

“God’s Vaccine”

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Proverbs 1:20-25, 32-33

Wisdom shouts in the street;
in the public square she raises her voice.
Above the noisy crowd, she calls out.
At the entrances of the city gates, she has her say:
“How long will you clueless people love your naïveté,
mockers hold their mocking dear,
and fools hate knowledge?
You should respond when I correct you.
Look, I’ll pour out my spirit on you.
I’ll reveal my words to you.
I invited you, but you rejected me;
I stretched out my hand to you,
but you paid no attention.
You ignored all my advice,
and you didn’t want me to correct you. ...
The immature will die because they turn away;
smugness will destroy fools.
Those who obey me will dwell securely,
untroubled by the dread of harm.

Psalms 46:1-3

God is our refuge and strength,
a help always near in times of great trouble.
That’s why we won’t be afraid when the world falls apart,
when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea,
when its waters roar and rage,
when the mountains shake because of its surging waves.

Philippians 4:4-7

Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. Don’t be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

Sometimes, the best thing to do is also the hardest. Like, when we are in the middle of a crisis. It’s important to step back and look at the bigger picture. Yet we can find ourselves missing that big picture because the present urgency and sense of approaching calamity cause us to ignore the larger view.

In today's 24/7 globalized society, we face such an unrelenting stream of news that it can seem as if we are drowning. The temptation to hide or try to escape it is understandable. If only we could go to sleep for six months and wake up when life is back to normal.

I get it. Coronavirus is bigger than any of us. Being forced to remain safer-at-home can leave us feeling helpless. Powerless. But if we can look at a bigger picture we gain a sense of perspective that can help us navigate this present moment.

As with most disasters, this pandemic is bringing out the best and the worst in humanity. We

hear stories of selfishness and selflessness. Of exploitation and astonishing goodwill.

We can trust that medical science will find a vaccine for this particular strain of coronavirus. But... what is the vaccine for fear? Because fear is stalking the world – in much the same way it did during the Black Death of 1347 that ravaged Asia, Europe and Africa and the flu pandemic of 1918. How do we inoculate ourselves and communities against fear? Because we need it. I was talking with Rebecca Voss on Wednesday. She echoed my observation that while her workload is not any greater, the mental weight of concern is draining. The fear weighs on all of us. Anxiety gnaws at us if we do not keep ourselves occupied with something.

A fear of death is natural. But this fear is exacerbated by the never-ending flow of news of illness and death, of governments issuing orders restricting all social behaviors and of the social contagion that ensues. I laughed at the panic-buying of toilet paper, especially when I read of Japanese restaurants that were marking theirs with curses against those who stole it. I smiled when one of you talked about reaching the checkout counter. When the clerk asked if you found everything and you said, “No,” he gave you a 4-pack for free.

We are concerned for our elders and the immune-compromised for whom this disease would be quite serious. We’re concerned about all the folks who are working on the front lines, as first-responders, caregivers or medical people, or in the few stores that are open. Every day I pray that they, that you, will remain healthy and whole.

Maybe it’s a natural response to aging, but I have grown increasingly aware of the fragility of life. Scripture says, “Our days are like grass.” This realization is freeing when we are wasting time on things that don’t really matter, but it can also bring fear. The coronavirus pandemic challenges us to examine our faith and to notice how relevant we let God be to our lives. This crisis gives the world a chance to learn real lessons, lessons faithful people already know and could live out more fully.

Speaking of lessons, I found a list of “9 Scientifically-Backed Ways To Stop Worrying.”ⁱ Here are a few of them:

One, set aside 30 minutes (but only 30) of “worry time,” when you let yourself think about your fears. This acknowledges that your fears are real but limits your focus on them. Two, give yourself permission to unplug. Too much time checking the newsfeed does your mental health no favors. Three, write down your concerns. Putting them on paper can help lessen your anxiety.

Four, keep your hands busy. Distract yourself. Coronavirus will still be there when you finish. Still, this age-old remedy – whether through knitting or fishing, gardening or woodworking – has helped countless people through crises.

Five, practice mindfulness. Be aware of your thoughts and emotions without judging them. If you have never tried meditation, this might be your moment. Sit comfortably and relax your mind. Acknowledge whatever thoughts show up but then invite them to go away. And relax your mind again. Brain scans confirm that meditating changes the way your brain processes. It not only lowers anxiety levels, it also affects the regions of your brain that control emotions and thinking. I will caution you that I have been practicing meditation for 10 years and my mind still flits all over the place. Be gentle on yourself. Even 3 minutes helps.

Number 6 goes along with this. Accept the concern or fear, then move on. A 2005 study showed that people who try to suppress their unwanted thoughts end up being more distressed by them. Practice not being upset by your fears but do not deny that they are valid.

Lastly, move. Exercise is such an effective way to beat stress. It increases our serotonin, that “happy” hormone. And, long-term, exercise is said to be safer and more effective than medication.

Any of these things can help us, yet as faithful people we have more. I mentioned a vaccine for fear. That vaccine is hope. True hope beyond the simple wish that COVID-19 will soon be over, and we can get back to our lives. We can find hope in the tireless service of medical people. We find it in the small acts of kindness we witness toward strangers. We can find hope in the morning birdsong outside our doors and the green that is nosing up in our gardens. I’m sure you can think of other examples.

We can find hope in God’s word for us - through our times of prayer, our conversations, and our Bible reading. Through our lives, God offers us wisdom, courage, patience, patience and strength. The lesson from Proverbs that [name] shared warns us that we neglect these gifts to our own detriment. Waywardness and complacency do not serve us well. When we know what we are to do, whether it’s taking a walk or calling someone from church, we need to do it. Whenever we make a point of heeding God’s leading, we find a measure of peace.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us that while it is easy to feel alone when we are fearful, we do not have to be fearful. God is present with us – in this and every moment. God will strengthen and uphold us (41:10). In the midst of chaos, these are good words to hold onto.

Corrie ten Boom once said, “Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow. It empties today of its strength.” We need to know what is happening around us but we also need to balance it with a realization that knowing how many are sick in Sierra Leone or that Florida’s governor has issued a stay-at-home order does not help us. This kind of hyper-focus on the situation impacts our ability to live out our ministry, a ministry that even now God calls us to.

As Jesus says, worrying cannot add a single moment to our lives. Today’s trouble is enough for today. So, while being washing your hands, and staying safer-at-home is good, letting coronavirus fears overtake us is just not helpful. It is bad not only for God’s mission for us but bad for our well-being.

Remember that even in the midst of the worst that life sends our way, God wants abundant life for us. At this moment, abundant life has some outside restrictions we cannot ignore. Yet we can still live abundantly. Love yourself. Eat well. Sleep. Get up and move. Love the ones you’re sharing space with – family and fur-friends. Some moments will be challenging so think of ways to have space in your togetherness. Love your extended family, your church family, your neighbors. Call them. Email. Stick notes on car windows.

All of this will reflect that you truly do love God. And that you know in every fiber of your being that God loves you and is with you, with all of us. This is our inoculation for anything that we may have to face.

Love is what will get us through this.

Amen.

ⁱ Amanda L. Chan, “9 Scientifically-Backed Ways To Stop Worrying,” Huffington Post: Wellness, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/stop-worrying-anxiety-cycle_n_4002914 (last viewed on April 1, 2020).