

Guide for Personal or Family Worship

March 15, 2020

Welcome to worship! For us, this is a Sabbath day, set aside in accordance with God's command to set down the burdens of life's work in order to rest in God's provision and sovereignty. Sabbath is an invitation out of our individual lives' pursuits into a time of rest, renewal and recreation through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the book of Exodus, Sabbath time is set aside to imitate the rhythms of God's own life, etched into the grain of the cosmos. The Book of Exodus remembering that after God worked, God rested and so it is God's will for us and all God has made to do the same (Gen 2:2, Ex. 20:8-11). In the book of Deuteronomy, Sabbath is remembered as a memorial of God's liberation of the Hebrews from their slavery. (Dt. 5:12-15)

What follows is a simple service to guide your personal reflection today. You may wish to walk through it in its entirety or make use of individual elements of it throughout the day.

Preparation

"Stop for one whole day every week, and you will remember what it means to be created in the image of God, who rested on the seventh day not from weariness but from complete freedom. The clear promise is that those who rest like God find themselves free like God, no longer slaves to the thousand compulsions that send others rushing toward their graves." — Barbara Brown Taylor

Hymn of Assurance

Consider the words of the hymn that follows. Hold their gentle assurance against your life and ask, "For what am I worried today?" You may wish to write down your concerns, anxieties or fears. If you are in a group or family setting, you may wish to name them. Place your worries before God, leave them at the threshold as you abide with God in this time of rest.

You can listen to the Yates youth singing this song at Yates' Ash Wednesday service on February 26 here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rG1xwYdyMLI> Feel free to sing along!

Do Not Worry

Ellie Holcomb (lyrics © Full Heart Music)

See the birds who are singing in the spring air, they're given everything they need.
They don't worry where their next meal will come from. They don't worry 'bout a thing.

So just look around you and try to listen to the song creation sings;
And don't you worry cause you're in the hands of the God who made everything.

See the flowers in their colorful beauty, they're dressed better than a king.
They don't worry about what they should wear, no. They don't worry 'bout a thing.

So just look around you and try to listen to the song creation sings
And don't you worry cause you're in the hands of the God who made everything

Because you're not a bird and you're not a flower, you don't have petals or wings.
But there's good news: You're worth so much more to the God who made everything.

So when you worry 'bout today or tomorrow and the storms that they might bring,
Try to remember that you're in the hands of the God who made everything.

So just look around you, and try to listen to the song creation sings.
And don't you worry cause you're in the hands of the God who made everything.

Scripture Reading

Matthew 6:25-34

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

²⁸ “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Meditation

One of the things I value most about our life as a church is our relentless pursuit of God's call to serve with those who are easily overlooked or forgotten, whether in Durham or around the world. Every opportunity I have had on mission with our church has broken open my preconceived notions about what is possible in God.

In Ranquitte, Haiti, the friends we have made through Christian Flights International have taught me important lessons. Many at Yates have had the privilege of traveling to that remote place to serve alongside Christians who are ministering daily in churches, schools and government. In going, we see the amazing ways God is at work among those who live on less than a few dollars a day. On my visit there, our team made home visits out in the rural outskirts of town, bringing beans, rice and word of Jesus' love to families who had absolutely nothing to live on. The visits held precious moments as we prayed with our hosts and shared the gospel. As we left one house, I was told by some team members that the very first thing that those folks would do with their sudden abundance would be to call upon their neighbors to come and share in a feast.

At Orange County Correctional Center in Hillsborough, a vibrant congregation called Christ the King church gathers for worship and fellowship meals of cupcakes and juice boxes. That church ministers to the prison population and facility staff. For some time, Yates has facilitated a Bible study ministry and worshiped with the men there. The Holy Spirit moves powerfully in that fellowship.

These are men who have had everything stripped away from them for crimes they have committed, but when gathered together as the body of Christ, even behind bars, the conversion, commitment, accountability, encouragement and inspiration is palpable. I have always viewed it as a bit ironic given the captivity of the prisoners, but it is also the first place where the story of Acts 16 makes sense to me:

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose.

Sometimes I think these men are, in a very real way, freer than I am. I remember talking to one man after worship one night. He was serving a 10-year sentence for financial crimes in the Great Recession. As we talked about his journey through the system he told me "Of course, I regret my actions. I hurt people. I wish I had not done what I had done. But, I cannot say that I regret being here. What God has done in me and through me is something I never could have imagined before being in this place."

That, friends, is a picture of God's grace. Once stripped of everything he valued, he found God at work more powerfully than his faith imagination ever allowed him to consider before. For him, in prison, God was revealed to be truly sufficient.

