

Lenten Devotional in a Season of “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” Each day focuses on one of the “Psalms of Ascent” (Psalm 120-134), which traditionally were sung or read before the great Passover celebrations in Jerusalem. Join your FCC family in authentically drawing closer to God through the Word as we approach the pinnacle of our faith, Holy Week. Just like the pilgrims of old, we may sing these psalms together, from our own journeys, joining our voices to the great chorus of faith, even while we are “apart.”

Consider the following format for each devotion: Begin with centering yourself (and others) in prayer. Read the assigned Scripture for the day. Listen to the text, ask questions, think through its images and words. Consider the reflection, but, don’t let it dictate your own understanding. These words are meant to guide, not control. Close in prayer, trusting in God’s goodness to sustain you, in this moment, and in life’s continued journey.

Week 2

Monday, March 23

Read: Psalm 125

Reflection:

By now I’m sure it feels like we’ve all had enough, and we’ve only just begun this “shut-down.” Maybe some of us were ready to throw in the towel on Day 1. And that’s okay! This psalm offers: “Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which...abides forever” (v. 1). I’m sure none of us feel immovable in this moment – what’s worse, I’m certain the only thing any of us want to do *is* move!

Yet the focus of these words directs our attention to that “Immovable Mover” who comes *to us* for relationship. It’s this great cosmic Mystery that stoops to my level to “surround” me (v. 2). We might all be ready to tear our hair out, but God is still God. When we’re restricted from our physical contact with each other, we have yet this God who seeks to hold onto us.

Maybe that’s enough to get us through today. Maybe by grounding ourselves in the LORD, we can face the challenge afresh, at least, for another day. And today is enough for any of us.

Prayer: *It’s not always easy to “see” You surrounding me, O God. But help me feel Your Presence just enough to do some good for others, and make it through another day. Amen.*

Tuesday, March 24

Read: Psalm 126

Reflection:

These words speak from Israel's own experience of exile and isolation. When the people returned to Jerusalem after their Babylonian captivity, it felt as if awakening from a dream – has it really happened? Is this true? God was faithful to God's promises and had brought about restoration...*and yet*, the picture was *not* complete.

The Jewish people would continue to suffer loss. The Temple was restored but only to a fraction of its former glory. Their limited freedom would again be co-opted by imperial control, this time by the Romans. The Temple would again be destroyed and the Jewish people further scattered.

Yet this psalm remains hopeful. The Bible presents us with *more* than mere optimism – this psalm like many others centers on hope in *God's* future. As Christians, we believe that future has already broken into our present in Jesus. This leads us to proclaim, no matter the circumstances, “God has done great things for us” (v. 3). Jesus presents us not with a dream, but a whole new reality – it's up to us to embrace it each and every day.

Prayer: *May Your upside-down Kingdom become more apparent each day, O God – turn our tears to laughter, our grief to joy. Help us to live Your future today. Amen.*

Wednesday, March 25

Read: Psalm 127

Reflection:

Have you ever started a project, without making sure you had all the necessary preparations? Consider trying to plan a meal without asking how many people are coming over. This psalm raises the question – unless God's involved in our projects, will they truly “succeed?”

I don't think this means that we have to make sure everything we do gets the “God stamp,” but I wonder if the psalmist is calling our attention to making sure we are prepared for life's adventure. Are we ready and willing for where following Jesus might lead us? Especially in this season of social distancing, are we prepared to face the challenges that ministry amid such limitations may pose.

The psalmist assures us that worrying about it will do little – rather, we're called to open our ears to God's Voice and be ready for the Spirit's leading. “Unless the LORD” directs our ministries, they may not “succeed” on the Kingdom level.

Prayer: *God, our plans may mean little to Your sight, but may we commit ourselves to Your Kingdom mission, trusting You to seal the deal. Amen.*

Thursday, March 26

Read: Psalm 128

Reflection:

The problem with this psalm is that it seems like the believer is “guaranteed” a perfect life. I doubt any of us have had that picture-perfect an existence, even if we have experienced our fair share of blessings. The biblical writers did not equate bliss with blessing (think the Book of Job!) – rather they understood blessing as “contentment.”

Those who walk in God’s ways, the psalmist says, will find themselves exactly where they need to be. Bearing God’s Image means we will work, have relationships, enjoy *and* grieve – all the intricacies of life – because that’s where God’s Kingdom is. God cares about us and how we live. That may not equal a care-free or “perfect” life, but perhaps we’ll find contentment being the people God made us to be.

While this psalm seems to paint a “Leave It to Beaver” scenario, may our voices sing the praises of the LORD wherever and whenever we follow God’s path.

Prayer: *I don’t know if I need or want a “perfect” life, O God. But may the life I have flow from the life You call me to lead. Amen.*

Friday, March 27

Read: Psalm 129

Reflection:

What I love about the psalms, honestly, is *their honesty*. When you read the Psalter, you are reading the entire breadth of human experience. Psalm 129 is certainly no exception. These are words for the angry, the bitter, the attacked. In this season, we certainly don’t have an “enemy” to call God to oppose, but I think we’re all a more than a little upset and anxious.

Perhaps we do have an opponent – but it is *not* a nation or people; it is an attitude, a perspective. During the COVID outbreak, will we succumb to nihilism and negativity? Or, will we have a “righteous” anger that leads us into greater love for our neighbors, into renewed service for our communities? Will we combat spiritual isolation and social deterioration by uplifting one another and seeking to place others before ourselves, in the Way of Jesus?

There is much to cause us bitterness and anger in this season – but our fellow human is not one of them. May our prayers to God be for strength against our greatest foe: Failure to love.

Prayer: *God, I toss my hands up in frustration at this crisis, but in reaching to You, may that anger give way to Your peace. May Your love calm my heart and steady my hands for service, and not war. Amen.*

Saturday, March 28

There are no texts for today. Rather, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that you are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

“The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, March 29

Join us for “virtual worship” through tuning into the website: www.fccstjoseph.org/sermons-3/ either during our live-stream at 10:30 AM, or on your own at a later time.

Whether you “join in” into this virtual worship or not, use this day as a time for praise, reflection, and strengthening of your discipleship for the daily journey of following Christ. May God’s Spirit go with you, guiding and empowering you, and reminding you that even in “social distancing” we are a *community*. We are family of God, bound through Christ’s love and presence, and we never journey alone.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you, now and forever. Amen.