

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
5th Sunday of Easter, May 10, 2020
John 4:7-14
“What Do We Do Now?” by Rev. Sue Trigger

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON

John 4:7-14 (CEB*)

7 If you have really known me, you will also know the Father. From now on you know him and have seen him.” **8** Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father; that will be enough for us.” **9** Jesus replied, “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been with you all this time? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? **10** Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I have spoken to you I don’t speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me does his works. **11** Trust me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or at least believe on account of the works themselves. **12** I assure you that whoever believes in me will do the works that I do. They will do even greater works than these because I am going to the Father. **13** I will do whatever you ask for in my name, so that the Father can be glorified in the Son. **14** When you ask me for anything in my name, I will do it.

‘Anybody who says they’re not scared during this is lying to you.’ⁱ The words of a paramedic in Paterson, NJ. I’ve heard it repeated multiple times while watching the news on CNN. I imagine many of you feel that way. When we started this journey in March I didn’t think it was going to be very long. I figured we’d all stay home a few weeks, flatten the curve and return to life as normal. Maybe we’ve flattened the curve some, but the number of new cases of illness hasn’t plateaued yet in Kansas. Even so, we’re beginning to reopen the economy. We have reason to feel scared.

After what we have seen in recent weeks, I cannot stand before you and say God will protect you from this virus if you are faithful. Not when the founding pastor of our church is still recovering from it. Not when we have lost a dear friend.ⁱⁱ Not when the Church of God in the United States has lost 30 clergy and bishops. Italy has lost 100 Catholic priests. The Christian Post has been reporting the losses weekly, in just over a week a priest, a bishop, a pastor, and a rabbi all died from coronavirus. The Virginia pastor who said ‘God is larger than this dreaded virus’ died. Another Virginia pastor who believed ‘God can heal anything’ died of covid-19.ⁱⁱⁱ Presbyterians are not exempt. Rev. Tim Russell, associate pastor of Second Presbyterian in Memphis, Tennessee lost his battle with the virus. The choir of Mt. Vernon Presbyterian Church in Washington State has had 45 members with the virus. Three have been hospitalized, two have died.

At our virtual potlucks on Wednesday nights, I have been asking conversation starting questions. I thought it would be fun. At one potluck I asked, “If you could ask God one question what would it be?” The same answers came from children and adults. “I would ask why is this happening?” “What were you thinking, God?” “Why?” “Why?” “Why?” The next week I began asking humorous questions like, “what do you think about putting pineapple on your pizza?”

I don’t want to suggest that we shouldn’t look to God to find the answers to life’s questions, but God has given us scientists who may offer us a logical answer as to why this virus has happened. What I am more concerned about today is *where* is God in the midst of this? If ever there was a time in our lives when we need to know the presence of God, it is now.

Researchers have found that the most common psychological symptoms related to quarantine included depression, stress, low mood, irritability, insomnia, anger, and emotional exhaustion. People have shared with me that they are struggling with these things. Those who have been *forced* to quarantine because of exposure to the virus have experienced more stress than those who have quarantined voluntarily.^{iv} We are living in a time of such uncertainty that it is destabilizing. So where is God?

A week ago I asked the Thursday Bible study group where they had seen God during this time of quarantine. The answers can tell us a lot about where God is. One person had seen God at work in the volunteers who are taking groceries and supplies to their neighbors. Another had seen God in the many people who were making phone calls and sending messages of love to those who are quarantined alone. God was seen in the moments of joy when family are able to see each other on a video call.

For me, I have seen God in some of painful moments. The Sunday before her death, the hospital arranged for Mitch and me to see Mary Johnson, even for just a few minutes, so that we could pray with her before her death. Thanks to a well-timed phone call from Maggie Blankers, I was able to pray over the phone with Glenda and Vern. In those moments of sorrow, I felt the presence of God as near as my next breath.

