

## **A Pastoral Letter for a Time Such As This**

There have been a number of statements, letters, and sharing of worry and concern about the COVID-19 virus. There have been a number of statements giving us advice, data, and direction. As I have read statement after statement, I have been moved to share and speak as well. Yet one thing that I have been careful to be aware of is where I should and where I should not speak. I am not a health-care professional, I am not a doctor or nurse or someone with knowledge about infectious disease. Nor am I an epidemiologist or a statistician or worker for the CDC or WHO. I will not tell you to be worried or to not be worried or to stay home or not stay home. I will leave those recommendations to the experts and urge you to follow them. It is important for us to recognize who has knowledge and background in various areas of public health, and to respect the amount of study and expertise that they have. From the church's perspective, we will do everything we can to follow the recommendations of health experts and officials, including sanitizing surfaces often, cancelling events where people may gather when we can, and reducing contact with people as we can. For the time being, I will not be making visits to individuals unless it is essential (end of life) so as to keep people safe.

I cannot speak to specifics of medicine or public health but instead urge you to follow the leading and suggestions of others. But I can speak to the presence of God, to the importance of our faith in a time such as this.

I can say with assurance that God has not left us. This is something that we are called to remember again and again. There are many passages that speak to God's promise of presence. For examples, I encourage you to read Psalms 23, 121, and 139 to be reminded of how God is always with us. God promises to be with us in the times of struggle and hurt as well as in times of joy and celebration. God does not leave us. And if God is with us individually, then God is also with us as a people. As much as I love how technology is connecting us, it is important to remember what it is that truly binds us together and that is the love of God. Every Communion Sunday we sing, "Blessed be the ties that binds our hearts in Christian love," and this is a time when we realize how those lyrics are true in profound and powerful way. As much as we cannot gather person to person, the Holy Spirit and the present and powerful and moving love of God connects and binds us together. God is with us. We are with each other. And this means that we are not alone.

I am reminded that as much as the crisis of COVID-19 has upended life, all of those stresses, those worries, those concerns that we had last month are still with us; but now there is the real worry that we have to work through them alone. You are not alone. We are not alone. It is important that we all remember this each day, and this is something that not only I offer but that we offer to each other. As your pastor it is partly my role to offer avenues of faith that may be helpful and a blessing, but you all have what you need to live and embrace that truth. You have what you need to embrace and live into the truth that you are not enduring this time alone.

There are some specific things that we can do to keep connected with each other. Start with pray. If you do not have a regular practice of prayer in your daily routine, this is a great time to start. Take some time to pray for people in your church family. If a name emerges in your prayer, write it down, and then reach out to that person. Make a phone call, send a text or an e-mail. Make a connection and remind each other that you are not alone. Let the prayer be the beginning of claiming and strengthening the connections that we have in our church family.

We will still have worship, albeit not in the traditional way. I will be leading a time of prayer, reflection, and Bible Study, but until things return to normal, I encourage you to engage through the internet; watch the Facebook livestream, share in the comments, and stay connected that way. E-mail mail me your prayer concerns, or call me with them, and I will bring them with me to worship that Sunday. It is best that you stay home, but you need not stay away. We can still worship and be connected together. You can find the live-stream of the worship on Sunday morning at 9:30am via our Facebook page – First Baptist, East Greenwich, RI. We will not go through this time alone.

I cannot tell you if you should be worried about your health or not; that is not my area of expertise. But I can tell you that the Church universal has been through times such as this. I can tell you that our faith has endured such moments of testing and has prevailed. And I can tell you that we are going to journey through this time together, united by the Holy Spirit, led by Christ, and grounded by God. As the song says, we have come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord, trusting in God's Holy Word, and God has not failed us yet. God will not fail us still.

Peace,  
Pastor Malone