

Life is Fragile
Sermon, March 15, 2020

Time is precious. We are fragile. Life is short. Every minute counts.

Judges 6: 1-2, 6-13a

“The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds.

When the Israelites cried out to the Lord because of Midian, he sent them a prophet, who said, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. I rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians. And I delivered you from the hand of all your oppressors; I drove them out before you and gave you their land. I said to you, ‘I am the Lord your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.’ But you have not listened to me.

The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezwite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.”

“Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about?”

Dear beloved,

About 75 days ago, when we entered into this new year, we placed our lives in God’s hands and we asked our Creator and sustainer to be with us, to walk with us and to assure us that in every situation He is with us. I can assure you, that our dear God heard our prayers, and He accepted our prayers. I can assure you that God IS with us even these days when we are facing so much bad news about the Coronavirus, called COVID-19. He is with us when our hearts are trembling as we see how the death rate goes up every day and how the countries try to stop this

horrible virus from spreading. I assure you, that God is with us, when we are questioning even our safety.

God was with our Session as, on Friday early afternoon, we gathered to discuss how we should protect our church members from this deadly virus. The Holy Spirit was our guidance when we decided to close our church until further notice, avoiding gathering where people would be more exposed for this virus, which on a surface could survive from three to even nine days. We made this decision as the second congregation in our Forest Hill area on Friday around 4.p.m, following Forest Hill United, who announced already in the morning that they would close their congregation. On Saturday night at 8:28 p.m., Highland Baptist Church announced that they cancelled their services as well for safety reasons.

Today, on Saturday at 2.p.m., The Presbyterian Church in Canada had the following announcement on their website:

“The strong and swift response in Canada to measures aimed at reducing the transmission of COVID-19 is encouraging evidence of the care Canadians have for one another. Churches have an important role in this.

This response is evolving daily. Cancellations of meetings and events show that Canadians are willing to do their part to stem the transmission and therefore care for the health of one another. Some of these responses go above and beyond the recommendations of Public Health authorities.

Decisions about public worship during COVID-19

Worship services in various faiths are being suspended temporarily. These are difficult decisions that balance our desire for the public good with our commitment to worship and gathering with the people of God for fellowship and mutual support.

In The Presbyterian Church in Canada, “The session is responsible for regulating the hours and forms of public worship and for arranging special services” (Book of Forms 111.1). This means that only the session can determine if public worship in a congregation will be suspended.

The recommendation from the National Office has been and continues to be that “congregations are urged to follow the advice of Federal, Provincial and Municipal Health authorities and make decisions accordingly. This is the minimum requirement, but it is the first place to go in making a decision about suspending worship services.”

On Saturday, our Synod was advising us as follows:

1. As soon as possible, create a way to quickly contact your entire congregation (including those without email) to advise them of decisions as well as to ensure that all are healthy and to determine if deliveries of food or medicine are required.
2. A number of congregations have talked about streaming worship online. While this can be helpful, it also promotes needless interaction. Instead, provide some devotional material by email or encourage people to avail themselves of resources already on the internet.
3. Cancel all other weekly events, Bible Study, fellowship events etc.
4. Do not visit hospitals or seniors and use the phone instead.
5. Recognize that many of our congregations are made up of those most vulnerable to this virus and, while our faith is important, meeting every Sunday during a health emergency isn't.
6. As I look at social media, we seem to be as caught up in this echo chamber as everyone else. Trust the voices of public health officials and consider your own role in creating or lessening anxiety.

This pandemic will require an extra measure of leadership from ministers and elders. Not everyone will agree with every decision you make, but they must be made decisively and with the best interests of the whole church in mind. Finally, having taken all precautions, let us pray for our leaders, our health care professionals and each other as we face this most unusual challenge.

- In Christ, John-Peter & Tori Smit CNOB Synod Staff

Dear beloved,

There is still a valid question, which is crossing our minds. This question was raised already almost 3,000 years ago by Gideon, when he asked God's angel: *"but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about?"* Judges 6:13a

These days, every time we turn on the TV, we all are alarmed by COVID-19. We are reminded again how fragile we are, and how fragile life is.

These days, we all raise the questions: Why? Where is God in these situations and what is God's message to us through this?

Today I will NOT discuss WHY these things are happening in the world, why so many people died, and why so many will die due to this virus. But I would like to share with you a few things about HOW this present situation should shape our way of thinking about our present and about our future.

Do you think that those who already died because of this COVID-19 virus were worse people than we are? NOT AT ALL !

Please do NOT try to make a correlation between sin and tragedy. Please do NOT imply that those victims were worse sinners than everyone else. Please do NOT think that bad things are happening only to bad people who sinned. Those who died in these tragedies were NOT worse than we are.