When we describe the essence of God, we commonly say that God is love. Love is relational. What does that mean? It means that God is affected by our actions. It means that we have an influence on God – which is why we pray. God, who is love, feels emotions and reacts to our experiences. Thomas Jay Oord is a philosophical theologian who explains what it means that God is relational like this, “What we do, what we experience, affects God. We all suffer, and some people suffer deeply. Oppression can be physical, emotional, social, racial, gender-based, sexual, spiritual, political, or something else. Biblical writers describe God as empathizing with the oppressed. God cares, consoles those in pain, and has compassion. And God calls upon

believers to comfort those who suffer.^v God is love, a companion who suffers with us and understands our suffering. God is the source of all comfort.”

So where is God? God is with us.

Some of you are worshipping with us on Facebook. I want to ask you to take a minute to bring your presence into our worship space. In your comments, please type, “I am here.” (*Watch “I am here” video*)

We are here and where we are, God is present. In life and in death, we are with God. Dr. Marlynn Wei wrote about ways to feel better during this time of quarantine in Psychology Today. I recommend the entire article to you. You can find the link in my sermon which will be posted on our website. Dr. Wei concludes her article saying, “I believe that the most healing thing at the center of all of this psychological stress is to be connected to a sense of community and compassion—for each other and for ourselves. Know that you are not alone. Many of us are, have been, or will be experiencing some level of shock and distress from this unprecedented time. But know that we are all in this together, and we must continue to do what we can to help each other when we can.

At the roots of psychological wellness is the ability to care and be generous to others and ourselves. During this time when so many in my family and medical colleagues are on frontlines fighting this unthinkable battle, I have witnessed so much courage, compassion, kindness, and generosity—from brave healthcare workers on the frontlines to those in the community working so hard to support them. I have connected with new and old friends and witnessed the kindness of strangers and even corporations who rapidly are trying to donate food and supplies.

While we are all still weathering this storm, take comfort in the knowledge there is generosity, love, and compassion at the heart of all this—that is the hope and light amidst these dark, uncertain times.”

I especially like her last sentence, “That is the hope and light amidst these dark and uncertain times.” What better way to describe our loving, relational God?

While you are struggling through this pandemic, take the time to pause and hear the voices of our community calling to you, “I am here.” The voice of God is speaking through them.

You may have seen an ad for an app on TV. The app is called “Calm.” The ad invites you to do nothing for 15 seconds or for 30 seconds. The time counts down to the sound of rain falling and you see the water

dripping down tree leaves. Next time you see it, take the time to breathe deeply and remember the voice of God speaking to you saying, “I am here.” Exhale saying, “Thank you, God.”

Our journey through this pandemic is not over. It may be quite a while before we can gather safely and share God’s love together in person. But God is here, no matter what comes. As sure as I am here, as close as my next breath – God is here. I encourage you to take time each day to pause and connect with the one who understands what we feel. Take time to share the presence of God that is in you with others. Then you will know exactly where God is.

ⁱ CNN, **Anybody Who Says They’re Not Scared During this is Lying**, <https://ktvz.com/news/national-world/2020/04/30/anybody-who-says-theyre-not-scared-during-this-is-lying-to-you-a-day-in-the-life-of-paramedics-in-a-pandemic/>, April 30, 2020.

ⁱⁱ Blair, Leonardo, **Coronavirus claims 3 More Pastors**, christianpost.com/news/coronavirus-claims-3-more-pastors-one-may-have-exposed-hundreds-to-disease-at-funeral.html, April 6, 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jamison, Peter, **Pastor Landon Spradlin Coronavirus Death**, The Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2020/04/27/pastor-landon-spradlin-coronavirus-death/>, April 27, 2020.

^{iv} Wei, Marlynn, MD, JD, **New Research on Stress of Quarantine and 5 Ways to Feel Better**, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/urban-survival/202003/new-research-stress-quarantine-and-5-ways-feel-better>, March 30, 2020.

^v Oord, Thomas Jay, **3 Reasons It Matters to Believe God is Relational**, [Thomasjaylor.com/index.php/blog/archives/3-reasons-matters-believe-god-relational](https://thomasjaylor.com/index.php/blog/archives/3-reasons-matters-believe-god-relational), October 12, 2017.