

Lectio 365: Praying through the Coronavirus Pandemic

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which can be downloaded for free on smartphone.*

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Day 1: Love in a time of fear

This week we will be focusing our prayers upon the Coronavirus crisis, beginning today with Christ's invitation to love in a time of fear.

PAUSE

As I enter prayer now, I pause to be still; to breathe slowly, to re-centre my senses upon the presence of God.

Pause and pray

Prayer of Approach

Unshakeable God, you are my ever-present help in times of trouble. Amidst all the isolation, grief and fear caused by this crisis, renew in me your peace, restore to me your perspective, and reveal to me your presence as I spend this time with you now.

REJOICE AND REFLECT

I choose to rejoice in the assurance of God's protection and provision today, joining with the ancient praise of all God's people in the words of Psalm 27:

The Lord is my light and my salvation—
so why should I be afraid?
The Lord is my fortress, protecting me from danger,
so why should I tremble?
When evil people come to devour me,
when my enemies and foes attack me,
they will stumble and fall.
Though a mighty army surrounds me,
my heart will not be afraid.
Even if I am attacked,
I will remain confident.
The one thing I ask of the Lord—
the thing I seek most—
is to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
delighting in the Lord's perfections
and meditating in his Temple.
For he will conceal me there when troubles come;

he will hide me in his sanctuary.
He will place me out of reach on a high rock.

Psalm 27:1-5

This week, as we reflect on God's Word amidst the chaos of Coronavirus, we'll be praying into a different dimension of this complex crisis each day.

Together we're going to address the themes of
connection in a time of isolation,
depth in a time of distraction,
courage in a time of containment,
hope in a time of hype
breath in a time of death,
beginning today with Christ's invitation to *love in a time of fear.*

If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: in this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us.

1 John 4: 15-19

Everywhere I look right now I encounter fear. The news is scary. There is fear in peoples' eyes. But the apostle John says that God's 'perfect love drives out fear'. The Greek word for driving out here is *ballei*. It's the same word used of Jesus driving out the money-lenders from the temple, and casting demons out of the oppressed.

It's forceful. Love doesn't just soothe our fear. It isn't polite. There is a violence about the way it kicks terror out of our hearts and minds. It's important to face the facts, even when they are scary, but even more important to focus on the ultimate and enduring reality of God's love.

ASK

I focus my thoughts upon the image of Christ upon the cross, acknowledging its terror but also allowing thanks to arise in my heart for this tangible proof that love wins.

Pause and pray

Remembering the way that Jesus had compassion upon Mary even from the cross, I think now of people who are particularly fearful at this time - the elderly, the unwell and those without work - presenting each one to Christ on the cross and entrusting them to his love.

Pause and pray

YIELD

As I return to the passage, I notice the way that the apostle John repeats the word 'love' again and again, nine times in total, once for every 12 words. It's like a heart beating rhythmically through the text and through the years.

If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: in this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us.

1 John 4: 15-19

A story is told of the Apostle John who wrote these words. In old age they would carry him from place to place, church to church, barely breathing, the last remaining connection on earth with the human Son of God. And whenever he arrived anywhere crowds would gather to hear and see him speak. With great effort he would sit up on his stretcher, and the room would fall silent, hushed in eager anticipation. 'Love one another' he would cry. 'Love one another'. He would then lie down. His three-word sermon was over. And he'd be carried to the next congregation.

'In the end,' as one gnarly old saint said, 'the only thing that will matter is how well you loved'. How might I drive fear from another person's life today, by the simple power of love?

Pause and pray

Prayer of Yielding

At this time of so much fear I take hold of God's promise in Isaiah 43 finding courage in this beautiful assurance for the day to come:

Hear the Word of the Lord: '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.'
(v.1-2)

Closing Prayer

*Father, help me to live this day to the full,
being true to You, in every way.
Jesus, help me to give myself away to others,
being kind to everyone I meet.
Spirit, help me to love the lost,
proclaiming Christ in all I do and say.
Amen.*

Day 2: Connection in a time of isolation

This week we are focusing our prayers on the Coronavirus crisis, today exploring Christ's invitation to *connection in a time of isolation*.

PAUSE

As I enter prayer now, I pause to be still; to breathe slowly, to re-centre my scattered senses upon the presence of God.

