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## Shine on, friends!

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**SHINE  
ON!**

Friendship is one of the greatest gifts a human being can receive. It is a bond beyond common goals, common interests or common histories. It is a bond stronger than sexual union can create, deeper than a shared fate can solidify and even

more intimate than the bonds of marriage or community.

Friendship is being with the other in joy and sorrow, even when we cannot increase the joy or decrease the sorrow. It is a unity of souls that gives nobility and sincerity to love. Friendship makes all of life shine brightly.

—Henri Nouwen

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## Patient attention, valuable discoveries

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For many people, the coronavirus pandemic has been a test of patience — or worse. Medically vulnerable people face an anxious time of hypervigilance. Furloughed workers wait on hold or in lines for assistance. Special events have been canceled or rescheduled.

Those not impacted directly deal with assorted frustrations and inconveniences. Many people are learning the benefit of slowing down, being present (even virtually) to others and practicing patient attention.

Interestingly, scientist Isaac Newton did some of his best work when the plague forced Cambridge University to close. At home, the inquisitive student invented calculus and developed groundbreaking theories of gravity and optics. Later Newton called 1666 his *annus mirabilis* (“year of wonders”) and reportedly said, “If I have made any valuable discoveries, it [owes] more to patient attention than to any other talent.”

What have you discovered during the Covid-19 crisis? What appreciations have you developed for aspects of life you may have previously taken for granted? What has physical distancing taught you about the value of neighbors, church, community volunteering?

During the pandemic, what have you learned about persistence and God’s presence? What empathy do you now feel for writers of words such as “I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope”

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## A daily prayer

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Whatever happens today, dear Lord, help us remember that you are present. If we find ourselves in the shadows of disappointment or rejection or pain, let us see your comforting light. If we’re in the radiant light of success or acceptance or wholeness, may we acknowledge your providence and grace. Wherever we are, grant us the assurance of your nearness. Amen.

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## God amid pandemic

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Last spring, life changed as we became familiar with terms such as social distancing, flattening the curve and self-quarantining. We could hardly believe the closed schools, businesses and especially churches — just as Holy Week and Easter drew near! The coronavirus ran rampant in the world. Where was God?

But as the spread continued, many civic leaders stepped up, calmly informing us of the facts, of actions being taken to mitigate the crisis and of how we could help. Healthcare professionals risked their lives and endured separation from families; teachers drew on astounding stores of creativity to teach online; pastors delivered sermons and lessons to empty sanctuaries as members listened and prayed while living in lockdown. Surely God was present — through them!

Then I remembered how God assures us through Isaiah, “Fear not! When you pass through the waters, the fires, yes, even the pandemics of this world, I will be with you” (43:1-2, paraphrased). And Jesus echoes, “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20).

—Sandy Hyland

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## Usher duty

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It’s human nature to sometimes slip into judgmentalism and arrogance: “I’d *never* do what *she* did!” we think or say. Or “People who [fill in the blank] shouldn’t call themselves Christians. They don’t belong in the church.” Jesus clearly said, “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matthew 7:1, ESV) and, memorably, made his point with the image of a speck in someone else’s eye and a log in one’s own.

In *Love Does* (Thomas Nelson), Bob Goff reflects further on what Jesus’ response would be when we put ourselves in positions of authority over others: “[Jesus] said people who followed him should think of themselves more like ushers rather than the bouncers, and it would be God who decides who gets in. We’re the ones who simply show people to their seats that someone else paid for.”

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## Learning — and laughing — on the fly

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Faced with the sudden move to livestreamed church services, many pastors and worship leaders had to learn new technology quickly during the pandemic. As they were “winging it,” bloopers and bobbles added levity to the tense time.

For instance, a fake tree fell on a drummer while a worship song was being broadcast from Georgia. After getting too close to a candle, a vicar in England had to pause to extinguish flames from his sweater. And several preachers appeared on screen with cartoon-like features after inadvertently turning on social media filters.

“This wasn’t planned,” wrote the pastor about the falling ficus, which went viral. “But God used it to bring laughter to the hearts of many. For that, we are thankful.”

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## The power of love



By comparing love to everything from oxygen and fire to wind and war, songs and poetry emphasize its immense power — for good or for ill. Christian author Patrick Morley uses metaphors that focus on love's practicality in everyday life: "Love is the glue that holds us together and the oil that keeps us from rubbing each other the wrong way." He also calls love "the WD-40 of relationships" be-

cause it "can seep into tight places where logic, threats and even promises just can't seem to penetrate."

St. Augustine, who predated WD-40 by centuries, knew that love not only eases friction in personal interactions but, with God's help, can change hearts and lives. "Love all [people], even your enemies," he advises. "Love them, not because they are your brothers, but that they may become your brothers. Thus you will ever burn with fraternal love, both for him who is already your brother and for your enemy, that he may by loving become your brother."

