

Dear Friends in Christ,

Grace to you and peace from our Shepherd and Savior Jesus Christ!

I imagine at some point our mothers and fathers in the faith--the Israelites in the wilderness—realized that this new, weird reality was going to last more than a couple of days. That's where we find ourselves now. The world is closing down and changing fast. We are in transition and uncertainty. We are living the Lenten journey whether we were prepared for it or not.

As we wander, wonder, worry, wash hands, complain, consider, clean, help, support, stockpile, panic, forgive, breathe, readjust, reach out, hunker down, home school, wash hands again, binge watch the news, pray, fret, call, laugh, cry, encourage, wash hands again, and more, please remember:

God is leading us somewhere. There is a Promised Land or an Easter on the back end of this fraught journey that is worth the trouble getting there. We don't know when, or where, or how, but we know Who, and that gives us sufficient hope.

We're in this together. Please be tender and thoughtful. We're all in uncharted territory and doing the best we can. Instead of judging, help and support. Forgive yourself and others when frustration erupts. (Remember how badly the Israelites behaved? Crisis is hard. Sacrifices are painful. Losses hurt.) Cultivate and spread patience and grace. Check in on those who might need groceries or a friendly voice. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Read Luther! Nearly 500 years ago, Pastor Martin wrote some timely advice for us: *"I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me, and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely, as stated above. See, this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God."* - Martin Luther, "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague, 1527," The Annotated Luther, Volume 4: Pastoral Writings, ed. Mary Jane Haemig (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 404.

Mindful of his wisdom and heeding the counsel of medical experts, we have closed the campus of Shepherd of the Valley Church and Preschool indefinitely. Church staff and council remain in ongoing conversation about navigating this new reality as responsibly as possible.

We will not gather for worship the last two Sundays in March. I will record a video with Scripture reading, sermon and prayers which will be posted each Sunday morning on our website and Facebook feed, and as usual, a printed version of each sermon will be added to the website as well. We will fast from Holy Communion for now. Plans for Palm Sunday, April 5 remain pending. Stay tuned.

We can still pray together. Yesterday marked the first of 19 days leading up to Holy Week which we are marking as the "COVID 19 Days of Prayer." Each day we are posting a specific petition and thanksgiving that we can all lift together in prayer. Please pray with us and invite others to join us on this prayer journey.

Please also share this letter with others who you know may not receive them. Thank you for helping to spread the word.

Thank you also and especially for your patience, understanding and support as our church, our preschool, and our wider world all navigate a new reality. Thank you for being the body of Christ. Thank you for being a blessing to others and for taking responsible care of yourself. Thank you, children of God, for meeting the moment with love.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7) now and always.

Together in Christ,
Pastor Brian