Here we are, facing hardships unique to our time and place. Worries we could not have anticipated when we all shouted "Welcome!" to the year 2020. We find ourselves with no school, limited opportunities to be together, shortages on necessary supplies and the relentless awareness of an unseen pathogen whose arrival has turned our lives completely inside out.

The public health concern is very real, and so we are doing our part as a church to contribute to the greater good of our neighborhood. But setting down life as usual, church as usual, has its own anxieties. You have yours and I have mine. It is not easy to be stripped of those institutions, rituals and routines that guide our lives. But today, I turn our attention outward to those we know – and love – who face severe challenges of their own.

I do not tell their stories minimize our current situation. What I am trying to do is highlight the intimate relationship that is struck when we, with all our worries, challenges and anxieties, can perceive the deeper connection we have with others we know and love who are also worried, struggling and suffering. When the Apostle Paul talked about wanting to know Christ completely, he said it the same way. It wasn't simply about aligning the victories of our lives with the victory of Christ. The relationship God is making with us comes also by "*participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.*" (Phil 3:10-11)

What I am reminded of today is not only that "life is difficult." M. Scott Peck famously wrote that in *The Road Less Traveled*. It also recognizes that in our common vulnerability and hurt, we can see in each other glimpses of an alternative to giving up and giving in because of it. The poor in Haiti can still be generous, the incarcerated in Hillsborough can still be grateful. Why? Because these were people who knew Jesus. Jesus, who saw in the birds and the flowers a picture of daily trust.

Jesus, whom the book of Hebrews reminds us is not a "*high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tested in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.*" Jesus knew full well about the difficulty of life. Jesus knew full well that humankind and the entire created order of things would not be able to extract itself from its bondage to sin and death. In him, God shares our lot, and lives a life that ultimately would leave God incarnate stripped of everything and hanging on a cross. Yet he can still say with confidence, "*Do not worry.*" That is what faith sounds like. We follow One who shows us that we can trust God, even when things have quickly moved well beyond our control.

So for us, as we make our accommodations to reduce the spread of the 2019 Novel Coronavirus, could it not also be an opportunity that provokes us to imagine acts of love, generosity, mercy, self-giving and service that we never thought possible when life was more

“normal?” We didn’t choose this path we are all on, but being stripped of our customary habits and routines, can we not try to see God at work in fresh ways and join God there?

We are where we are. Will we respond out of our anxieties and worries, or might our trust in God's call daily to find ways to share the transforming relationship forged by God in the suffering and victorious Jesus lead the way?

Things will not always be this way. I truly believe that this time is going to reveal to us aspects of God’s provision and power that we could not have perceived before we were stripped of some of the insulation we've wrapped around us. When things return to normal (whatever that means), we will be tempted to wrap ourselves back up and try to return to “normal” church again.

I hope you know what I mean when I say that I, for one, hope not.

Prayers of Intercession

God of all Comfort and Counsel, we pray today for those who are frightened or grieving, reeling from the sudden illness or loss of loved ones. May they find your fellowship in their suffering, your comfort in their loss and your hope in their despair. We name before you those known to us who are especially vulnerable – the frail, the sick and the aged. God of all comfort, you are powerful and merciful. May this be our prayer:

Response: “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 Cor. 1:10)

Lord of Peace, we remember those living in coronavirus hotspots and those currently in isolation. 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:

Response: “May your mercy come quickly to meet us, for we are in desperate need. Help us, God our Savior, for the glory of your name.” (Ps. 79:8).

God who Heals, we 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. We thank you for the army of researchers working steadily and quietly toward cures – give them clarity, serendipity and unexpected breakthrough today. Rise above this present darkness as the Sun of Righteousness with healing in your rays. May this be our prayer:

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

God of all Wisdom, we pray for our leaders: the World Health Organization, national governments and local leaders, too – heads of schools, hospitals and other institutions. We ask

you grant them wisdom beyond their own to contain the virus, faith beyond their own to fight the prevailing fear, and strength beyond their own to sustain vital institutions through this time of uncertainty and turmoil. God of all wisdom and counsel, you are powerful and merciful. May this be our prayer:

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

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

Response: “The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly Kingdom. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.” (2 Tim. 4:18)

Response

As you conclude your time of worship and reflection today, do so by responding to the prompt in your life to reach out and contact someone who is on your mind or heart. The Holy Spirit goes to work in powerful ways, calling us to acts of self-giving and love to build up, or build out, the growing community of a church. Remember, social distance is not spiritual distance. Having been filled and strengthened by God's presence in this time, share some of yourself and the gifts you have received with someone else today. Be at peace.