

See what great love the Father
has lavished on us, that we
should be called children of
God! And that is what we are!

—1 John 3:1—

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Sunday Devotion

May 10, 2020

Find a quiet place by yourself
or with another and come to
God

CALL TO WORSHIP

We've come to worship God, who loved us before we were yet born,
who knows us even better than we know ourselves, whose presence never leaves us,
and whose love for us never ceases.
This is our God. Come and worship!

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, on this day of the festival of the Christian Home, the celebration of Mother's Day, the witness to the eternal love of Christ, remind us that we are responsible for caring for each other. We are called to lift up rather than tear down; to support rather than abandon, to reach out when others have turned away. Give us hearts of love that, in all places and times, we may be a witness to the hope that is found in Jesus Christ. Amen

HYMN "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"

1 A might - y for - tress is our God, a bul - wark nev - er
2 Did we in our own strength con - fide, our striv - ing would be
3 And though this world, with dev - ils filled, should threat - en to un -
4 That word a - bove all earth - ly powers, no thanks to them, a -
fail - ing. Our help - er he, a - mid the flood of
los - ing, were not the right man on our side, the
do us, we will not fear, for God hath willed his
bid - eth. The Spir - it and the gifts are ours through
mor - tal ills pre - vail - ing. For still our an - cient foe doth
man of God's own choos - ing. Dost ask who that may be? Christ
truth to tri - umph through us. The Prince of Dark - ness grim, we
him who with us sid - eth. Let goods and kin - dred go, this
seek to work us woe. His craft and power are great, and
Je - sus, it is he. Lord Sab - a - oth his name, from
trem - ble not for him. His rage we can en - dure, for
mor - tal life al - so. The bod - y they may kill; God's
armed with cru - el hate, on earth is not his e - qual.
age to age the same, and he must win the bat - tle.
lo, his doom is sure. One lit - tle word shall fell him.
truth a - bid - eth still. His king - dom is for - ev - er.

PRAYER OF BROKENNESS

Loving God, we confess that at times we don't know the way. We have become lost in fear, scattered in hopelessness. We have forgotten how to listen for your voice. We demand signs that this will end, answers to how to move forward, because uncertainty is too heavy a burden. And yet, you have shown us the way, the truth, and the life, through your son Jesus. You have shown us the way of love. You have shown us that our acts of love are powerful, able to overcome fear and hopelessness. Remind us of who you have called us to be, and what you have called us to do: love one another. In the name of Christ, who has shown us the way, we pray all things. Amen.

BLESSING/ASSURANCE

We know that the way, the truth, and the life is love, and that love has been made known to us in Christ Jesus. We are forgiven, loved, and restored. In Christ we find rest, we find hope, and we are not alone. We belong to Christ, and to one another. Live into Christ's ways of love and peace, and God will see you through. Remember this truth: Jesus died for us. Jesus forgives us. Jesus loves us. Jesus is good to us. Amen.

FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON Psalm 31: 1-5

In you, O Lord, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.
² Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily.
Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me.
³ You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name's sake lead me and guide me,
⁴ take me out of the net that is hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.
⁵ Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.

SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON John 14:1-14

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ² In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."
⁸ Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. ¹² Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

MEDITATION

Individuals and families around the world are in coronavirus self-isolation and are faced with the prospect of spending an extended period of time at home before life gets back to normal. But it seems many parents in particular are struggling with spending so much time with their children and have taken to social media to share hilarious thoughts about their experience. Humor can be some of the best therapy, at times, so for all of you who are feeling the isolation blues, here are some thoughts from parents:

“Working from home - Day 1: “This is going to be great! I can bond with my kids and work in comfortable clothes.

Day 2: Here is Mom - in tears with makeup running down her face.

Day 3: The students have been suspended and the teacher is let go for drinking on the job.”

Another – “If schools are closed too long, parents are gonna find a vaccine before the scientists.”

Another – “Homeschool Day 1 – How do I get a student transferred out of my class?”

