

March 19, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I offer these thoughts hoping they will inspire prayer and reflection. Please feel free to forward them to anyone who might find them meaningful.

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. Now when the tempter came to Him, he said ‘If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.’ But He answered and said, ‘It is written, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God”’” (Mt. 4: 1 -4, NKJV). With this reading, many began their Lenten journeys less than four short weeks ago; it now seems like a distant time!

Our Lenten journey has taken an unexpected and frightening detour; we have learned strange new words, and today we find ourselves “self-isolating”, “social-distancing”, and encouraged to avoid others—and all without the spiritual and emotional comfort of our Christian gatherings. Now, when we are most conscious of our dependence on the life-giving word of God, we are alone and our churches closed to public worship. We are afraid to offer help to the most vulnerable among us; if we carry the virus, we might literally be killing them with our kindness! We are threatened with social isolation; without our churches we are threatened with spiritual isolation; we fear the physical unknown to our persons; and we worry that the interruption of our communal life will have a deleterious effect on our already-small worship community.

Good News is that, even in our isolation, the word of God and the Word of God are there to sustain us. Yes, we may be required to stay at home and out of church, but our certain hope is that “neither death nor life ... nor things present nor things to come...shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”(Rom. 8: 37, 38). To borrow the words of Gershwin, “they can’t take that away from me”, and during this difficult time we can still open our hearts to God’s word; we can still allow God’s love to work through us to glorify His name and accomplish His will in the world. If our current situation is like being in a Wilderness, yet we can still drink of Jesus’ life-giving water! (Jn 4: 14). If our self-isolation is like Fasting, we can still live on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God! If we can’t gather together to mutually encourage each other with “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs”, we can still rejoice in the certainty that, working through this time, God can make our Christian Community not *more scattered*, but MORE UNIFIED; not *more fearful*, but MORE COURAGEOUS; not *less spiritual*, but MORE CHRIST-CENTERED; and not *weaker*, but STRONGER! Even now—especially now—let us praise God who most shows His strength when we most acknowledge our need; when we finally admit that *we can’t*, God shows that HE can!

As we join humanity, crying out to God with a fearful voice of misery, we must also wrestle with Paul’s admonition to the persecuted church in Thessalonica: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess. 5: 16-18). The “praying” part will certainly get easier in the near future; but how can we nurture an attitude of thanksgiving to our loving God during this trying and terrifying time?

Heavenly Father, Blessed are You and Blessed be Your Holy and Glorious Name; Your creation is beautiful, Lord, and we thank You for making us part of it, and for Your constant loving presence among us. Our hearts are heavy with concern for the weak, the sick, and the aged among us, Lord, and we fear the effect this pandemic will have on us, on our friends, on our families, and on our small Christian Community. Protect us, merciful Lord, in your loving embrace; watch over all who care for us physically and spiritually; and may Your Holy Spirit grant us Wisdom to know how to give You thanks in prayer during this time, and how to offer our need for the glorification of Your Holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Tom Stockton