

Proclaiming the Lords Death: The Cross and the Coronavirus

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

March 22,2020-10am Livestream

Reverend Peter Jonker

1 Peter 5:6-11

Maybe you know: 1 Peter is a letter written to people under stress. It's a letter written to people who are worried that everything in their world is changing. It's a letter written to people who feel as things are coming apart. Why do they feel that way? They are under some level of persecution. Society had turned on them. They've fallen out of favor. Scholars disagree about the severity of the situation. Some think they suffered serious persecution; others think it was more like strong social disapproval. Either way, life was suddenly hard. If you were a Christian businessperson, people stopped doing business with you. If you were a Christian neighbor, some of your neighbors were suddenly practicing social distancing.

Read through the book of first Peter and you can feel the stress. In the six verses we will read, Peter talks about suffering and anxiety and, most vivid of all, he describes the devil prowling around like a roaring lion seeking to devour. In the rest of the book, Peter says the church is accused of being evildoers, he says they are suffering abuse, and he says they were reviled for the carrying the name of Christ. So times were tough. They'd wake up in the morning and their worries would surround them. They'd wake up in the morning with fear tapping at their window saying, "What are you going to do!?!? This is bad! This is terrible! Everything is coming apart!"

Sound familiar? Can you relate to their anxiety? The Coronavirus isn't persecution. The Coronavirus isn't the same as people hating us for bearing the name of Jesus, but the results are more or less the same. We are anxious. We are worried. We feel like the evil one is prowling around like a roaring lion seeking to devour. We wake up every morning with fear knocking at our window saying, "What are we going to do!?" This is bad! This is terrible! Everything is coming apart!"

And it is bad. There's reason for worry. We can't predict the future and we're taking all these drastic measures to flatten the curve, but some of the reports are sobering: estimates that 2 million people could die in this country if we do nothing. I hope that's wrong, but I know it's scary. Many of us have friends in the health care industry and we've heard them talk about how stressed they are – both because of their exposure to the virus and because they just don't feel equipped for all the patients who are coming. Business owners are terrified about the long-term economic impact of the shutdowns. Hourly workers, especially in the service industries wonder how they are going to pay their bills. And people in the at-risk populations face both the loneliness of quarantine and the fear of contracting the disease.

In the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the apostle Peter stands up to speak a word to us. Peter speaks God's word to people facing our kind of

fear. He's a good person to do it, because he knows what it's like to be afraid. He lived through the terror of the crucifixion. He was there on that day when the evil one roared and tried to devour Jesus. That was a day so full of fear that the sky went dark. And what does Peter say to our fear? "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you. Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To hHm be the power forever and ever. Amen."

What is God saying to us through Peter? I would like to say three things that these words can tell us in the time of the coronavirus. 1 Peter is saying: you are not alone. He says stand firm, because "you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings." This is how it goes, says Peter. This is not new. This is what it is like to follow Jesus. This is the kind of enemy, the kind of opposition we've always faced as believers, so stand firm.

We are hardly the first people to have to keep the faith in a pandemic. Mass disease used to be much more common. Way back in the middle of the third century, a terrible plague surged through Rome. Historians estimate that during the height of the plague 5000 people died per day. In Europe, from the 14th century up through the 16th century, the black death-the bubonic plague-swept across Europe in waves killing millions of people. How bad was this plague? So terrible that in the 14th century it's estimated to have killed 30 to 60 percent of Europe's population. Pastors and congregation members alike were figuring out how to respond to these diseases. In 1527 Martin Luther even wrote an essay called, "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague," in which he gave this advice: "Use medicine; take potions which can help you; fumigate house, yard, and street; shun persons and places wherever your neighbor does not need your presence or has recovered, and act like a man who wants to help put out the burning city." His advice stands up pretty well.

Actually, this situation isn't even unprecedented in LaGrave's history! Back in 1918 when the Spanish Flu epidemic swept through Grand Rapids, the churches of the city closed to prevent infection. The Grand Rapids Herald, one of the local newspapers of the time, reported on the closures. Here's what was written in the October 27, 1918 edition of the paper: "There are perhaps few congregations in the city feeling the hardship of the church closing order as keenly as the 17 Christian Reformed Churches. Members of these churches have been trained from childhood to regard regular church attendance as natural in their lives as eating breakfast, and at each of the two or three Sunday sessions the churches wont to be crowded...In the meantime however, church members are making the best of matters and conducting services in their own homes."

“Stand firm in your faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings,” says Peter. That’s not a word to minimize today’s fears or today’s danger. That’s simply a word to say that this is how the struggle goes. We’ve always faced this same foe. This is not a new foe, it’s an ancient foe. This ancient foe still seeks to work us woe. His craft and power are great, and he’s armed with cruel hate, but one little Word shall fell him.