## Why we lament

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic struck America during the middle of Lent, a season associated with deprivation. Some people made light of the shutdowns, joking, "I didn't mean to give up *this* much for Lent!" Others asked why the suffering was occurring in the first place.

Professor N.T. Wright, in an essay for *Time*, explains that asking "why?" but receiving no answer is key to biblical lamenting. Adding to the mystery, he says, is that God also laments — grieving at the wickedness of humans, despairing over Israel's unfaithfulness. Jesus cries at a friend's tomb; the Holy Spirit groans in anguish.

"Part of the Christian vocation," Wright concludes, is not being able to explain why but lamenting instead. "As the Spirit laments within us," he says, "so we become, even in our self-isolation, small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell. And out of that there can emerge new possibilities ... new hope."

## God in my hands

When I was ready to give up on the Church, it was the sacraments that pulled me back.

When my faith had become little more than an abstraction, a set of propositions to be affirmed or denied, the tangible, tactile nature of the sacraments invited me to touch, smell, taste, hear, and see God in the stuff of everyday life again. They got God out of my head and into my hands. They reminded me that Christianity isn't meant to simply be believed; it's meant to be lived, shared, eaten, spoken, and enacted in the presence of other people. They reminded me that, try as I may, I can't be a Christian on my own.

—Rachel Held Evans

## Paying it back — and forward

During the pandemic, acts of kindness seemed especially meaningful. Last spring, as Covid-19 hit Native American communities particularly hard, an interesting transatlantic outreach occurred. Donations from Ireland began appearing in a relief fund for Navajo and Hopi families, leading administrators to suspect the account had been hacked. Then they realized a cross-generational payback was underway.

In 1847, Choctaw Tribe members sent \$170 overseas to Ireland to help with Potato Famine relief. That generosity was never forgotten, and by May 2020, people in Ireland had contributed more than \$4 million toward pandemic assistance for relatives of people who'd helped their ancestors. Many donors included an Irish proverb meaning "In each other's shadows the people live."

The concept of paying it forward dates back to a 1784 letter by Benjamin Franklin. It also echoes Jesus' Golden Rule: "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31). How might you live out this practice today?

## The gift of desperation

In a 2012 interview with NPR, author Anne Lamott shared: "I've heard people say that God is the gift of desperation, and there's a lot to be said for having really reached a bottom where you've run out of anymore good ideas, or plans for everybody else's behavior; or how to save and fix and rescue; or just get out of a huge mess, possibly of your own creation. And when you're done, you may take a long, quavering breath and say, 'Help.'"

Amid the pandemic and life's other, more typical trials, have you found a silver lining — a gift that has arisen out of your desperation? Sometimes we're more open to God during times of struggle than when all flows smoothly. As long as we think our ideas and plans for ourselves and our loved ones are pretty good, we don't feel we need a Savior. But when life is so challenging that we call to God for help, "the gift of [that] desperation" is finding that God's loving arms have embraced and strengthened us all along.

## An interlocking community

Christ distributes courage through community; he dissipates doubts through fellowship. He never deposits all knowledge in one person but distributes pieces of the jigsaw puzzle to many. When you interlock your understanding with mine, and we share our discoveries, when we mix, mingle, confess and pray, Christ speaks.

—Max Lucado, *Fearless*

## The rhythm of rest

Does God indeed need to rest? Of course not! But did God choose to rest? Yes. Why? Because God subjected creation to a rhythm of rest and work that he revealed by observing the rhythm himself, as a precedent for everyone else. In this way, he showed us a key to order in our private worlds.

—Gordon McDonald



## FASTING and FEASTING

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Lent should be more than a time of fasting. It should also be a joyous season of feasting. Lent is a time to fast from certain things, and to feast on others. It is a season during which we should:

- Fast from judging others; feast on the Christ dwelling in them.
- Fast from emphasis on differences; feast on the unity of all.
- Fast from words that pollute; feast on phrases that purify.
- Fast from discontent; feast on gratitude for all our blessings.
- Fast from complaining; feast on appreciation.
- Fast from worry; feast on trust in Providence.
- Fast from hostility; feast on non-resistance.
- Fast from negativity; feast on affirmation.
- Fast from unrelenting pressures; feast on unceasing prayer.
- Fast from bitterness; feast on forgiveness.
- Fast from self-concern; feast on compassion for others.
- Fast from discouragement; feast on hope.
- Fast from facts that depress; feast on truths that uplift.
- Fast from lethargy; feast on enthusiasm.
- Fast from thoughts that weaken; feast on promises that inspire.
- Fast from shadows of sorrow; feast on the sunlight of serenity.
- Fast from idle gossip; feast on purposeful silence.
- Fast from problems that overwhelm; feast on prayer.
- Fast from anger; feast on patience.
- Fast from pessimism; feast on optimism.