Pause and pray

Prayer of Approach

Unshakeable God, you are my ever-present help in times of trouble. Amidst all the isolation, grief and fear caused by this crisis, renew in me your peace, restore to me your perspective, and reveal to me your presence as I spend this time with you now.

REJOICE AND REFLECT

I choose to rejoice in God's intricate involvement in my life today, joining with the ancient praise of all God's people in the words of Psalm 139:13-17.

You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body
and knit me together in my mother's womb.
Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex!
Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it.
You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion,
as I was woven together in the dark of the womb.
You saw me before I was born.
Every day of my life was recorded in your book.
Every moment was laid out
before a single day had passed.
How precious are your thoughts about me, O God.
They cannot be numbered!

Psalm 139:13-17

Today, as we reflect on the importance of connection in a time of isolation, we turn to the beautiful story of Jesus healing a sick woman, imagining the changing expressions on her face and on his face as this encounter unfolds:

As Jesus was on his way, the crowds almost crushed him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her. She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped.

'Who touched me?' Jesus asked.

When they all denied it, Peter said, 'Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you.'

But Jesus said, 'Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me.'

Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed. Then he said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.'

Luke 8:42b-48

Jesus doesn't seem particularly interested in performing an impersonal miracle. Power short-circuits from his body and - after twelve years of suffering and shame - this poor woman is instantly healed. Hallelujah!

But immediately he swings around, needing a name, scanning the crowd for a face, seeking the dignity of a personal encounter. All too often I want Jesus for his power, but he only wants me for myself.

In this age of face-masks, hand sanitisers and elbow bumps his priority is touch; facial recognition; the connection of a deeper relationship.

ASK

In this time of isolation people need connection more than ever. Thinking through the day ahead, I ask the Lord to put particular people on my heart to call. To give me opportunities to smile and wave to those I might pass in the street. To help me love and listen to those I meet - even if it's only online.

Pause and pray

I name before you now Lord those known to me who are self-isolating, asking that this may be a season in which they go deeper in their relationship with you.

Pause and pray

YIELD

As I return to this beautiful story, I ask myself why this woman's touch was different from those of all the other people in the crowd:

As Jesus was on his way, the crowds almost crushed him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her. She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped.

'Who touched me?' Jesus asked.

When they all denied it, Peter said, 'Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you.'

But Jesus said, 'Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me.'

Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed. Then he said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.'

Luke 8:42b-48

In Jesus' day there were strict rules forbidding the touching of anyone or anything considered ritually unclean including lepers, corpses and even menstruating women. (Perhaps this kind of regulation of touch may seem a little less strange to us now, finding ourselves forbidden from handshaking and hugging, required to sanitise our hands after every encounter.)

This poor woman was not just sick, she was untouchable. Years of chronic haemorrhaging had brought the added stigma of isolation and shame. No wonder she 'came trembling and fell at Jesus' feet'. Her touch was supposed to infect Jesus, but instead his touch healed her, and his words restored her dignity.

Pause and pray

Prayer of Yielding

At this time of isolation from human touch, I take comfort today from the words of Jesus in Matthew 28:20, promising me his presence forever more:

Hear the Word of the Lord: 'Surely,' he says, 'I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'

Closing Prayer

*Father, help me to live this day to the full,
being true to You, in every way.
Jesus, help me to give myself away to others,
being kind to everyone I meet.
Spirit, help me to love the lost,
proclaiming Christ in all I do and say.
Amen.*

Day 3: Breath in a time of death

Today we continue to focus our prayers on the Coronavirus pandemic exploring the significance of *breath in a time of death*.

PAUSE

As I enter prayer now, I pause to be still; to breathe slowly, to re-centre my scattered senses upon the presence of God.

Pause and pray

Prayer of Approach

Unshakeable God, you are my ever-present help in times of trouble. Amidst all the isolation, grief and fear caused by this crisis, renew in me your peace, restore to me your perspective, and reveal to me your presence as I spend this time with you now.

REJOICE AND REFLECT

I choose to rejoice that God is firmly in control today, joining with the ancient praise of all God's people in the words of Psalm 63:3-8:

Your unfailing love is better than life itself;
how I praise you!
I will praise you as long as I live,
lifting up my hands to you in prayer.
You satisfy me more than the richest feast.
I will praise you with songs of joy.
I lie awake thinking of you,
meditating on you through the night.
Because you are my helper,
I sing for joy in the shadow of your wings.
I cling to you;
your strong right hand holds me securely.

