

Message for the week of March 15

Pastor Michael O'Neill

Just a few weeks ago, none of us would have considered that we would be in the status that we find ourselves in today. But I believe these times can draw us closer together in Christ – for sure in spirit, if not proximity! These times can drive our relationships deeper as we pray for each other and see each other outside of worship.

The church has always been here for good and we will continue to be. Throughout history, and even in many, many parts of the world today, the Christian Church has known times when they were not able to meet together openly due to persecution. We are nowhere near what they were facing, but maybe we should rejoice that we can share in their suffering, even though ours is, truthfully, more of an inconvenience and certainly not persecution of any kind. So how can we be here for good during this time?

I find it more than ironic that last week, our sermon and Scripture passage dealt with the letter that Jeremiah wrote to God's people while they were in exile – unable to gather together in worship. I want to remind you of that, because it is an especially good word for us today and the weeks ahead:

In Jeremiah 29:5-7, God wrote to his people in exile:

“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

Maybe it will help you to get out your “Here for Good” book and review your notes on the sermon from last week, but let me remind you what we are told in this portion of that passage: we are told to live abundantly in exile; to live in the fulness of resurrection life and the power of the Holy Spirit *today* – not waiting for the announcement to come that we can be back together again in worship. We are to live abundantly today and every day, and we are to do so by living loyally for the Lord. In EVERYTHING we do and say, we must live for the Lord, and not for ourselves. So, when someone at the store wants to wrestle you over that package of toilet paper, let them have it with your blessing! Because lastly, we must live generously for others.

That is especially true in this time. Some of us are under quarantine, some of us are doing our best to keep our social distances, in order to protect ourselves and others. Still, there are ways we can live generously for others. It is in times like these that Christians have historically stepped up to serve those in need. Don't wait for an invitation; look for ways to show love to others.

As a church, we will watch for ways that we as a congregation can be of service to others in our community, and will keep you informed of those. Of course, all of us can and should continue to give our tithes and offerings to the church, even though we aren't able to do it together in worship. You can mail in your giving, drop it by the church office, give through

our church app, or through our church's website at westvalleychurch.com. It will take a conscious effort for all of us to continue to give for the ministry of our church, since we're not able to do it on Sundays.

Like the early church, and like many churches around the world today, we will still be one church in many locations; our connections through our small groups will be essential during this time. If you haven't heard anything yet from your small group or Bible Study leader, contact her or him and find out what's going on. And if you are not in a small group right now, then this is an especially important time to join one; just contact our office online or give us a call. Even if you are under quarantine, your group can do FaceTime or Skype with you during their meeting.

Maintaining these relationships through our small group connections will be a significant way we can look out for each other in our church, so that we can help one another and our neighbors – perhaps helping with childcare for those in your group or our church who need help with their little ones, so they can continue to work. Maybe you can help do shopping for those who can't go out to get groceries. Your group can encourage those who are frightened or alone with a phone call or a visit.

A Pastor friend of mine suggested that teens who are home from school could provide child care/babysitting while parents have to work; that kids or adults at home could find elderly folks who could use a hand with spring cleaning or yard help. Parents who are adept at handling stay at home kids could share ideas with one another for passing the time productively.

In the statement we sent out to the church, I reminded us of God's instructions in 2 Timothy 1:7 that says:

“For God did not give us a Spirit of fear, but of power, and love, and a sound mind.”

I'd like to unpack that a little more. First of all, when it talks about the Spirit that God did and did not give us, it's not talking about our own spirit, or our own determination. This is not a saying for some motivational poster that is supposed to help you build up your own courage. The Spirit is the Holy Spirit himself. As a believer in Jesus, God has given you the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life. Our enemy, the devil, would love to give you a spirit of fear, and if you watch the news, it would seem many people already have that spirit. Can anyone explain to me why we are hoarding bottles of water? If I'm diagnosed with the Coronavirus, will I somehow not be able to turn on my faucet? When someone sprints past you at the store to get the last bottled water, you don't have to receive their spirit of fear. In fact, maybe take a break from the news. The news media's main job is to incite emotion. Don't get caught in the hype. By Monday of this week, we are supposed to be back to beautiful weather. Get some fresh air, breathe it in deep. Give thanks to God for fresh air. You can hoard all the fresh air you want – there will still be plenty left for everyone!

I know it is tempting to be afraid. We feel afraid when we feel that we have no power over the situation. But God has given you the Holy Spirit of power – he has power over your life and all things. Don't be afraid. You can take steps, too, to feel empowered. Wash your hands regularly. Think about how often you touch your face. Think about the things you touch. Cough into your elbow. Instead of greeting people with a handshake or fist-bump, do like the Japanese do – bow to each other. What a great way to show honor to others!

Check the CDC website for all the ways you can better control your environment and exposure; doing those things will help you feel empowered.

Fear drives us to think we might not have enough of what we need to meet the unknown, so we give in to panic-buying and hoarding resources. We begin to resent those who have what we think we need, or we resent those who are healthy. I've even read of people mistreating Asians and people at Chinese restaurants out of some primal racist fears. But you have received the Holy Spirit of Love. And the Bible tells us in 1 John 4:18 that "perfect love casts out fear"! Think about how to help each other in the ways I mentioned above. You really can offer to those in need your last roll of toilet paper. You might say that's a way to turn the other....never-mind.

Finally, fear causes us to begin to connect dots in our minds that are not supposed to be connected. We begin to think irrationally and jump to completely wrong conclusions. I saw on Facebook that someone claimed this virus was a conspiracy by our own government to control our lives. If there are any conspirators, it's the folks at Facebook who allow all that nonsense to have a platform. You have received the Holy Spirit, so you can have control over your thoughts. Some translations say "self-discipline" rather than a "sound mind," but it means the same thing. It means right moral thinking, being able to control your actions because you can control your thoughts with balance, wisdom, and clear thinking. One author has said, "When everything is coming unglued, this quality of 'levelheadedness' will keep the Christian focused calmly on the power of love that the Spirit provides, and so it makes perseverance in life and ministry possible." (Towner, 1994, 161)

I'm reminded that Paul wrote these words in 2 Timothy while he was in isolation in a cold, Roman dungeon where he was being kept in chains like a common criminal, being imprisoned there by the Emperor Nero. He was so isolated that many of his friends couldn't even find him to visit him. He was alone. Paul wrote this knowing that his work was done and his life was nearly at an end. If Paul knew these truths about the Holy Spirit while he was in that situation, then surely they apply to these weeks of social distancing with cabin fever.

So be encouraged. Continue to pray for each other and for our church. We are here for good.

As a church, we will stay closely connected with you; we will do it through various media, and our office remains open. Be careful, limit your exposure. If you are someone who is compromised and you can't risk being out, reach out to us and we'll do our best to find ways to help you. But don't fret. Trust God. This isn't for long!

We'll be back together again soon. Pray for each other and for our community; for God's peace and healing for all.