Seven year old Ben wrote the following essay: “It is not going good. My mom is getting stressed out. My mom is getting really confused. We took a break so my mom can figure this stuff out and I’m telling you it is not going good.”

Parent Simon Holland wrote: “If you had asked me what the hardest part of battling a global pandemic would be, I never would have guessed, ‘teaching elementary school math.’”

One Mom wrote a Twitter message: “Quarantine Day 11: My kids are outside, washing rocks from the landscaping. One of them is naked.”

A parent wrote: “As the mother of two teenagers and a tween, I’ve reached the stage of parenthood where I’ve taken to watching *Rosemary’s Baby* for comfort.”

One more: “I am the perfect parent six hours a day... and then my alarm goes off.”

Finally, “You know that completely stress free feeling that comes from knowing you’ve done everything you need to do? Yeah, me neither. I’m a mom.”

This is Mother’s Day, but it isn’t just mothers who have a tough job. Every parent will tell you, parenting is difficult and loaded with stress – not just during this pandemic, but under even the best of circumstances. So this day has been set aside since 1914 as a day to lavish mom with presents to express our gratitude and maybe as a bribe so she’ll put up with our shenanigans for another year or at least until her birthday or Christmas – whichever comes first.

But again, moms *and dads* are not the only ones who experience stress and this isn’t new. The COVID-19 pandemic is not the originator of stress but I have say, it is certainly making it escalate. Surveys have shown a heightened rate of depression, anxiety, and domestic violence including child abuse over the past two months.

I don’t know about you, but this past week has been particularly hard for me. For no new or overtly apparent reason, I just found myself waking up on Monday saying out loud, “I don’t want to do this anymore.” I don’t want to go into a building that is empty and prepare for a service that will be broadcast on Zoom, where I’ll walk out of the empty sanctuary and say “good bye” to no one. I don’t want to wear my mask every time I go out in public. I don’t want to stay holed up in my small apartment with only my cat for company. I don’t want to Zoom one more meeting talking about, “how are we going to do this.” I don’t want to pass people in the grocery store feeling uncomfortable just

because we are there and I do wish they would go down the aisle in the direction the arrows are pointing. I don't want to miss my friends, my family. I don't want to miss celebrations. It's been nine weeks and I don't want to do THIS anymore! Now before you worry too much, I'm not going to stop using the CDC prescribed guidelines for social distancing and safety nor am I advocating anyone else do so – quite the opposite.

It was with this feeling in my heart that I opened the scripture readings for this week. Psalm 31 says, “Incline your ear to me – listen to me! Rescue me speedily – save me and save me now! This is a psalm that is looking for safety, and rescue. I can certainly relate to that. It is hard to be in a place where one feels the need of rescue. I think most would agree that when distress comes, we want out – now!

I remember when my mother died sixteen years ago. I was struggling with grief and couldn't pull myself out of the “funk” that I was feeling. Talking with a friend, I remember describing this and the friend told me, “well, that's normal,” to which I got very angry. I didn't want it to be normal. I wanted it to be over! I prayed the words of Psalm 31 – “save me and save me now!”

I think Jesus understood this very human response to stress and so we hear his words in today's gospel lesson – “Let not your hearts be troubled.” Really Jesus? Really? Why wouldn't they be troubled? We often hear these words at funerals when troubled souls are gathered to grieve the loss of one who was loved. “Let not your hearts be troubled” points to the resurrected Jesus who reigns forever in heaven where there is a place for us – out of here and “this-world” mess. We picture Jesus in heaven where it doesn't matter whether we have opened our eyes to what seems like the umpteenth day of quarantine or that the family pet has run away or whether our son left his cellphone outside in the rain or whether Mom's Pap smear was positive or Dad is searching the internet for a new job since his was unexpectedly terminated.

“Let not your hearts be troubled” seem to come from a future Prince of Peace where peace is yet to come and where it doesn't really matter that aged parents still don't under the dreams of their children, that children continue to be bitter because they were not parented better, that death comes before the rebellion can become reconciliation, before ugliness can become understanding, before loathsomeness can become love.