Psalm 63:3-8

Today we are going to reflect on Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones, standing in a place of death and devastation, confronting a situation of total despair with nothing but the Word of the Lord.

[The Lord] said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army.

Then he said to me: 'Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off." Therefore prophecy and say to them: "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord."

Ezekiel 37:9-14

We know by now that the Coronavirus spreads extensively through coughing, sneezing and breathing, and that it attacks the lungs. We are warned to maintain a two meter distance from one another, and to avoid breathing in close proximity for any length of time.

Breath is a powerful metaphor in the Bible for life and the Holy Spirit. In Genesis 2:7, God makes Adam by breathing into his nostrils. In John 20:22, Jesus breathes upon his disciples and says 'Receive the Holy Spirit'. And here in this story Ezekiel prophesies breath into countless corpses turning the Valley of Dry Bones into the Valley of Resurrection.

ASK

Acutely aware as I am that the Enemy wants to attack my breath, I take a few deep defiant breaths now in God's presence, consciously exhaling fear, quietly receiving his Spirit afresh into my body, rejoicing that the breath of God brings hope not harm, health not sickness and life to the full.

Pause and pray

I pray for those in my local hospital right now using ventilators, for those desperately needing ventilators and for those companies rushing to manufacture more ventilators in response to the sudden urgent demand. Lord, we cry out to you in the words of Ezekiel 'put your Spirit in these people that they might live.'

Pause and pray

YIELD

As I return to the passage, I open my ears to hear Your word, and my heart to yield to Your will once again.

[The Lord] said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army.

Then he said to me: 'Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off." Therefore prophecy and say to them: "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.

Ezekiel 37:9-14

The People of God in the world today are certainly saying 'Our hope is gone and we are cut off', but as in the Days of Ezekiel, the Breath of God is coming again in our time to counter the Enemy's devastation and to raise us up once again as 'a vast army'. Holy Spirit I invite you to come now from the four winds to revive and resurrect us in this place of such despair. I name particular churches other than my own in my village, town or city.

Pause and pray

Prayer of Yielding

*At this time of so much grieving and dying I receive God's promise through Ezekiel again into my own life, allowing faith to rise within me for all that is to come:
Hear the Word of the Lord: 'I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord' (Ez 37:14)*

Closing Prayer

*Father, help me to live this day to the full,
being true to You, in every way.
Jesus, help me to give myself away to others,
being kind to everyone I meet.
Spirit, help me to love the lost,
proclaiming Christ in all I do and say.
Amen.*

Day 4: Depth in a time of distraction

Today we continue to focus our prayers on the Coronavirus crisis, exploring Christ's invitation to depth in a time of distraction.

PAUSE

As I enter prayer now, I pause to be still; to breathe slowly, to re-centre my scattered senses upon the presence of God.

Pause and pray

Prayer of Approach

Unshakeable God, you are my ever-present help in times of trouble. Amidst all the isolation, grief and fear caused by this crisis, renew in me your peace, restore to me your perspective, and reveal to me your presence as I spend this time with you now.

REJOICE AND REFLECT

I choose to rejoice in the promise of God's presence today, joining with the ancient praise of all God's people in the words of Psalm 46:6,10-11:

The nations are in chaos,
and their kingdoms crumble!
God's voice thunders,
and the earth melts!
..."Be still, and know that I am God!
I will be honored by every nation.
I will be honored throughout the world."
The Lord of Heaven's Armies is here among us;
the God of Israel is our fortress.

Psalm 46:6,10-11

Today I am reflecting on the invitation of Jesus to a deeper intimacy and a more restful life in a time of personal distraction, fearful distortion and cultural disruption:

The apostles gathered round Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.' So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.

Mark 6:30-32

With flights cancelled, offices closed, restaurants and gyms shut, I have an unprecedented, unexpected opportunity for intimacy with Jesus. He beckons my soul to a place of solitude, away from the crowd, saying: 'Come with me by yourself to a quiet place and get some rest.'