Which brings us to the second thing Peter tells us about how to face this crisis. Peter reminds us that, as people of the cross, we are trained for this fight. You have been training for this! You have been preparing for this fight your whole life.

Did you notice all the training language in our passage: “Humble yourselves! Be alert and sober minded! Resist the Devil! Stand firm in the faith!” This is the language of discipline, of preparation, of training. When you follow Jesus, when you stand under His cross, or-to use the training language that Jesus used-when you pick up your cross daily and follow Him, you enter into Spiritual training with Jesus. If you’ve been going to church your whole life, you’ve been in training. You come here and we teach you the disciplines of faith and hope and love. We drill you in generosity and service. When you are part of a Christian community we teach you to open your heart to the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit starts to build His fruit in you-love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. In your home, you practice Bible reading and prayer. You’ve been in Spiritual training! Jesus has been preparing you for such a time as this! This is your time.

And that’s the beauty of the Christian community. Because living in a consumer society also trains us, but not for times like this. Consumer society trains us in wanting and fun and pleasure. It holds up all sorts of pleasurable activities in front of our faces and says, “You should do this! You should buy that.” That’s not all bad. We all like fun and we all like pleasure. I like to go to a good movie. I like a nice dinner out. I find the symphony enjoyable, and I freely confess my weakness for a really nice Banana Republic cardigan. Fun and pleasure are not evils. In proper proportion, they are God’s good gifts to us. But they are not a good foundation for life. In this world where the devil prowls like a roaring lion, in this world where Jesus promised that we would have trouble, you need a firmer foundation. Fun and pleasure are just not substantial enough! If you are only trained in fun and pleasure, you will have no answer when death and disease come. You will not be ready to face the roaring lion.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are people of the cross! We are ready! When trouble comes, you don’t hoard toilet paper and cling to your cash. You’re a child of the cross. You’ve trained in generosity, so you open your wallet to your neighbor in the time of need. When trouble comes, you’re not swept up in fear. You don’t lock your doors or cave into yourself. You’re a child of the cross. You’ve been trained to think about your neighbor’s needs so when the trouble comes you are ready to reach out and help them. When trouble comes, you’re not a finger pointer. You don’t begin with angry blame. You’re a

child of the cross. You've been trained to love your enemies and to do the work of love while it is still day. We've prepared for this our whole life. Every day you've been practicing the disciplines of the faith. Now the day of trouble is here. You belong to Jesus, the Spirit is in you, and you are ready.

How will the church react to this crisis? Well if history is any guide, I have good hope that the people of the cross will show the fruits of their training. In the fourth century, during the reign of Emperor Julian, the plague came to Rome, and while most of the regular Romans went into self-preservation mode—doing the ancient equivalent of hoarding toilet paper and buying guns I presume—the Christians cared for each other. In fact, they didn't just care for each other, they cared for neighbors.

Julian was trying to return Rome to the old pagan gods and this compassion drove him crazy. In 362AD, he wrote a letter in which he lamented the growth of Christianity and he called on the pagans to step up. He ranted about those rotten Christians with their "benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead, and the pretended holiness of their lives...it is a disgrace that...the impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well." Those poor pagans didn't stand a chance. The Spirit of God was in those Christians. They were people of the cross! They had been training for this their whole life. And so have you.

There is one last thing that Peter is saying to us as we face this crisis. He's said you're not alone; he's told us to stand firm and that we are ready for this, but the dominant message here is "Don't be afraid, God is stronger than this!" Peter's dominant message is: yes, you are in the middle of some pretty hard times, yes the future is really uncertain, yes the devil is roaring and his roar is particularly loud at the moment, but God is stronger. God has got this! "He will lift you up in due time...Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you...after you have suffered a little while, He will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast."

As people of the cross we know this. That's the message we've been hearing our whole lives. It's the truth we speak at the baptism of our children, it's the truth we proclaim in a loud voice at our funerals, it's the truth we sing in this sanctuary week after week after week. We may have to suffer for a little while. Death is scary, and death will have its little day. On Friday he'll growl while the sun goes dark. On Saturday he will try to overwhelm us with fear and grief. But on Sunday morning the grave opens and Jesus walks out of the grave. He's holding the roaring lion by the throat and he's saying, "Don't be afraid people, I was dead but behold I am alive forevermore, and I hold the keys to death and Hades." Friends, the weeks ahead will not be easy. There will be sickness and sacrifice. There will be unemployment. There will be uncertainty and loneliness. The devil will prowl and roar. And he will try to scare you. But do not be afraid. You belong to Jesus. You've trained for this your whole life. And your Lord has already won the victory. To Him be the power forever and ever amen.

© Rev. Peter Jonker