

PEACE AND PRESENCE

In these continued days of isolation and uncertainty, we may still find ourselves overcome by a whirlwind of emotion, worry, or simply by the stress of responsibilities crashing down upon us. The world has slowed down, and we're forced to withhold from ourselves the social presence of others and much of what we knew as "normal." Such isolation and distance, perhaps, has mirrored a similar rift between us and God.

It is important for us to remember God's peace and presence during this time. No matter how angry, sorrowful, or apathetic we may grow while apart, it is crucial to remember our lives are still held by the Creator of the universe, and He's right here with us. We pray this week's devotionals help make that clear!

There will be three devotionals published per week on Thursdays, meant to be read on Friday, Monday, and Wednesday. They will also be posted on the church website, firstchurchgrandhaven.com.

The Peace of God

Devotional for Friday by Art Tuls

Read: Philippians 4:4-7

"Do not be anxious about anything..." When I read these well-known words, I'm inclined to complain to Paul: "that's easy for you to say! You are a saint, after all!" But then I need to remember that he was in a dungeon-prison when he wrote these words; and not only that, he had experienced some terrible things: running for his life, being beaten and left for dead, living through a shipwreck. He had firsthand experience of the sad fact we all know—sooner or later we suffer; hard things will happen. That's the root of our anxieties, isn't it?

Now the whole world is painfully aware of that truth. COVID-19 has changed everything it seems. We hear of people losing their jobs, losing their business, losing their lives. Some of us are forbidden to leave home. Some of us wear masks when we get groceries. Schools are closed. Professional sports are shut down. We're forbidden even from going to church! And in the middle of trouble Paul writes, "Do not be anxious about anything." Really? Isn't there much to be anxious about?

But of course he doesn't stop there. Instead of worry, he calls us to prayer: "in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving bring your requests to God." In everything. Paul does not deny or minimize our troubles. He does not try to explain them away as God's will or God's way of teaching us a lesson or God's way of testing us. He simply tells the Philippians that in spite of trouble, even in the middle of any trouble, they should keep in touch with God, whose grace and power transcends the worst of times (and the best of times, too, come to think of it).

Paul not only avoids minimizing our suffering, he also does not promise us the moon. He does not say if we pray our troubles will go away. He does not promise a quick deliverance. Neither Jesus nor his disciples were promised such deliverance. Instead, Jesus was arrested, beaten, and crucified. And his disciples fled for their lives. And we all know that eventually they lost their lives for His kingdom. So, no promises of an easy life on a primrose path, if only we pray.

Instead, our prayers result in "the peace of God" coming over us, coming into us. What is that exactly? Well, it's "beyond our understanding." It's a deep, deep gift, as deep as our minds can go, as deep as our hearts can go. This peace keeps our hearts and minds secure "in Christ Jesus our Lord." It is just as Jesus himself, not long before his arrest, comforted his worried disciples: "My peace I give you."

The peace of God will watch over our hearts and our minds, Paul promises. In the middle of serious trouble, the heaviest grief, keep in touch with God. He will breathe into us the deep gift of His peace, which is so deep it is beyond our understanding. That's why Paul can say it and mean it: "do not be anxious about anything." Keep in touch with God. He will give us His Peace. May His Grace and Peace be yours, brothers and sisters.

Songs to listen to: Peace Like a River (It Is Well)
Those Who Trust in the Lord (Psalm 125)

Forced Slowing as a Gift of God

Devotional for Monday by Eric VanHouten

Read: Psalm 46. Now read it again, but slower.

Here's a historical fun-fact for your day: Calvin Coolidge, the United States' 30th president, apparently once claimed "four-fifths of all our troubles in this life would disappear if we would only sit down and keep still."¹ It would now seem as though this sentiment has been debunked in practice by a worldwide virus. We have been forced to slow down—mandated to isolate and, in the scheme of what was our constantly moving lives, *sit down and keep still*. I'm guessing this isn't news to you.

