

The Coronavirus and the Holy Spirit Ps. 46; II Tim. 1:7-8; Matt

3/15/20

I had prepared a different sermon this week- a sermon about the gifts of the Holy Spirit- but stuff happens! And by Thursday afternoon, I felt it was important to say something about the Coronavirus this week, so I changed direction! The Coronavirus, also known as CoVid19, has been dominating the news. It was first reported in Wuhan City, China and has become well-established in several countries, leading the World Health Organization to declare it a pandemic this week. So far, there are relatively few cases in the US, but experts expect that to change. It has already caused major disruptions to the stock market, colleges and universities, sports at all levels, and other large gatherings. Just look around the sanctuary this morning! Public schools have been closed in a number of states, including ours. The Coronavirus is easily spread, with older adults and those with chronic heart and lung diseases as well as diabetes at higher risk for serious disease.

How should Christians respond to this public health crisis? What impact might the Holy Spirit have on the way we react to it? I'm glad you asked those questions! I've got a couple ideas to share with you this morning. The first has to do with fear. One of the reactions to this disease that I've read about all week and heard about in conversations is fear.

That's understandable. This is a new disease for which there are no vaccinations. The mortality rate appears to be around 2%, but we're not even sure about that. Our collective anxiety has led to a whole host of cancellations, and a surge in hoarding cleaning products and common household goods like toilet paper. Just check the aisles at Walmart!

Last year I heard a story about a woman who has no sense of fear. The part of her brain that produces fear has calcified. Therapists work to help her, but she just has no concept of what fear feels like. When researchers introduced her to poisonous snakes, she had to be restrained from picking them up! She has a very difficult life, and needs a lot of support to get by. You see, fear is actually a gift from God, and in the case of the Coronavirus, it can motivate us to wash our hands more often and avoid behaviors that might cause harm to us or others. That's a good thing! But fear and anxiety can also paralyze us, or cause us to overreact or react in selfish ways!

This is where Christian faith has something to say. God's people have often faced fear, going back to the ancient Hebrews enslaved by Pharaoh, to early Israelites living in fear of their more powerful neighbors, and to early Christians living in fear of persecution! They relied on their faith in God's providence to sustain them in those times. Listen to these words from Ps. 46.

¹*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*

²*Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;*

³*though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah*

⁴*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.*

⁵*God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.*

⁶*The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.*

⁷*The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah*

⁸*Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has brought on the earth.*

⁹*He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.*

¹⁰*“Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.”*

¹¹*The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. (Ps. 46:1-11)*

In the midst of great turmoil, with shaking mountains and foaming seas, with wars and desolations, the Psalmist is comforted by the knowledge that God is both powerful and present with him. “*The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.*” That is the bedrock of the Christian approach to managing fear- remembering that God is in charge, and God is with us.

In the mid-1600's Oliver Cromwell's emissary traveled to Europe on an urgent matter with important implications for England's future. He stayed overnight in a room by the sea, but didn't sleep well, worrying about the outcome of the next day's negotiations. As was the custom of the time, his servant slept in the same room with him, but unlike Cromwell's representative, the servant slept well. In the morning the emissary asked the servant how he could sleep so soundly when so much was at stake for England.

The servant asked, "Did God rule the world before we were born?"

"Certainly, he did!" answered the representative.

"And will God rule it again after we die?"

The emissary agreed that God would.

"Then why not let God rule the present as well?"

That's the basis for Christian hope in uncertain times. God continues to rule the world as he has from the beginning of time.

The Heidelberg Catechism puts it like this in its very first question and answer:

Q. "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?"

A. "That I belong- body and soul, in life and in death- not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head..."

The author of II Tim. adds this: *for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*

(II Tim. 1:7) We've been talking about the Holy Spirit during Lent. Here we find another activity of the Spirit- helping us to overcome fear, and replacing fear with power and love and self-discipline. Those are attributes that are really helpful during a crisis, aren't they? Power, love, and self-discipline.

Let's focus on the "love" aspect. We are all called to love our neighbor. Jesus said it was the second greatest commandment, so we certainly can't just ignore it! And the Spirit wants to help us to love. So, what might loving our neighbor look like during the Coronavirus epidemic?

Well, it would start by doing and refraining from doing things that might spread the virus. Love would look like washing your hands more often. Avoiding shaking hands. Love would look like staying at home if

you have any symptoms, or if you've been quarantined. Love would involve following the advice or restrictions of public health officials and doctors, and other scientists who have been gifted and trained for this kind of work. Love involves doing our part to avoid spreading the virus.

Love also would mean that we avoid hoarding. That's right. Hoarding leads to shortages of important goods that everyone needs. Don't do it. Buy what you need, and share extra materials with others. That's what love looks like during an epidemic.

If the virus spreads as predicted, love will involve looking out for others and caring for them, relying on the advice of medical professionals as to how best to do so. Perhaps shopping for them or bringing them meals, and regularly contacting those who are isolated. Love will refrain from blaming others for the pandemic- the Chinese, the Europeans, or the president. There will be time to evaluate all of our responses after the pandemic is over. Blaming might make us feel a little better, but that energy is better directed toward solutions right now.

Love will also seek to accept community and even church changes with grace, even when we don't fully understand them.

And love will cause us to pray. Remember those words from Ps. 46, "*Be still and know that I am God.*" (Ps. 46:10) Prayer will remind us of

who we are and whose we are. And God will hear and answer our prayers for wisdom and for healing. Love will cause us to pray.

You may be wondering what we are doing about the virus here at GPC. It's a rapidly evolving situation, but a task force will bring recommendations to the Session this week that may involve some more cancellations and some more changes in how we worship, and perhaps even suspending public worship for a while. In the meantime, we have stepped up our cleaning of hard surfaces in the building, we've made some changes in worship, and we have cancelled a number of events. We encourage you to wash your hands before coming to worship and to pray for the task force and the Session- that we'll make wise choices.

In a crisis, being a Christian gives us hope to counter our fear, and calls us to love our neighbor. Look for ways to be God's light as this crisis evolves. Remember that the Holy Spirit doesn't produce fear, but power, love, and discipline.