Henri Nouwen describes solitude as 'the furnace of transformation'. 'Without it,' he said, 'we remain victims of our society and continue to be entangled in the illusions of the false self. Solitude is the place of the great struggle and the great encounter - the struggle against the compulsions of the false self, and the encounter with the loving God who offers himself as the substance of the new self.' (p. 15-16 *Henri J.M. Nouwen - The Way of the Heart (Ballantine) 1981*)

ASK

What are the characteristics and compulsions of my false self? What masks do I hide behind? What behaviours do I use to avoid God's presence and to protect myself from change? I confess these defences and avoidance strategies to Jesus now.

Pause and pray

Many wonderful stories are already coming in of people turning to faith in Jesus in response to this crisis. I take time now to name friends who aren't Christians and loved-ones whose usual securities are being shaken and whose normal defense mechanisms have been stripped away, asking that they might begin to consider Christ's invitation to 'Come with me'.

Pause and pray

YIELD

As I return to the passage, I open my ears to hear Your word, and my heart to yield to Your will once again.

The apostles gathered round Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.' So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.

Mark 6:30-32

Christ's invitation to solitude comes at a time when he is experiencing every kind of stress. Prior to this encounter he's been rejected in his hometown, then he's heard the devastating news that his cousin John has been beheaded, and now he is so busy that he hasn't even had time to eat.

It's easy to think that I'll finally get my prayer life sorted when all my problems go away. When things get a bit easier and I feel a bit more spiritual. But Jesus reminds me here that I have to be forceful with myself in seeking the solitude of his presence. That he awaits me in the midst of my distractions and problems.

Lectio 365 is a great start, but I suspect that when Jesus says 'Come away with me to a quiet place and get some rest' he is envisaging more than a few minutes. Is he inviting me to take an extended time of prayer and worship, or to study a part of the bible in depth, or to start reading a particular Christian book?

Pause and pray

Prayer of Yielding

At this time of so much distraction, I take hold of God's assurance in Jeremiah 33 promising me fresh inspiration and revelation whenever I call on his name:

'This is what the Lord says... "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.'" (Jeremiah 33:2-3)

Closing Prayer

*Father, help me to live this day to the full,
being true to You, in every way.
Jesus, help me to give myself away to others,
being kind to everyone I meet.
Spirit, help me to love the lost,
proclaiming Christ in all I do and say.
Amen.*

Day 5: Hope in a time of hype

This week we are focusing our prayers on the Coronavirus crisis and today we are going to explore the hope of Christ in a time of hype.

PAUSE

As I enter prayer now, I pause to be still; to breathe slowly, to re-centre my scattered senses upon the presence of God.

Pause and pray

Prayer of Approach

Unshakeable God, you are my ever-present help in times of trouble. Amidst all the isolation, grief and fear caused by this crisis, renew in me your peace, restore to me your perspective, and reveal to me your presence as I spend this time with you now.

REJOICE AND REFLECT

I choose to rejoice in the hope of God's unfailing love today, joining with the ancient praise of all God's people in the words of Psalm 33:18-22...

But the Lord watches over those who fear him,
those who rely on his unfailing love.
He rescues them from death
and keeps them alive in times of famine.
We put our hope in the Lord.
He is our help and our shield.
In him our hearts rejoice,
for we trust in his holy name.
Let your unfailing love surround us, Lord,
for our hope is in you alone.

Psalm 33:18-22

Today I am reflecting on one of the great apostolic prayers in the Bible, in which Paul identifies hope as the hallmark of God and his people:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:13

To know God is to know hope. His will for us, according to the apostle Paul, is fullness of joy, fullness of peace and so much hope that it overflows from our lives into everyone we meet. They walk away from spending time with us feeling brighter, more confident, less worried. How on earth is this possible, especially right now when the world is so bleak and our own personal circumstances are so incredibly difficult?

Well, it's not about positive-thinking. The apostle Paul says that we receive peace and joy by trusting God, and we receive hope by being filled with the power of his Holy Spirit. In what areas of my life do I lack peace and joy? And could it be because I am struggling to trust God in these areas?

ASK

Admitting to God the places in which I find it hard to trust him, I begin to imagine what his best for me might look like in these areas. I listen for any words or promises he might want to speak into my fear.

Pause and pray

I take time now to pray for those I know whose situation seems desperate, asking the Lord to show me any practical ways in which I might share with them a little of His hope this week.

