

Stay home and stay safe, everyone. Let me know how you are doing.  
UCC Parker Hilltop Sunday worship @ 10:00 am Mountain Time:  
<https://zoom.us/j/605190279>

**“Hope and Pray”**  
**Luke 11:1-13**  
**March 29, 2020**

*Prayer has become fashionable these days. We pray the virus does not seep inside our homes. We pray no one we care about will get it. “Please, God, keep it over there, away from us. Keep our health workers safe, our store shelves stocked and our days warm and sunny.” The disciples ask Jesus how they should pray and what they should pray for. They, too, are living in anxious and grievous times. Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people of God in Luke’s Gospel, the 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter, beginning with the first verse.*

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” He said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you

then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

*Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.*

Imagine this: Your tooth, one of the back ones, has been bugging you for a few weeks. You make an appointment with the dentist to have it checked out. At the dental office, after x-rays have been taken and your mouth has been painfully probed a bit, the dentist tells you that your wisdom teeth-all four of them-have to come out. Ugh.

“Can you do it right now?” you ask, for we all know it is far better to get it over with right there and then.

“No, not today. We are really jammed up on our schedule,” she bemoans (but not really). “It will be about a month before we can get you in. And I *don't want to worry you*, but because you are allergic to the medicine we use to numb the mouth, you will have to undergo the extractions without anesthetic. Have a nice day-you can pay your bill and set up your surgery on the way out. Oh, and by the way, you should bring someone to drive you home after the procedure, if you know what I mean.”

Talk about anxiety! The wait is excruciating. The uncertainty of what awaits is almost unbearable.

Ok, now picture this: You are one of the disciples of Jesus living under Roman rule in 33 AD. You have faithfully followed Jesus while he traipsed all over Galilee for the last three years. At times, you have been a bit nervous, because he is so feisty with the Pharisees and the Romans. But he's the Son of God, right? The Messiah, the Chosen One. *Surely* God will protect him and his followers from harm.

Lately, Jesus has been laying down hints that his time is running out. He's been talking about his death. He says to you gathered at dinner with him, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." You don't understand what he means and are afraid to ask him about it.

At first, you think he is just in a sour mood. After all, life on the road as itinerant preachers is hard. Never the same bed for more than a couple nights in a row, beholden to the charity of others for soup and bread and safety from the cold winter's wind, constantly subjected to badgering by the Pharisees, the way has been trying, the stress has been building. Even the Messiah is entitled to a bad day. Maybe he's just talking smack to relieve some of the pressure.

But as time goes on, he talks more and more about his coming passion. He is rather matter of fact that his end is near. Just yesterday as we neared Jerusalem, he says again, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"

And that's not all. During one particularly long teaching, he warned that we-the faithful, innocent disciples- will not be spared retribution by the authorities. He said, "...they'll arrest you, hunt you down, and drag you to court and jail. It will go from bad to worse, dog-eat-dog, everyone at your throat because you carry my name." I just hope and pray these predictions are wrong. I just hope and pray.

We just hope and pray the dentist is wrong. We hope and pray Jesus is wrong. We hope and pray the scientists are wrong about the coronavirus.

We sit and we wait day by day, watching the numbers of infected persons rise exponentially, the anxiety growing. Our days are increasingly worried; our nights are fitful. Many nights now we wake up and think of all the bad things that could happen to us, to our families, to our church and our country. As Anne Lamott characterizes it, we spend our God-talking time “in beggy prayer and fretful meditation.”

This Lent, it feels like we have blown right by Palm Sunday and its pageantry, and now we are stuck in Holy Friday and Saturday, the time of waiting, the days of unsettled foreboding. It is a shared anxiety that we are experiencing. So far in our immediate communities, Covid-19 has appeared only as numbers on the TV or computer screen and the smartphone display. Sure, the numbers are growing, but they have yet to make a lasting impact *here*. Our people- *our people*- are not yet sick, are not yet in Intensive Care, are not yet *our* family members who are healthcare workers who have tested positive for the virus. Our people-our loved ones and friends, are not yet *not* making it through, are not yet dying. But we are told with certainty, it is coming. We are all pre-grieving this reality.

We hope and pray the certainty is wrong. We step outside to work in our front yard and see people across the street playing frisbee with their kids. Bicycle riders fly by on roads with fewer cars, skateboarders clack clack clack their way down the sidewalks. Dogs are walked, joggers run, and Culver’s is still selling burgers, shakes, and delicious ice cream, albeit at their drive-up windows.

It’s surreal, isn’t it? It is as though the virus only exists on TV news. Some folks feel like they are on a stay-at-home vacation, and parts of that are guiltily...really nice.

We hope and pray. And we wait, together, as the Body of Christ, as suffering patients wait for ventilators in short supply, as disciples wait in fear of the Roman guards, as laypersons languish at home trying to ward off a virus they don't understand. Where is the hope? What should be our prayer?

In her book, *Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Prayer...is for sharpening my intention, not for winning God's attention...I do not know anyone who prays very long without running into the wall of God's apparent nonresponsiveness....Waiting is certainly a kind of prayer, especially if you can stand howling, wide-open spaces." She wrote that prophetic sentence more than 10 years ago. It applies now in our imposed quarantined time. She explained what she meant:

Once between the time my doctor gave me some bad news about my health and the time I was scheduled for surgery to have the bad thing cut out, I found it possible to love my life in ways that had never occurred to me before. I never thought I could value being able to walk around my house and look out all the windows. I never thought of the brickwork on the building where I worked as beautiful before, or the sound of people laughing on the sidewalk as welcome signs of life. I never allowed myself the time to take a bath instead of a shower, or to find out how long the hot water lasted if I were not in a hurry. Waiting, I found speechless intimacy with other people who were living in such wide-open spaces themselves. We lived in a whole different world from those who thought they were fine. We could spend fifteen minutes admiring a rose, a whole hour enjoying a meal. Even if [the] news had stayed bad instead of getting better, I like to think that these simple pleasures would not have lost their power to console me. They constituted an answer to my prayer for more life, even if that life turned out to be shorter than the one I thought I wanted.

And so, we wait. And we pray. God's answers are interwoven in how we now take time—time to notice, time to rest, time to enjoy simple pleasures, time to talk and just be.

So, be the wait. Be the hope. Be the prayer. Be the connection. Be Christ in the world. And don't forget to breathe. *May it Be So.*

donations gratefully accepted:

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