Promise vs. Panic: Using Christ When COVID-19 Lurks

Co-Missioners,

This week we share an exercise in practical, urgent, and down-to-earth theology, anchored in the word and promise of Christ—or so we hope you'll find it to be. It's one of what we guess are several thousand letters that pastors around the U.S. have dispatched in recent days to congregants beset with anxiety over COVID-19, the disease *du jour* that has unsettled the world these past several weeks.

Fear is a fearful thing, as President Franklin D. Roosevelt observed back in Great Depression days. One wants to observe today that for all the panic the sudden virus is inducing, the number of deaths it has caused so far is a minute fraction of the 1.35 million deaths that resulted from worldwide traffic accidents in 2016—almost 38,000 in the U.S. alone. So what parent thinks twice about strapping their toddler in a car to go visit Grandma? Yet many conscientious churchgoers are thinking more than twice this week about shaking hands with the person behind them when it's time to share the peace at the Sunday morning liturgy. "Go figure," one wants to say.

And after that one remembers our Lord's injunction to love and serve these people he calls his own. Each is dear to him beyond all understanding. "Fear not," he says, though without despising them because they are afraid.

From the point of view of a six-step Crossings analysis, the item you'll read belongs squarely in Step Six. That's where one envisions the shape that faith in Christ might give to the way we function in our old-age secular world. Much of what is said

here exudes secularity. May you notice nonetheless how the Promise informs the advice it gives. If you can't, do tell us through a note to our editor.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

P.S. We just found a plea for virus-related prayers in the last place we'd look for such a thing. Check it out. Can we as a community surprise this surprising or even unwitting servant of the Lord by taking him seriously this week and doing as he asks? Just a thought.



Church and the Coronavirus

A Note from the Pastors

Our Lord Jesus once told his disciples to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). In other words, keep your wits together in this dangerous, broken world—and, no matter what it throws at you, keep trusting God and loving your neighbor.

We pray that all of us will take this counsel to heart in our congregation as we react to the news we’re hearing about COVID-19, the new coronavirus that’s been spreading through the world these past several weeks. As we write this, it hasn’t reached our state yet, let alone our county. It almost certainly will.

Our Lord’s prescription for this is the faith in God that drives out fear and replaces it with thoughtful common sense and deep care for each other.

Common sense begins with heeding advice from our public health officials. The website of the Centers for Disease Control (cdc.gov) is an obvious place to turn for this. We encourage you to do so. Much of what is there at the moment is labeled as “interim advice,” a reminder that health officials still have much to learn about how this virus behaves and spreads.

As of today, March 4, the CDC’s risk assessment reads as follows: **“For most of the American public, who are unlikely to be exposed to this virus at this time, the immediate health risk from COVID-19 is considered low.”** For that, we thank God. Now is not the time for major changes in the ways we live and work and pray together.

On the other hand, now is very much a time for paying extra attention to those habits of essential hygiene our mothers taught us. Soap and water. Covering mouths when you cough or sneeze. Staying home when the sniffles are bad, and for sure when you’re running a fever.

Here are some things that this extra attention will or might mean when we're together at church, beginning this weekend—

- You will notice your pastors disappearing when the offering is being taken. They'll be headed for the nearest sink to wash their hands thoroughly, yet again, before communion begins.
- When we share the peace, you may find that the person next to you would rather not shake hands. Please, respect that—and be gracious as you repeat what the Lord just said to you: "Peace be with you." If you're the one who would rather not shake hands, decline with a nod and a smile—and again, repeat the Lord's words. Remember that we have different feelings about what is safe and healthy and what is not, whether for ourselves or for the people God gives us to care for. We also have different circumstances to think about as we arrive at such decisions.
- When communion begins, some may wonder why in times like these we're still using the common cup. Answer: because some among us find it very important as a way of underscoring our unity in Christ, and they aren't at all afraid to use it. The rest of us can surely honor this.
- Many others of us will continue to commune by "intinction," that is, by dipping the host into the special intinction cup. We remind all who do this to be careful not to touch the wine with their fingers. On the chance that this might happen, we encourage everyone to stop at a restroom on your way into church and give your own hands a thorough rewashing.
- If you come to church with a slight cold, consider communing that day simply by receiving the bread and forgoing the wine. Christ is there for you regardless.
- Now and then a pastor comes down with a cold. Our policy

going forward is that whoever has one will step aside from either consecrating or distributing the sacrament, or both. If a communion assistant arrives with a cold, we will find someone to serve in his or her place.
- We are currently looking for some portable hand-sanitizing stations and will have these in place as soon as we can get them. It may take some time. Demand at the moment is high, and the item we want won't be available at Amazon until April 6 at the earliest.

As the days and weeks go by, we will keep a close eye on the latest advice from the CDC and our local health officials, and will act on these as needed, in consultation with our church council. If you have any questions or concerns, don't hesitate to approach either of us.

Finally, here is a good piece of advice for God's saints to heed at all times, and especially at this time: be more concerned about protecting others than protecting yourself. Or as Jesus once said and continues to say: "Love one another as I have loved you."

God grant us all such love as we continue to serve him. Pray for those who are ill today or are stricken with fear. And in all circumstances, remember that "the Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge." Emmanuel is his name. (See Psalm 46; also Matthew 1:23 and 28:20.)

Yours faithfully, etc.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
A publication of the Crossings Community