**Coping With Covid: A Spiritual Toolbox**

**Matthew 11:28-29**

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It was two months ago today that the first case of Covid-19 was diagnosed in Michigan, and suddenly we went from an impending crisis to one that had arrived on our doorstep.  Leaders in churches, businesses, government and universities jumped into action trying to make decisions with no idea what the future might hold. Two months ago today, I quickly began to sort out what we would need to do to protect everyone’s health and still worship together that weekend.  I contacted the lay leadership of the church, talked with staff, and put together a document that is still sitting on my desk today, “Guidelines for worship during coronavirus”.  Two days later, I cancelled worship completely and we began planning our first recorded worship service to show online.

It was a chaotic few days but somehow, at that point, it still felt like a short-term crisis.  Now, we are beginning to realize that Covid-19 is here to stay for a while, and the uncertainty of the future that we felt so acutely then is chronic now - wearing on us as we wonder what the next days, weeks, and months might bring.

We have barely begun to understand the toll Covid-19 is taking on our mental, emotional, and spiritual health.  As we make this transition from crisis mode to living with this reality for a while, what tools does our faith offer us to give us strength, peace, and perspective?  Over the next few weeks, we’ll be exploring just that in a sermon series called “Coping with Covid: A Spiritual Toolbox”.  In the course of the series, we’ll look at loss and grief, self-compassion, and how to make meaning out of this time, but we’ll start with the uncertainty itself.  How do we live as people of faith in such uncertainty?

So many of us are struggling with anxiety and worry, and that’s understandable.  We have big things to worry about. Will I keep my job?  What if my salary gets cut?  Will my child be able to go back to school or college?  Will I be able to retire?  What if I get sick?  What if someone I love gets sick?  When will the pandemic end?  When will we get back to normal?  Will we ever feel normal again?

Our anxiety is only compounded by the fact that so much feels out of our control.  Somehow we think if we worry enough, plan enough, prepare enough we’ll be able to control what happens. And then, every once in a while, we get a glimpse at the truth. We, ourselves, are not in control of this story.  We can’t be.

Then there is the fact that things change so quickly.  We may feel like we know what’s going on one day, but by the next day, we have new questions and new worries. We turn to the news in hopes of understanding the virus, how it spreads, and how to stop it, but we just hear different, and often conflicting, stories.  The only consistent thing is that the timeline keeps getting longer. It will be weeks and then months. Now it’s possibly a year or maybe two.

And finally, we are constantly hearing and experiencing new ways the virus is impacting our lives and our communities.  By now, you may have lost someone.  It’s quite likely you know someone who is sick.  We hear that the hospitals are overwhelmed and small businesses are struggling to survive.  Unemployment claims have sky-rocketed.  Now, meat is becoming harder to find.  We can’t help but wonder, what’s next?

Though we are isolated from each other, we are living through a communal crisis with an uncertain future.  Our fear and worry are inevitable, but how do we cope?  Psychologists and therapists have some suggestions to offer. In his book, *Your Brain At Work*, David Rock points out, “The brain craves certainty. A sense of uncertainty about the future and feeling out of control both generate strong limbic system responses.”  In other words, when the brain perceives a threat - and the uncertainty we’re facing right now is definitely a kind of threat - our fight, flight, or freeze response kicks in.  The accompanying stress hormones only accentuate our anxiety. We may not sleep well, have trouble concentrating, and find our heart rates up and stomachs churning.

So, one thing we can do is to learn to manage that physical experience.  Exercise, meditation, and prayer can all settle our nerves and create moments of peace and inner calm.

Taking control of our physical response reminds us that there are aspects of life we can control as well.  Focusing on those can pull us back into balance.  You can’t control the spread of the virus, who wears face masks in public, or the speed of developing a vaccine, so what is in your control?  How you spend your time, the food you eat, how much you sleep, the time you spend connecting with others, the ways in which you try to help in this crisis - these are all things that you can do something about.  You have agency and choice.

In a similar way, you can control your exposure to things that trigger your worry.  Limit your time on social media.  Don’t watch every news show.  And for heaven’s sake, don’t be me and read the headlines before you even get out of bed in the morning!

The great medieval theologian, Thomas Aquinas, distinguished between the emotion of fear and fear as a way of living.  The emotion of fear, he said, is actually a good thing because we experience fear when we perceive a threat to someone or something we love and, of course, love is how we most closely reflect the image of God.  What matters is what we do with that fear.   If fear causes you to turn inward, to focus only on yourself and protecting those you love, to hoard toilet paper or hand sanitizer, then your fear is stifling you, leading you to limit your own potential and, possibly, lash out at others.  But, if fear leads you to express and celebrate love, then you have touched the hand of God.

And the hand of God is never far away. For all of the different ways in which Jews and Christians have thought about God, perhaps the most consistent has been that God is steadfast.  We see it in the Psalms, as in Psalm 91, which starts, “Living in the Most High’s shelter, camping in the Almighty’s shade, I say to the Lord, “You are my refuge, my stronghold!  You are my God - the one I trust!”  And we find it in the great songs of our own tradition, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”, “O God Our Help In Ages Past”, or “Leaning on the Ever-lasting Arms”.  We hear it in Jesus’ words as he gives the disciples the Great Commission - “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”  And we witness it in the wonders of creation- from the grandeur of the night sky to the persistent unfolding of the seasons and the dependability of the tide.

But, God is with us not just on the grand scale but in the smallest and most ordinary parts of our lives, as well. Ephraim Radner wrote a beautiful piece on the “First Things” website entitled “Uncertainty and the Christian”, in which he says, “It is surely unfortunate that Christians gave up the celebration of the weekly Sabbath. For the Sabbath is the great sign of the “sufficiency of today,” of the fact that God gives himself to us through the things of today—of sitting down at home, of family and sojourner together, of food, of repentance, of remembrance and restoration in the unmerited grace of creation.” Our God is with us at the dinner table, in the hospital, as we file for unemployment, when we stand by the grave.  Our God, creator, redeemer, and sustainer, never leaves us.  We can plant our feet firmly in that truth no matter what happens in the months to come.

But, how do we connect with that presence?  One way is to be intentional about serving others - getting outside of yourself to seek out God in the faces of those who are most in need.  For that reason, each week of this sermon series, I’ve asked our Justice League to share one way you might serve or help someone else in our community - as they did about Hope Clinic today.

Another is to start some sort of spiritual practice - some way of reaching out to feel God’s presence, of seeking out the peace of Christ.  That’s why for these four weeks, we’ll be offering opportunities for you to learn and practice a kind of prayer or other spiritual practice each week.  I will introduce a new one in worship each week.  Then you will find a teaching video of the practice that you can use at home on the church’s Facebook page.  And each week, on Thursday evening, we’ll have a Zoom meeting in which we can practice together.

In today’s scripture passage, Jesus says to his followers, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”  A yoke is a wooden cross piece that is placed on the shoulders of two animals so they can pull a plow or a cart together.  The yoke of Christ connects us to him.  We don’t have to pull the weight of anxiety and worry alone.  Jesus is offering to pull with us, so that together, in tandem, we can face the future.  And with that assurance, we are free to embrace the joy of life and love even as we live in uncertainty.

Thanks be to God. Amen.