Psalm 46 speaks almost directly to this forced slowing of our everyday lives, all under the poetic context of our God being *present* during our troubles. While what we're facing isn't necessarily the earth physically giving way and mountains hurling into a roaring sea, we are facing very real troubles and hardships that make us feel like our world *is* crumbling. Psalm 46 very clearly calls our response: "Be still and know that I am God." God is here, and God is in control.

I recently read a great book entirely framed by the question, "What if busyness isn't healthy? What if it's an airborne contagion, wreaking havoc on our collective soul?"² What an eerie and relevant choice of words. While it's important to remember that God is not the author of devastation, He will assuredly use this trial to teach, love, and draw His people closer to Himself.³ But how do we hear what He has to say? How do we see how He's working in and through it all? Again, God calls us to *be still and know* that He is here, and He is in control. Perhaps slowing down and being still is exactly what we needed.

Today, *be still and know* that the God who Created the universe has the world in His hands; He knows what you're going through, and He's right there with you. Rest assured that God is in control, and no earthly troubles will cause His grip to falter. While this isolation may not be solving four-fifths of the world's troubles, we are nonetheless presented with a much-needed opportunity for course-correction from busyness and distraction. We are essentially forced to slow down our lives—and in this stillness we may enjoy the peace and presence of God. "Every human wants to find out and understand all the ways of God in the world, but he cannot, because he is not God. And yet the faithful do not despair but cling to God, who deserves their trust; they can leave it to Him to make sense of it all, while they seek to learn what it means to "fear God and keep His commandments," even when they cannot see what God is doing. This is true wisdom."⁴ In that light, remember these words today:

*"God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in in trouble. Therefore we will not fear... 'Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in all the earth!' The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress."*⁵

¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of the Older Order 1919-1933* (Boston: Houghton & Mifflin, 1957), 58.

² John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2019), 27.

³ See James 1:13-14; Romans 8:26-30

⁴ Max F. Rogland, *Theme and Interpretation of Ecclesiastes in The ESV® Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 1194.

⁵ Ps 46:1-2a, 10-11

His Loving Presence

Devotional for Wednesday by Pastor Tom Pettinga

Read: Jeremiah 29:10-14

"I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD." Jeremiah 29:11

Babylon is 1678 miles from Jerusalem as the crow flies - talk about social distancing! God's exiled people were that far away from where they wanted to be. They were in a strange land, living in very unfamiliar circumstances. And they just wanted to go back, back to the familiar, the normal. When Jeremiah's letter reached them, it contained hard news and good news. The hard news? Their exile would last 70 years! The good news? It would end, and they were not exiled from God!

Because of government decisions made in the wake of COVID-19, we have been 'exiled' for three or more weeks now and the social distancing is not over yet. We feel cut off. Life is suddenly far from normal. Loneliness, boredom, listlessness, anger, and fear - all feelings that wash over us during this pandemic. We just want to go back to the way things were.

Some of us who read this have been 'exiled' for, in some cases, years. We've lost a spouse, a friend or other loved one. And the loneliness is very real. Or old age has taken away our health and strength, along with our independence and freedom. The threat of this coronavirus has literally shut us in our rooms, cutting us off from precious human connections.

Please take courage today from our Father God. The familiar Jeremiah 29 passage has three promises we can take hold of. First, know that we will not be in our current state of exile for one more day than God directs. This COVID-19 epidemic is part of God's plan even though it was not part of yours or mine. Second, his plan is always good; he always turns the worst into good for those he loves, his called and saved ones. We already have seen good things come from the worldwide disaster, people caring for others in courageous and creative ways. Let's keep our eyes open for the good that is happening around us and seek ways to be a part of it.

And we are never exiled from our Heavenly Father. He is in this hard place along with us. And he has promised to hear the prayers that exile wrings from our fearful and lonely hearts. So spend those lonely times in prayer - there are so many who need Jesus' touch, his wisdom, his comfort. And as you pray, God promises that you'll find him, the one who never leaves us or forsakes us. May God bless you with his loving presence this day.

How would you describe your level of aloneness today?

What good thing could you be grateful for in this crisis?

What three people are you praying for especially? How could you communicate your care for them?