



March 7, 2021

You Are Not Alone

1My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O, my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. Psalm 22

500,000 COVID-19 deaths. That is a daunting number. Greater than the population of Berks County. Almost equal to the population of Berks and Schuylkill Counties combined. I tried to imagine driving through either of those counties and not seeing another soul; no pedestrians, dog walkers, grocery shoppers or moving vehicles. Let your imagination loose in those empty streets and sidewalks and apocalyptic visions follow close behind.

I rejoice that vaccines are helping light grow at the end of this long, dark tunnel. I lament that another 100,000 anticipated deaths are in our future and that there are still some in our Conference who do not take the pandemic seriously.

I am sensitive to the strong desire for personal contact, church as it's always been and the comfort of our Christian connections. I understand that not everyone is computer savvy enough to use Facebook, Zoom and YouTube. I know the church down the street from yours is doing in-person worship so yours should be allowed to as well (an argument accepted by no parent ever). I would admire the surrender some make to the virus trusting in God to either keep them safe or take them home were it not for the God given gifts of scientific method, proven disease mitigation behaviors, common sense, and pesky scriptures about 'being our brother's keeper'. But the reports of congregations that worship together where the passage of the COVID-19 virus between and among members and clergy has happened — sometimes more than once — transcend my capacity to comprehend and leave me wondering what it means to be the church.

The pandemic is not over. The danger has not passed. Words like, 'exhaustion', 'weary', 'frayed' and 'thin' don't begin to capture the excruciating fatigue under which you labor, nor do they express the grief of lost loved ones and the absence of regular, human contact (I never thought I would miss the simple act of shaking hands as much as I do right now). The first verses from last Sunday's psalm ring in my heart with more truth than at any other time in my life.

So, too, do the last — "future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it" (Psalm 22: 30b).

The time for vigilance will pass — eventually. Until then I encourage you to:

Keep paying attention to guidance from the CDC and your local county authorities. Colleagues who have been able to tease out often conflicting information (particularly about the vaccine) to help their communities and congregations make smart and safe decisions inspire confidence and growth.

Keep worship, Bible classes, book groups, Consistory and Congregational meetings online. Easter is not that far away and despite relentless snow neither is spring. Some congregations will return to outdoor worship. For those fortunate enough to be able to do so, connect with your neighbors who are not and invite them to worship with you.

Keep teaching your congregations how to move past technological limitations. An entire generation is now being raised in a digital age and expect technological connections to facilitate and enhance every facet of living — religious and spiritual life included. Any congregation hoping for a future must come to terms with this. The pandemic has afforded us an opportunity to do so.

Encourage the eligible and able around you to get the vaccine. Preach, teach, and for those who are eligible but not ABLE, offer ways to get them to vaccination locations.

Jesus died alone and on the cross with the words of Psalm 22 on his lips. The loneliness of his death was met by the fullness of his resurrection so that those who follow him would never have to endure without the power and promise of his presence.

So, let me reassure you and me that we are not alone...

In continued social distancing, You Are Not Alone.

In establishing relentlessly new life patterns, You Are Not Alone.

In feelings of being overworked and under connected, You Are Not Alone.

In discovering new ways of doing Lent and Easter that may feel clunky and uncertain, You Are Not Alone.

Even in the aloneness of being single, separated, or suffocated by family, You Are Not Alone.

Trust in that and keep the faith,

Rev. William P. Worley

Pennsylvania Southeast Conference Minister