

Pastor Jon's "safe distance" Sermon from Sunday, March 22

In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, I am comforted this week by Psalm 23 and Ephesians 5.

In Psalm 23, the writer speaks of God's presence in the midst of a scary time. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, **for you are with me**, your rod and your staff they comfort me."

In our Ephesians lesson, Paul or someone writing in Paul's name asks his hearers to find out what is pleasing to God.

So, in light of social distancing, shutting down of communities we love, and trying to flatten the curve, it is time, dear church, to get creative and figure out what is pleasing to God.

This social distancing thing is hard work, but critical work. My three year-old was playing outside and the neighbor kids were in the yard next door. They naturally gravitated toward each other at the fence like Tim Allen in the show Home Improvement. Marcella called over, "Kids, do you want to play with me?" How do you explain to a three year old, "Sorry honey, not at this time." I said, "Maybe when it warms up." Marcella put her head in her hands and sat down in frustration. Thankfully their mom came out and called the kids in for lunch. Can you relate to Marcella? How many of you have your hands in your heads wondering, "How long, oh Lord?" People are experiencing many forms of loss and grief right now.

We were running out of milk this week and had to go to the store. Our anxiety is up as it is. But going out in public ramps it up even more. For example, at the grocery store, we just wanted to get in; get out; nobody gets hurt. Then we heard someone coughing in the produce aisle. Our heads pop up, we locate the person, mumble to ourselves, quickly grab the things we need, and rush to get ahead of them. The human condition is crazy, isn't it? We now look at everyone with suspicion... and they with us. I am coining it "safe distance shaming." But my wife would disagree. We are just trying to stay safe. Then, when I got home, I gave the groceries a bath in hand sanitizer.

Our kids are getting along for the most part. We only had a few arguments. We signed up for the Disney+ free trial. The theme song of Frozen 2, "Into the Unknown," has a new, profound meaning for me. The most creative thing our kids are doing is making daily quarantine videos to send to family and friends. It is amazing, when they have a common purpose and mission, how well they get along. You hear them laughing, jumping around, and bouncing ideas off each other. They reminded me of how the church needs to keep our common purpose and mission at the center of our life together.

I am thankful for all the people who have been reaching out and sharing their concerns and ideas with me on how to be a church at this difficult time. I am thankful for friends texting or calling. It is nice to be remembered. Thank you to all who are calling or writing to our homebound folks and offering help. We will put some of your ideas into action this week by organizing. I will share some of those at the end and share ways you can help.

One thing I know for sure is that we all long for community. I miss the Bible Studies, communal worship, and daily interactions with all of you. I know my kids are getting cabin fever. They would love to be with friends and extended family. However, we have had several conversations about why not.

In the Gospels, Jesus teaches us to love our neighbors as ourselves. At this time, loving our neighbors as ourselves looks like quarantining and keeping a safe distance. It is the most unselfish thing we can do right now. A positive is I see more people outside at a safe distance, of course. Jeranna and I played tennis twice this week with no net.

Being in community pleases God. There are many ways to be in community without gathering in groups. We are gathering today online. Many of you are on social media. I learned in seminary that God in God's very essence is community. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are a community of their own. We were asked in seminary, why did God create the heaven and earth and all creatures? One explanation is that God longs for community because God is community. God creates community and doesn't want anyone to be

alone. Can you see why we are longing for community? God created us that way.

In the book of Ephesians, keep in mind that in chapter 2:8-10 we are told, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is a gift – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” The early church rallied around this idea of being saved by grace through faith. Jews and Gentiles were coming together into one community centered around Jesus’ work on the cross. It was a gift of God. And how should we respond to a gift? This is what we call the Christian life. It is everything we do after we come to know we are saved by grace through faith. Our works are a response to this good news.

That is the question put before us today. How are we to live pleasing lives to God? We are to live in the light. We are to live the same at night as we do in the day. As Christians, Paul was calling us to put away the old life and live the new life in Christ. Darkness was the ways of the world. Christians are called to act differently: to tell the truth, to push for justice, to uphold goodness regardless of the norms of the society at large (as one scholar put it in working preacher). Remember, our future in Christ is already secure. So how do we live as resurrected people in the midst of the current evil and brokenness in the world? We live with a fearless hope!

What is pleasing to God is when we think outside ourselves to others. When we give voice to the voiceless. When we take care of the earth. When we don’t shame others who may not have any other way to get what they need. The system is stretched and stressed. We need to have wisdom paired with grace.

Amen!

Sing Amazing Grace