There are a few very important things that we really need to know. We have to take a look at ourselves and where we are at this moment, and we have to hear what Jesus said.

Bad things are happening to good people as well.

When you see or hear that bad things or catastrophes are happening to some people, stop looking for reason in **their** spiritual life. Stop believing that **they** were worse than you are. As Jesus says: *"Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbour, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye', while the log is in your own eye?"* Matthew 7:3-4

Instead of condemning others, try to ask questions like:

- If I have to die today, am I prepared for my departure?

- If I would die today, what kind of mess would I leave behind me?
- If I would have no more than a day left, what would I do?
- Did I live a life according to God?
- Do I know where I am going?
- Are my sins forgiven? Did I ask God in time to forgive all my sin?
- Am I going to go to heaven, or will God find I have not repented and I might perish?
- If I have to die today, am I going to meet with my merciful and loving Saviour, or am I afraid to be called to the judgement throne?

Today is the time when God is asking you and me to repent, which means: Be in a living and loving relationship with your Saviour Jesus Christ. Turn away from doubt and from sin, and live with Him.

Accepting Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Saviour has to be the greatest experience any person can have this side of heaven.

Accepting Jesus Christ as your Saviour will give you the real peace and happiness on earth and then in heaven.

We have to treat this tragic event as an opportunity to repent, to reform ourselves.

We have to realize that anything could happen to us at any time, but for now we have still got another chance, another day to live our lives differently.

Jesus is teaching us today that we all need to change before death comes. We have to make changes before it is too late. Death comes to all, whether by calamities, accidents, or natural causes. It is not **how we die** that is important, but **how we live**. The manner of life will be the basis for divine judgment, not the manner of death.

Since the length of life is unpredictable, it is best to reform now before it is too late. We saw people dying in accidents and they did not have time to prepare themselves to meet God. Jesus says: repent, reform before it is too late.

Let me ask you: Do you know where you will spend your eternity? If you are unsure about your eternity, if you don't know where you will spend your eternity, if you are not sure if your sins are forgiven, if you don't know exactly if you will

end up in heaven or hell, then today is the time to come to the Saviour and clarify all these questions by talking to Him.

We all have got a second chance from God to reconsider our past, our present and our future.

Death is inevitable and the Bible tells us that there is a final judgement, as we saw last week. The gardener, Jesus Christ, will do His best for all of us to change our lives and to make us fruitful, but it is up to you if you would like to bear fruit.

Jesus teaches us that there is such a thing as “too late,” even with God.

Once death comes, as unpredictable as to when as it is predictable that it will come, it is too late to change. So, the message is: change now.

Jesus teaches us that even the horrible experiences that happen to others can be opportunities for us to think twice, to think in the light of eternity, and to change our ways and our lives. The circumstances of our deaths don't matter, because our deaths are inevitable. The main question is, “What happens next?” The Lord is saying that the pertinent question is not how we die or why we die, but how we lived and why we lived.

These pandemic catastrophes are predicted many times in the Bible, mostly in Revelation, and this information is not new for those who read the Bible regularly and with an open heart. Christ knew that these are signs and prophecies, messages from God.

We, too, will die one day, no matter in which circumstances: by disease, by the aging process, by some accident, by the evil intent of others, by whatever means. The most important thing is not how we die but how we lived and where we will end up. If we interpret the catastrophes in the light of eternity, they will motivate us to repent and to reform our lives rather than fear our deaths or the manner of our deaths.

These days are potential signs from God that we can and should change.

There are procrastinators.

One day, it will be too late to reform our lives and freely decide to live according to God's ways.

Life is fragile. We have to use well every moment and to live every day as fully as we can. We cannot be foolish, thinking or saying that we have plenty of time, that we can reform later, and now we can do whatever we want.

The Bible teaches that we may get a second chance, or a third, or more, but eventually our lives one day may come the final chance. And we will not know which chance is the final one, so we had better repent, embrace Jesus Christ, and make changes now.

The time to get serious about the future is not in the future, not tomorrow, but today.

I am optimistic and hopeful, that we all can learn these days that time is precious, we are fragile, and life is short, and for this we will try to stay safe these days.

Please spend more time with those whom you love and spend time with God, who is with us, who is holding our hands and who promised that He is with us in every circumstance in Jesus Christ.

My hope is that, in a short period of time, we can put these days behind us, this will be a history, and we will worship our Lord with empowered and faithful hearts in our church.

My hope is that these days will shape our faith and will make us stronger in the Lord.

I don't know when can we get back to the normal, or what tomorrow will bring to us, but I know for sure one thing, what Paul said to the Romans: "*In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" Romans 8:37-38.

Amen.