Pause and pray

YIELD

As I return to the passage, I open my ears to hear Your word, and my heart to yield to Your will once again.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:13

I love this idea of being a hope-dispenser at such a hopeless time when there are so many desperate people all around. And yet of course I am not immune to all the despair, the heartbreak and the real problems of the world. I often feel hopeless, but God does not. And so I take a little time now asking him to fill me afresh, that I might 'overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.'

Pause and pray

Prayer of Yielding

At this chaotic time I receive the balm of Jesus' promise in John 14, choosing to trust him in this life and also in the one to come:

'Do not let your hearts be troubled,' says Jesus. 'You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that you also may be where I am.'
(John 14:1-3)

Closing Prayer

*Father, help me to live this day to the full,
being true to You, in every way.
Jesus, help me to give myself away to others,
being kind to everyone I meet.
Spirit, help me to love the lost,
proclaiming Christ in all I do and say.
Amen.*

Day 6: Courage in a time of containment

This week we have been focusing our prayers on the Coronavirus crisis, and today we are going to explore Christ's invitation to take courage in this time of containment.

PAUSE

As I enter prayer now, I pause to be still; to breathe slowly, to re-centre my scattered senses upon the presence of God.

Pause and pray

Prayer of Approach

Unshakeable God, you are my ever-present help in times of trouble. Amidst all the isolation, grief and fear caused by this crisis, renew in me your peace, restore to me your perspective, and reveal to me your presence as I spend this time with you now.

REJOICE AND REFLECT

I choose to rejoice in the reassurance of God's smile today, joining with the ancient praise of all God's people in the words of Psalm 4:1, 6-8:

Answer me when I call to you,
O God who declares me innocent.
Free me from my troubles.
Have mercy on me and hear my prayer...
Many people say, "Who will show us better times?"
Let your face smile on us, Lord.
You have given me greater joy
than those who have abundant harvests of grain and new wine.
In peace I will lie down and sleep,
for you alone, O Lord, will keep me safe.

Psalm 4:1,6-8

Today I am reflecting on God's commandment to be strong and courageous when I am tempted to hide away and ride out the storm:

Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. ⁹Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.'

Joshua 1:8-9

Coronavirus began, of course, in China where the word for crisis is made up of two characters: the first means 'danger' and the second means 'opportunity'. The danger of this crisis is very real. Everyone is affected in some way. Hundreds of thousands are likely to die. Millions are losing their jobs. The world is heading for recession. It's important therefore that we heed the advice of our political leaders and our medical experts for the sake of the most vulnerable in our world.

But this crisis is also an opportunity for the people of God to 'be strong and courageous', to show his love to a world that is being shaken to its core.

In the year 251AD a plague decimated the great city of Carthage. Its citizens were 'shuddering, fleeing, shunning the contagion'. Carcasses piled up in the streets. In a famous sermon on Matthew 5:43-48, the great Church Father Cyprian urged the church to stay in the city to care not just for other Christians but for their non-Christian neighbours too (who had recently been persecuting them).

Rodney Stark, in a fascinating book *'Epidemics, Networks and the Rise of Christianity'* observes that: *'The minority Christian community, which did not flee but stayed to provide nursing, had a higher survival rate than their pagan neighbours; and the pagans who had been nursed through the crisis by Christians were likely to be open to a faith that, unlike their own, had worked.'* (Rodney Stark, *Epidemics, Networks and the Rise of Christianity*, pp 159-75 cited *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom* by Alan Kreider Grove Books 1995, p.39)

ASK

I ask the Lord to give me courage in spite of my nerves to reach out to other people today, and to bring to my attention now any specific people to whom he is sending me.

Pause and pray

I take time now to pray for my political and spiritual leaders that they may have wisdom beyond their own wisdom, and strength beyond their own strength to take a lead in this crisis.

Pause and pray

YIELD

As I return to the passage, I open my ears to hear Your word, and my heart to yield to Your will once again.

Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. ⁹Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.'

Joshua 1:8-9

This is an unusual time of constraint and containment when the natural human impulse is towards self-preservation - mere survival. But this season of confinement may also be a great blessing.

Eugene Peterson writing about Jonah's confinement in the whale, says this: *'Without confinement, without the intensification resulting from compression, there is no energy worth speaking of... Confined to the reality of the human condition, the person is surprised to be living not a diminished life but a deepened life, not a crippled life but a zestful life.'* (Eugene Peterson *'Under The Unpredictable Plant'* (p.75 & p.89)

Lord I ask that I would be deepened and not diminished, emboldened and not terrified, by the pressures of this crisis for the sake of those who don't yet know your love.

