

“Extraordinary Times”
Psalm 23; Isaiah 43:1-2; Romans 8:31
A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells, Jr.

If you're looking for a couple of words to describe this past week, I think it's got to be head spinning. Our world changed in the course of just one week with school and business closings and travel restrictions. All because of a virus. It may be hard to believe, but that is the world we live in now.

But I can't think of another time when life in our country, indeed, the world, has been so drastically affected. Because of the COVID-19 Coronavirus, we are living through perhaps the most extraordinary time of our lives. What I want to talk to you about this morning is how we can live through these extraordinary days, and to do so without extraordinary fear. So, what can we do as people of God during this time of national emergency?

The first thing we can do is to have faith in the God we worship. There are lots of things we can be fearful about as we journey through life, like going to a new school or job. These are common fears we all face and learn to deal with. Then there are fears about some of the worst things that can happen to us: getting in a car accident, getting a serious disease (like cancer), losing a loved one. Some things we can avoid, others are out of our control.

God does not visit these kinds of tragedies on us. Let me say this clearly: the COVID-19 Coronavirus is not God's punishment on humanity for sin. Viruses occur in nature, and many of them are beneficial to the ecosystem and some living organisms. The Coronavirus, and others like it, are naturally occurring diseases that are part and parcel of living in this world. God does not come up with these natural disasters to indiscriminately kill people. That's not a God I could worship, and I don't think you could either. The God we worship is a God of love who seeks to redeem, and not destroy. When tragedies like the Coronavirus strike, we can turn to God and have faith that God desires the best for us, not the worst.

Second, get the facts about the dangers we face. There has been a lot of information put out about COVID-19. I want to encourage you to look up the facts yourselves, to become informed about this virus and the risks associated with it. When you go looking for information, go to reliable sources. The websites for the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC), The World Health Organization, the Maryland Department of Health, the Frederick County Health Department...these are all reliable resources for information about the epidemic.

We are still learning about the COVID-19 Coronavirus because it's new. Here are a few things to know:

- Not everyone will get this disease. It all depends on whether you come into contact with someone who has it, or you touch surfaces where the virus can live for a short time.
- Of those who get the disease, 80% will experience no symptoms to mild effects from the disease.
- 20% will experience more severe symptoms, many of these people will have to be hospitalized. People with underlying medical conditions, like lung and heart disease or diabetes, are more likely to have severe symptoms of the Coronavirus. Older adults (over 60) have been more susceptible, but recent reports indicate younger adults are also getting sick.¹
- The mortality rate from COVID-19 has varied from country to country. In the US, so far, the death rate is about 1.1%. This is far higher than seasonal flu, which is about .1%.

These facts help us put the risk posed by the Coronavirus in perspective. The risk remains relatively low for most of us. This isn't to say you shouldn't worry about it, but you do need to be cautious. Stay well-informed.

¹ "Coronavirus causes mild disease in four in five patients, says WHO," *The Guardian*, Feb 17, 2020, article online, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/17/coronavirus-causes-mild-disease-in-four-in-five-patients-says-who>, accessed 21 March 2020.

Third, do the right thing. The point here for us as Christians is to do the right thing by supporting our public officials. This is also in line with John Wesley's three Rules for Methodist Societies: Do no harm, Do good, Stay in love with God. When we observe the travel restrictions and practice "social distancing," we are contributing to the effort to not harm others. We can also practice the "do good" part of John Wesley's rules by:

- Getting groceries or running errands for someone who can't go to the store.
- Calling people on the phone just to check in and see how they are doing.
- Shopping locally, especially at restaurants, by ordering takeout meals at least once a week.

Christians have been doing the right thing by helping others for centuries.

- In the Roman Empire, it was a common practice for people to abandon unwanted children in a practice called "Exposure." Christians frequently took in these children and gave them a chance at life.
- Christians were among the leading groups to establish hospitals to help those who needed healing and care. In the United States today, there are 52 United Methodist hospitals and health care systems.² The Roman Catholic Church has 600 hospitals and 1,600 long term and other care facilities. Altogether, roughly one in six patients in the US today is in a religiously-affiliated hospital.³ This is part of our tradition of "doing good" and taking part in God's work of healing and redeeming a broken world.

Finally, we can look to God for help. God loves us. The God we see revealed in Jesus Christ promises to love us and to be with us, no matter what we are going through. This is the promise of scripture. We hear this promise in the much beloved 23rd Psalm, especially in the words: "He leadeth me beside the still waters."

In these stressful and anxious times, these words speak to my soul:

When I was a child growing up on Long Island, New York. My grandparents had a beach house on the north shore of the Island. In the summer, my family would spend weekends there. I distinctly remember getting up early in the morning to see the sunrise on Long Island Sound. The water at that time of day was perfectly still, and silent—the sun hadn't heated up the atmosphere enough to cause a breeze. The waters of the Sound looked more like a mirror than a large body of water—perfectly flat, perfectly calm, perfectly still. I hold on to that image, even now. For me, it is a still place, a safe place, and a way to reflect, be still and know that God is God. Do you have a still place? Have you been there lately? Maybe now is a good time to pay a visit.

The words of the prophet Isaiah, too, tell us of God's ever-present love.

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you..."

These words remind us, once again, that God is with us, that God knows us personally, by name. And they tell us God is right there in the waters, with us; and the waters will not sweep us away. For those who are wondering "where is God" during the Coronavirus outbreak, I will tell you:

- God is with those who are waiting anxiously at home for the results of their COVID-19 test.
- God is with every person suffering with this disease in the hospital ICUs.
- God is with the doctors and nurses who are working incredibly long hours to save lives.
- God is with every family who has lost a loved one to this disease.

² "United Methodists at a Glance," *UMC website*, Mar 21, 2020, article on internet, <https://www.umc.org/en/content/united-methodists-at-a-glance>, accessed 20 March 2020.

³ "Catholic Health Association of the United States," Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, article on internet, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Health_Association_of_the_United_States, accessed 20 March 2020.

- And God is with you and me as we seek to do our part to help bring an end to this crisis by doing no harm, doing good, and staying in love with God.

Beloved, we have survived crises and calamities before. We will survive this one too. We are not alone. We have a God who is with us and we have each other.

I want to close with words from the eighth chapter of Romans. This chapter is one of my very favorites out of all the scriptures. I love these words because they say God's love for us is more powerful than any other force in the world: "What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?" I hope you heard that right. God is for us. And God is with us, loving us, suffering with us, and raising us up to new life through Jesus Christ, our Savior.

"For I am convinced," the Apostle Paul went on to say, "That neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That is something I believe this morning; and I hope it is what you believe too.

We will make it through this crisis together. It's going to take time. We will need patience. We will need faith. And above all, we will need love.

Remember God's love often.

In the name of Jesus.

Amen.