



March 19, 2020

To the forgiven and redeemed followers of Jesus at First Presbyterian Church of Edmond:

Part of the research for my doctorate was reading minutes from the 1800s of meetings of ruling elders from Presbyterian churches all over the country. More than once, there was a gap in the minutes from a Church in a community where there had been a quarantine battling cholera. For months, people were locked down. No one left their homes. Churches didn't meet. Thousands died. Lives were changed.

In the minutes of First Presbyterian Church of New York, after a quarantine in the summer of 1849 was lifted and the church began to gather again, there was a thin line in the minutes, "Following quarantine, the Elders met at 7:00 PM on July 23<sup>rd</sup> with glad and generous hearts." Eventually the pages filled with minutes of meetings, church statistics, and other reports of normal congregational matters.

Life returned and life went on.

We face uncertainty with COVID-19 and the fallout from trying to contain it. People are getting sick. Some will die. The economy is being ravaged. Jobs are being lost. Businesses will fail. Lives are being upended. People are afraid. Tuesday night Jen and I had dinner at a restaurant in Lawton. The server, Gerald, said we would be his last table for a while because the mayor was shutting down all the restaurants and bars for a month in just a few hours. "I have no idea what I am going to do," he said. I know many of you feel the same way. You just want to hold on for a few weeks and hopefully not longer. COVID-19 is going to impact all of us.

We wonder what God is doing during all this. Walking with God means asking questions. If there were no moral order to the universe, if there was no Divine plan, questions would be irrelevant. Life would be just a bunch of stuff that happens with no rhyme, reason, or redemption.

More than once as the disciples walked with Jesus, He did something surprising or shocking. Jesus did something that no one expected and even seemed offensive, reckless or dangerous. And they questioned Him severely. One of the best examples of this was when the disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee on a small fishing boat and a severe storm rolled up from over the hills on the eastern side of the lake and the water began to swamp the 26 foot long boat. Jesus was asleep in the stern on a cushion and the disciples cried, out, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" (Mark 4:38)

Jesus then woke up, stood and exercised His Divine authority over the natural world.

**He rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace, be still." And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" Mark 5:39**

The great meaning of Jesus is God is with us—no matter what. He has permanently cast His lot with humanity. He is in the boat with us—even amid the storm. As this story suggests, He has authority over the storm. His authority over the storm is so complete that He can use it for His glory and even reveal His greatness. After Jesus calmed the waters of Galilee with a word, the disciples were filled with wonder and they exclaimed,

## **Who then is this that even the wind and sea obey Him? Mark 4:41**

A few years ago, I had lunch with a man with whom I served on a board. After our Friday morning meeting, we enjoyed some Mexican food and I asked what he was doing that weekend. He said he had a fund-raiser for an organization that provides dress clothes for young women in need—everything from prom dresses to office wear. I was intrigued and casually asked how he got involved in that and he told a story of how his daughter had died 12 years earlier and he and his wife started this foundation to honor her.

“So, anyway,” he said as he took a bite of his taco, “That’s how we got involved in that. What are you doing this weekend?” I replied but was struck how that meager little phrase, “So, anyway,” summarized and passed through such a tragic, gut-wrenching tragedy.

But once again life returned and went on—different, for sure, but nevertheless there was life, even good, abundant life.

When we go through crisis, we long to get to that point where a time of trial, testing, and even tragedy is finally distilled down to that simple summary, “So, anyway.” It is a deceptively simple statement of triumph.

What is God doing in the midst of COVID-19 and the fallout?

We will see, but like the disciples who walked with God daily and were frequently shocked by His reckless abandon, we can trust He is at work breaking our too meager expectations, shattering our lesser hopes, and revealing the knee-buckling depths of His character.

And because of this we can live triumphantly—even when we have no idea what victory in the end will look like. We are a people of the resurrection—of the defeat even of death—and we can trust the promise:

## **The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Psalm 46:11**

Here is how we envision this working out at First Presbyterian Church of Edmond over the coming weeks and longer, if need be:

- We are going to double down on our vision, “New Life through Jesus for Edmond and the world” by loving our neighbor as ourselves, especially those whose lives have been upended. We are in touch with Central Middle School about helping their low-income families with meals. We will encourage you to reach out to those around you in your neighborhoods. We will participate in drives to keep food pantries and non-profits stocked up for their ministries.
- We are going to love one another and stay in touch through every media and means at our disposal. We will be sending mail to those who are less technically inclined. We will use social media to create a “Daily Office” (a reference from monastic communities) inviting FPCE to worship and prayer four times per day: 8 a.m., 11 a.m., 3 p.m., and 7 p.m.
- We are going to pray for ourselves, for Edmond, our nation, and the world, asking Jesus to reveal Himself by calming the storm of COVID-19.
- We are going to resist fear and live victoriously knowing that in the end God will be glorified by looking not just to our own interests but looking to the interests of others and having the mind of Christ. (Philippians 2:4-5)

- We are going to worship fully and abundantly in our homes using technology God saw fit to provide our congregation just over a year ago.
- We will be a good neighbor and honor the leaders appointed by God (Romans 13:1) by following the precautions they have prescribed to stop the spread of the virus.
- Finally, we are going to look forward to that day when we can gather again in person and not take for granted the simple gift of community and human presence.

COVID-19 like cholera in 19<sup>th</sup> century New York or even the crippling grief of the loss of a loved one, will pass. Life, even good, abundant life, will return and Jesus will have the victory. He will be glorified and we will be His chosen instruments.

In Jesus,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "E" and a trailing flourish.

Lead Pastor Eric Laverentz