

## IN RESPONSE TO THE CORONAVIRUS

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Romans 5:1-11

Glossophobia—the fear of public speaking—used to top the list of fears in our country. For the past several years, Chapman University has conducted an annual survey to determine what our nation’s people most feared. In 2018, the number one fear among those surveyed was fear of corruption of government officials, followed by various types of pollution. Today, of course, the coronavirus is on everyone’s mind, and many are afraid.

One of the most repeated instructions in the Bible is “Don’t be afraid.” This message, if not these exact words, appears in the bible over 140 times. They remind us that ordinary women and men from the time of Israel’s patriarchs through first-century Christians struggled with fear.

Today, in light of the coronavirus steadily circling the globe, we need to hear the Word of the Lord more than ever: *Be not afraid.*

Fear is not always a bad thing. Fear can be helpful, even life-saving. Fear warns us against doing things which could be harmful—such as jumping out of an airplane without a parachute, or eating without washing our hands first.

Fear can also be paralyzing. Once, I was taking a hike—OK, it was a nature walk—leading to a waterfall. The path was interrupted at one point by a very, very small stream of running water. To help one cross the crick, a 6”x6” board was secured from one side to the other. Standing, looking at that narrow bridge with no handrail and the water rushing beneath it, I was paralyzed with fear. I decided I didn’t need to see the waterfall after all, and waited under a tree until Frank returned.

Granted, this was not much of a sacrifice. I have seen plenty of waterfalls in my life, and I am confident there will be more to observe in my future. Fear, however, can keep us from achieving our goals. From taking risks which will help us to grow and become better people when taken. Fear can keep us from being our best selves.

In the summer of 1916, the polio epidemic hit America. No one knew its cause. There was no cure. At that time, it seemed to target children more than other age groups, but no one knew where it would appear, nor who would be struck, and so it terrified the nation. People looked for someone to blame—who brought this to our optimistic, thriving country? Who was at fault?

The easy target then, as it so often is, was immigrants—in this case, specifically, immigrants living in New York City. People fled the city in fear, only to be faced with signs saying “New Yorkers Not Welcome.” Across the country, families who had a member fall victim to polio were isolated, ostracized, and sometimes blamed out of fear and ignorance.

Fear can be life-saving. Fear can be paralyzing. Fear can bring out the worst in us, encouraging us to “look out for number one” only, disregarding the needs of others. A woman visiting a local orthodontist’s office pulled out her personal bottle of hand sanitizer and refilled it using the communal pump which was intended for all of the doctor’s patients. A small example, but indicative of the selfishness fear can produce.

Fear can also bring out our best. An elderly couple sat in their car outside the grocery store a few days ago, afraid to go inside. After waiting 45 minutes for the “right person” to walk by, she finally did. The couple called to the woman and asked if she would be willing to help them. They slipped their grocery list and a \$100 bill through the barely cracked window, and waited for their Good Samaritan to return with their groceries and change. She did, glad for the opportunity to help her neighbor.

Posted on our denominational website is this statement:

*Leaders from Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and the Presbyterian Office of Theology and Worship continue to stress that while it’s important to remain vigilant and alert to potential dangers from this virus, we must continue to trust in God through all developments, ‘remaining calm in a time of distress, extending compassion to those who are suffering, and praying for the healing of the world.’*

The coronavirus is wreaking havoc, with our common sense—have you tried shopping for toilet paper lately? And with our plans. I sit next to a high school senior in the Rehoboth Concert Band (we were supposed to

perform this afternoon, but that was cancelled). My bandmate is a talented flutist and a lovely person. At band rehearsal Thursday night, I asked her, “How are you?” “Not great!” she responded. “They cancelled our band trip, the spring musical, state honor band and maybe prom! I just hope I get a graduation ceremony!”

My friend was, of course, bitterly disappointed—not exactly how she’d planned for her senior year to end. My friend’s letdowns may seem trivial compared to what some are facing in this pandemic—harsh economic losses, food insecurity, loss of essential services, loss of life—but they are certainly important to her.

We have probably all experienced disappointments and maybe restlessness as one after another, planned activities, major events such as basketball playoffs or weddings, vacations or visits to loved ones become “iffy” or outright cancelled. At the same time, we are to varying degrees concerned about the virus itself and its threat to public health, and potentially to the health of our loved ones and ourselves.

Poet Lynn Unger has written a beautiful poem which calls us to rise above our fear, to rise above our restlessness and to see this time of cancellations and concern as an opportunity to express our love and faith in new ways. The poem is entitled “Pandemic.”

## **Pandemic**

What if you thought of it  
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—  
the most sacred of times?  
Cease from travel.  
Cease from buying and selling.  
Give up, just for now,  
on trying to make the world  
different than it is.  
Sing. Pray. Touch only those  
to whom you commit your life.  
Center down.

And when your body has become still,

reach out with your heart.  
Know that we are connected  
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.  
(You could hardly deny it now.)  
Know that our lives  
are in one another's hands.  
(Surely, that has come clear.)  
Do not reach out your hands.  
Reach out your heart.  
Reach out your words.  
Reach out all the tendrils  
of compassion that move, invisibly,  
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love—  
for better or for worse,  
in sickness and in health,  
so long as we all shall live.

Yes, we should be diligent in doing our part to contain the virus. Wash our hands frequently and effectively. Avoid large crowds. Travel only when absolutely necessary, etc. But let's not make the same mistakes when fear over polio gripped this country. Let's reach out with phone calls, emails, text messages, cards, Facebook Facetime, carrier pigeons—there are so many ways to communicate today—let's reach out in love and faith to each other, even if not in person, so that no one need face this scare alone. Let's make sure our elderly and single folk are taken care of, that they have everything they need, including a friendly voice on the other end of the...it's not a line anymore, what would you call it? Cyberspace.

I don't know if we will be meeting as a body next week or the week after that. The session will decide, and we will be sure to let you know if worship is cancelled. If it is, I have some ideas on ways we can be together in spirit, even if not in person. Those of you with email, please check it regularly; those without it, look in your mailbox. With God as our refuge and our strength, we will get through this.

Julian of Norwich was in a small cell during the plague that decimated Europe. Outside her walls, half the population of Norwich died, and the plagues continued for years. She had, in 1373, astonishing visions of Jesus, his suffering, his compassion, his mercy and love. And people who don't recall anything else about her know that her mantra was "All will be well. All manner of things shall be well."

The post on the PCUSA website concludes with these words:

Let us be faithful and vigilant in our prayer for those nations, communities, families and individuals most affected by this outbreak, and for the medical personnel and government officials seeking to respond. Let us resist and reject fear and suspicion based on ethnicity or nationality; this virus is affecting people of all races and ages. Let us be generous in supporting organizations that provide assistance and support public health in our area and around the world. •Above all, let us remember and rejoice that "nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Brief Statement of Faith; Rom. 8:38–39).

Amen and Amen.