

## **A Word From Pastor Matthew Woods**

### **March 18, 2020**

I think by now we can all agree that the Coronavirus and the fear it has brought has plunged us rapidly into uncharted territory. We are learning new terms like “social distancing” and exercising self-isolation. We hear every day more and more about how the virus is impacting our country and now our community. And we don’t know if it will take weeks or months to recover. We have been exposed to a vulnerability unlike anything we have experienced in anyone’s lifetime.

Last evening (Tuesday, March 17) our church council gathered to develop a plan that would see us through this unprecedented time. We feel that it is important to act not only in our own interests but also in the best interest of our community. As Doctor Matthew Harris, our Synodical President, has stated recently--We will do well to practice our faith—Not to hurt or harm our neighbor in his body but to help and support him in every physical need. And so we hope to do our part in stemming any opportunity for the virus to get any foothold among our families especially our most vulnerable. This is why our leaders at Grace have decided to postpone most activities and to move its services online for at least the next couple of weeks and possibly longer. As things develop we will adapt and do our best to keep ministering to our folks with as much contact as possible. This is what we can do on this side of things. However, I pray that all of you will continue to be attentive to the health of your souls too. Such times as these usually have a strong impact long term. What’s doubly hard is that our instinct is to band together but this time we are being told to stay apart and isolate. Given today’s technology the Pastors are eager to stay connected to you.

I have to admit it’s hard not to think about all that is going on and to let my mind rest from it. But last night our family watched Frozen 2—not normally my kind of movie. Disney gave it an early release because so many are home hunkered down because of the virus. We even left the closed captioning on so my daughter-in-law could sing along. But it was fun. We were all together with both boys and daughters-in-laws huddled together in Josh’s basement living room. I did find it interesting as I watched the news beforehand that all the commercials keep going as though nothing has changed. They still want us to buy their stuff. It’s interesting how irrelevant those commercials seemed given our current circumstances. Who’s thinking about a new car, or a new home loan, or a diet pill when it confronted with a sense of one’s well-being or safety. The commercials seemed shallow, empty, and trivial. I confess the movie was okay. Like all movies it was a nice distraction for a while. But we need more than just a distraction. As your pastor and as Christians I would invite you to get reacquainted with something real and timeless.

I can’t help but think of John 3 where Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus. Jesus references Numbers 21 in John 3:14-15. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” You probably remember in Numbers 21 that snakes were biting the people but God promised that if they looked at the serpent on the pole and believed God’s promise to save them they would live. Jesus connects the most famous verses (John 3:16-17) to this fact. “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son so that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through Him.” Looking at a cross one can’t miss that it is connected to Jesus and to His promise to be saved through Him.

Notice though God didn't take away the snakes. Instead the Lord gave the Israelites a way to overcome the snakes by looking to His promise attached to the Serpent on the Pole. The world has seen many deadly things since that time in the wilderness and still calls us to look to His cross and its promise for deliverance. We don't always get to follow Jesus during "comfortable times" or from "safe places" and history has shown us that bad things can and do happen to God's people. If anything, however now we are called upon to remain faithful and to remember, "when I am weak, He is strong." The Apostle Paul went through a lot of harsh living and still he believed Jesus is real and not just a Disney story. He literally bet his life on Jesus.

Even as we keep watch over our hearts and minds we will also do well to remember to pray for our government officials. They are I think doing their best at this point to figure this thing out. Pray for wisdom, discernment, and a for unprecedented cooperation for the sake of the country. Pray for our first responders like the doctors and nurses, and those on the front line of this thing. Pray for those already affected by the virus. Pray for courage in the face of fear and for humility in the face of things we cannot control.

Remember the plague of 1527 in Wittenberg? Maybe you haven't. As others fled, Martin Luther in 1527 decided to stay when the Plague came to Wittenberg. He and his wife, Katie, who was pregnant at the time, decided to stay and they devoted all their efforts and their home to caring for the sick. It was also an unprecedented time, mired in fear as officials and citizens wondered what to do and what may yet come. It was in this time that Luther was inspired to write His most famous Hymn; "A Mighty Fortress is our God", basically Psalm 46 put to music. Those on the front lines are exposed. Please keep them all in prayer. Pray also for Grace Lutheran and for the Body of Christ that we may remain faithful, adaptable, and viable throughout.

Some of us will not be the same after this. As least in one measure that may be a good thing. Now that so much that would ordinarily fill our time has been postponed or cancelled during this season of lent perhaps we get a chance to be more basic. Maybe we have a real chance to fast from the things that have distracted us for too long from our family time. Perhaps we can learn about ourselves and refine our priorities. Perhaps we needed to work from home and have a different pace to life and maybe we could use some time to get some needed rest. Maybe we needed to confront our idols in repentance. The Lord knows.

Often within trouble is the opportunity for God to do something He otherwise wouldn't get the chance to do because any other time we may not be ready to listen or tune in. So often this is the case with our friends who are fighting cancer, for example. They learn to find God's hand on everything. Just having the strength to go is counted as a blessing—the most basic of things are remembered as gifts. We don't necessarily get out of such things unharmed and sometimes we are mortally wounded but the most spiritual journeys often find reality when trouble hits hardest.

I pray that you will find your refuge and strength in the Lord. Perhaps we are being tested. The key is found in which way we look for our help in this time of trouble. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent on the pole so too the Son of Man, Jesus is lifted up. I encourage you to look toward the cross in prayer and for courage.

Finally, I invite you to join us at our Web site ([glcna.com](http://glcna.com)) for daily updates and for further devotions. Look for us online for the broadcast of our church services this Sunday. They will be held at regular times and I pray that you would take advantage of our church app as well. Please continue to support the ministry of Grace and reach out to us with your ideas and

concerns and especially let us know how you are doing. Thanks for taking a moment with me today.

The Lord Bless you and keep you, the Lord make His Face to shine upon you and give you His peace.

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<https://youtu.be/gCndMnqNji4>