When we traditionally hear these words at funerals, we tend to think of the one who first said them to be the post-Easter Jesus, the Jesus who is the Christ – the one raised above us and our time, the Christ of some “Peace Place,” as Ralph J. Wallace put it, that is yet unknown to us because it is out there somewhere. It's hard not to hear these words in this way because we know the end of the story, or at least we think we do. In fact, we only know the end of one chapter in God's eternal book. But the truth is, Jesus spoke these words in the very midst of a very troubling time for both him and his followers. It is the middle of the last week of his life, in an upper room, during the last supper when Jesus made this irrational plea. It was when he was troubled in spirit because he had to hand the bread to Judas and told him to act quickly. It was when he had to confront the confused and determined Peter with the truth of his three time denial.

Jesus said words of peace not from a vantage point above and beyond the human condition. He was at its most corrupt core. He wasn't above time. He was in the worst of times.

Scott Hoezee made the observations that most of the time when someone—even when it's Jesus—tells you to NOT let your heart be troubled it is because as a matter of fact anyone with the ability to look around can see PLENTY of actual trouble! We need to “be told not to be troubled not on sunny summer days while floating on an air mattress on a crystal clear lake with a cool drink in our hand,” as Hoezee would say, “but instead when troubles are in fact abounding.”

In the worst of times, do not let your hearts be troubled. These words are good for funerals but I think they are *great* for life right now. Let's be honest, it's the "right now" that gets our attention. If God is going to have a place in our lives, then it is in this life and not just some other in which we desire his compassion and aid. I think this passage offers just that. As the hearts of all who were gathered in that upper room were troubled, Jesus talks about a Peace Place that is very much known in this world and that Peace Place was with him.

This gospel isn't about a mansion in the sky by and by. This gospel is really about Jesus. Fifteen times in it Jesus says, "I." "If you study the 'I's'," as Ralph Wallace says, "you cannot miss the point that the Peace Place is with Christ and through Christ with God." If he goes to prepare a place, he comes back to take us to be with him. He is the way to the Peace Place."

If you don't understand that, well, you are in good company. Neither did the disciple Philip. If the Peace Place is ultimately with God the Father, well, then, Jesus, show us the Father, Philip asks. And Jesus' response – "You're looking at Him."

I think that's our need as well. We want to see the Father. We want to see that God has actually got all this mess so that we can find ourselves in that Peace Place even in the midst of troubles. Missouri may be known as the "show me" state, but I think it is a state most of us live in. As children, we often ask the "Why" and "How" question to which parents give the response, usually in an exasperated tone, "Because I said so." As children of God we still ask those same questions and as child we still aren't satisfied with that answer, "Because I said so." Jesus knew this and so he gives a different answer. He says, "When you see me, you see the Father." I think this is our answer, where we see Jesus, the work of Jesus, the "What would Jesus do" stuff of life, we see the Father and we really do end up in the Peace Place.

This pandemic has brought out some of the worst in people. Maybe you saw in the news where a man entered a convenience store without wearing a mask. The clerk working there asked him to please put on a mask to which he responded by approaching that clerk and wiping his nose on her sleeve.

Another story told of police arresting a teenager for coughing on a middle-aged woman while claiming to have coronavirus. The woman was standing in the checkout line waiting to pay for her groceries when she asked a 16-year-old girl to give her more space. Rather than simply taking a few steps back, the teen and her mother engaged in a verbal argument with the victim. Next, the teen "pulled her facial mask down, walked closer to the victim, and coughed towards her while claiming she had the deadly and highly contagious coronavirus."

Where is Jesus? Where is our peace place? Boy, do we need it now! We are so stressed and therefore doing such stupid things. A psychotherapist posted tips for helping people under stress right now. One post was called the window of tolerance. It said, "Yes, we can feel grateful AND disappointed about things being cancelled. Yes, we can enjoy extra time with loved ones AND feel overwhelmed by their presence. Yes, we can be hopeful AND feel like everything is falling apart. Yes, we can be a source of support to others AND prioritize our needs, fill our own cup."