Pause and pray

Prayer of Yielding

At this time of so much disruption and dismay I take hold of God's promise in Isaiah 41:10 drawing consolation for the day to come from this beautiful assurance :

Hear the Word of the Lord: 'Do not fear, for I am with you;

do not be dismayed, for I am your God.

I will strengthen you and help you;

I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.'

Closing Prayer

*Father, help me to live this day to the full,
being true to You, in every way.
Jesus, help me to give myself away to others,
being kind to everyone I meet.
Spirit, help me to love the lost,
proclaiming Christ in all I do and say.
Amen.*

Day 7: A Sabbath Prayer

This week we have been focussing our prayers on those affected by the global coronavirus crisis.

We have explored Christ's invitation to connect in a time of isolation, to go deep in a time of distraction, to have courage in a time of containment, to hope in a time of hype, to receive breath in a time of death and to love in a time of fear.

Now, on this Sabbath day, when many will not be able to gather in their church services as usual, we join together as one Church to pray verses from the Bible.

PAUSE

As I enter prayer now, I pause to be still; to breathe slowly, to re-centre my scattered senses upon the presence of God.

Pause and pray

REJOICE AND REFLECT

I rejoice in God's protection today, joining with the ancient praise of all God's people in the words of Psalm 46:

*God is our refuge and strength,
always ready to help in times of trouble.
So we will not fear when earthquakes come
and the mountains crumble into the sea.
Let the oceans roar and foam.
Let the mountains tremble as the waters surge! ...
The nations are in chaos,
and their kingdoms crumble!
God's voice thunders,
and the earth melts!
The Lord of Heaven's Armies is here among us;
the God of Israel is our fortress.*

Psalm 46:1-3,6-7

ASK

Jehovah Shalom, Lord of Peace, I pray for those currently living in isolation and fear. May they know your presence in their isolation, your peace in their turmoil and your patience in their waiting. Prince of Peace, you are powerful and merciful; let this be our prayer:

"May your mercy come quickly to meet us, for we are in desperate need. Help us, God our Saviour, for the glory of your name." (Psalm 79:8)

Pause and pray

God of all Comfort and Counsel, I pray for those who are grieving, reeling from the sudden loss of loved-ones. May they find your fellowship in their suffering, your comfort in their loss, and your hope in their despair. I name before you those known to me who are vulnerable and scared - the frail, the sick and the elderly. [pause] God of all Comfort, you are powerful and merciful; may this be my prayer:

"He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us." (2 Corinthians 1:10)

Pause and pray

Jehovah Rapha, God who heals, I pray for all medical professionals dealing daily with the intense pressures of this crisis. Grant them resilience in weariness, discernment in diagnosis, and compassion upon compassion as they care. I thank you for the army of researchers working steadily and quietly towards a cure - give them clarity, serendipity and unexpected breakthroughs this week. Would you rise above this present darkness as the Sun of Righteousness with healing in your wings (Malachi 4:2). May this be my prayer:

"Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you." (Jeremiah 32:17)

Pause and pray

God of all Wisdom, I pray for the World Health Organisation, national governments, and local leaders too - heads of hospitals and other institutions. Since you have positioned these people in public service for this hour, I ask you to grant them wisdom beyond their own wisdom to contain this virus, faith beyond their own faith to fight this fear, and strength beyond their own strength to sustain vital institutions through this time of turmoil. God of all Wisdom and Counsel, you are powerful and merciful; may this be my prayer:

"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear" (Psalm 46:1-2)

Pause and pray

YIELD

Prayer of Yielding

I pray the blessing of Psalm 91: "Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you." (Psalm 91:3-7)

"Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer." (Psalm 4:1)

May El Shaddai, the Lord God Almighty who loves us protect us. May Jesus Christ, His Son who died for us save us. And may the Holy Spirit who broods over the chaos and fills us with his presence, intercede for us and in us for others at this time.

"The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen." (2 Timothy 4:18)

Closing Prayer

*Father, help me to live this day to the full,
being true to You, in every way.
Jesus, help me to give myself away to others,
being kind to everyone I meet.
Spirit, help me to love the lost,
proclaiming Christ in all I do and say.
Amen.*

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