on a deserted island. Whereas before, money was a “drug” to him, now marooned alone he realizes what is of true value and that is what he needs to survive and what is rewarding to him.

As we are marooned in our homes, we need to ask: “what is truly necessary in our lives?” What is more important: an abundance of money or simply food to eat?...Material possessions or family and personal relationships?...Status, titles or simply good health?

Second, he learns to live simply in balance with nature. At first the island seems to be barren, deserted, inhospitable and threatening, and he curses his fate. With time, the island becomes his home and he finds it provides everything he needs for existence: food, shelter, protection and even companionship in animals he domesticates. He learns to live in harmony with the island only taking that which sustains him and nothing more. He learns to live in balance with the earth.

As our family has sheltered in place, we really don't need anything more than that to subsist: food, shelter and a little bit of toilet paper! We talk and interact more, enjoy small comforts more, take more leisurely runs and walks, and marvel at the most beautiful sunsets. The sun setting hasn't changed, but I have changed in my appreciation of the earth and everything it holds for us.

Whereas, a successful vaccine could be created in 18-24 months to enable us to get over this global pandemic, if we go back to the way we lived post-COVID-19, there will be no virus that will save our entire planet, and that means we all have to change our lifestyles now and into the future.

Finally, the Robinson Crusoe story has a deep spiritual component. He takes with him from the ship a Bible that he finds, and this leads to him doing something he has never done in his early life: he reads it! In fact, he reads it 3 times a day and it changes the very fabric of his being. Whereas his earlier life was one of depravity and meaninglessness, he is forced to confront his misspent life and the guilt he bears for it. Crusoe repents and dedicates his new life in honor of God who brings him life itself on this deserted island.

Here is a quote from the book:

"One morning early, lying in my bed, and filled with thoughts about my danger from the appearance of savages, I found it discomposed me very much; upon which these words of Scripture came into my thoughts: "Call upon Me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me." Upon this, rising cheerfully out of my bed, my heart was not only comforted, but I was guided and encouraged to pray earnestly to read the first words that presented to me were, "Wait on the Lord, and be of good cheer, and He shall strengthen thy heart, wait, I say, on the Lord." It is impossible to express the comfort this gave me. In answer, I thankfully laid down the book, and was no more sad, at least on that occasion." (pg. 82, Kindle Edition).

In this time of our social isolation, we have the opportunity to grow deeper spiritually and to be made new like Crusoe. I have prayed and read Scripture more now than before the pandemic hit in my life. The Scriptures themselves have taken on a deeper and more profound meaning. In the Acts passage for today, Paul is addressing the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, the learned doubters of our faith. It was his chance to enter into intellectual inquiry and debate – a chance for him to make the case of our Triune God. Paul does this by

presenting God in two ways: as Creator and Preserver of life. He speaks the words we all known by now: "For in God we live and move, and have our being..." it was not the vain belief that they might hold as philosophers that "God lives in us," but the reverse: That we live in God: that our very existence is because and due to God. This is what Crusoe's transformation really meant. His former wretched life was now over, and now he understood that God had provided sustenance, health and meaning in life, and even though deserted and alone, he would live and move and have his being in God and God alone.

This was supposed to be a 10-12 minute sermon and I've gone way over that, but let me just point out from the John passage that Fred Craddock points out that this passage is about God's love and it has nothing to do with a feeling of any kind. To quote Craddock: "Feelings are not commanded but love can be, for to love is to be for another person, to act for another's good, to do that which brings benefit to the other..." (p. 215)

This is what is available to all of us in this time of social isolation. Neighbors are reaching out and helping each other far more than ever before. I'm noticing on my runs and walks, drivers are reacting with more kindness and stopping for me to cross, whereas before they would almost run me over. Our own Redondo Beach neighborhood has an email connection and there has been an outpouring of people who have offered to do grocery shopping, chores and errands for those who cannot get out. I had the time to respond to someone I didn't know who ran out of disinfectant wipes and asked if she could buy some from anyone who had extra because she had small children living with her elderly parents and was trying to keep the house disinfected. We had some extra so I dropped off a couple of boxes at her doorstep with no physical contact, and yet such an insignificant act contributed to the love that John is speaking about in Christ. I'm sure they probably felt grateful, but I know that I felt so much better in doing that.

Let me close with the way Prof. Gunderman ends his article on Robinson Crusoe:

"A pandemic can seem like the end, but it can also serve as a beginning. We are, in a way, cut adrift. Yet a new and ultimately more fertile landfall lies ahead, at least for those of us who are not sick, broke or homeless. If we heed Defoe's inspiration, these unprecedented challenges can transform us into wiser and more caring human beings." (Gunderman, Richard: *"Shipwrecked! How Social Isolation Can Enrich Our Spiritual Lives,"* The Conversation, April 5, 2020)

If we add our lectionary Scripture passages for today: we can be transformed into God's children who out of love, will be there for each other, and all the earth. Amen.