This post is a reminder that both of these feelings are legitimate and possible side by side. There is stress and yet we can do positive things even as we are having negative feelings. That's where we can see the Father, when we do the things that Jesus would have done. That is where we can be in a Peace Place, the dwelling place that God has prepared for us, even when we are hurting inside NOW. That's what can get us to face another day even when we don't want to do this anymore. What would Jesus do? Surprise, that is where God reveals God's self. Try it. Take time today and each day to do what Jesus would be doing in this pandemic. That will be the place, right now, where you can find God and God's peace.

PRAYER

God of all Living and Loving: How pleasant it is when women, men, and children live together in unity! How noble is your creation and the world that you have made! How blessed we are to receive the gifts of life and love!

We are thankful for families, where scattered piles of stuff testify that we live fully in the moment; where the noise of laughter and the silence of sadness are freely shared;

We are thankful for families, where we find sanctuary from danger and judgment; where words of love and openness are the rule of life.

We are thankful for families, where our differences are the spices of life; where our unity is something that we can always take for granted.

We grieve for families, where violence and rejection are living realities; where hearts are broken, and dreams are shattered.

We grieve for families, where walls of protection become fortresses of isolation, where language is a weapon of destruction and hate.

Help us to understand, those families whose identities are different from ours; the ways of loving, parenting, partnering and working together for peace.

Help us to dare, to stand strongly against hate and divisiveness; to encounter our differences with love and respect.

This we believe: that love is stronger than hate; that hope is stronger than despair, and that good is stronger than evil. In the name of the One who is Loving and Living, Amen.

The first candle is lit.

Nurturing God, we light this candle in recognition of the great care and love you have for each one of us.

Nurturing God, we praise and thank you.

The second candle is lit.

Nurturing God, we light this candle in thanksgiving for all mothers, for all they do, or once did, for all they give, or once gave and for all they mean and will always mean. For those who have struggled in their roles as mothers, where the path has not been smooth. For those whose mothers perhaps failed in any way. Bring hope in the midst of their lives, whether as mothers or as children. For those relationships that are strained, grant reconciliation. Where there is pain, bring the healing of Your grace and mercy.

Nurturing God, we praise and thank you.

The third candle is lit.

Nurturing God, we light this candle for all families throughout the world.

For those who are missing their families. For those who are stressed because of too much time with families. For those whose families do not provide a safe haven. For those whose families have no place to lay their heads. For those whose definition of family is untraditional

Nurturing God, we praise and thank you.

The fourth candle is lit.

Nurturing God, we light this candle for the family of the Church,

here and everywhere. For the church that is struggling with what it means to be church. For those churches that serve in unsafe places. For those churches who welcome the stranger.

Nurturing God, we praise and thank you.

The fifth candle is lit.

Nurturing God, we light this candle for all who nurture and encourage others. For those on the frontline of this pandemic. For those who provide essential services even at the risk of their own lives. For those who extend kindness, patience and a voice of reason. For leaders who make difficult decisions for the welfare of the whole forsaking popularity.

Nurturing God, we praise and thank you.

The sixth candle is lit.

Nurturing God,
We light this candle for all who are in pain, sick and grieving.

Nurturing God, we pray for your peace.

HYMN "Be Still My Soul"

1 Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side. Bear pa-tient-ly the cross of grief or pain. Leave to thy God to fu-ture sure-ly as the past. Thy hope, thy con-fi-be for-ev-er with the Lord; when dis-ap-point-ment, or-der and pro-vide, who through all chang-es faith-ful will re-dence let noth-ing shake; all now mys-te-rious shall be bright at grief, and fear are gone, sor-row for-got, love's pur-est joys re-main. Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heaven-ly Friend last. Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know stored. Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past through thorn-y ways leads to a joy-ful end. his voice who ruled them while he dwelt be-low. all safe and bless-ed we shall meet at last.

BENEDICTION

Praise God who loves us.
May God, who gave birth to all creation, bless us.
May God, who became incarnate by an earthly mother, bless us.
May God, who broods as a mother over her children, bless us.
May almighty God bless us, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.