As I looked yesterday at the words to the sermon that I had written for today, I felt that what I wrote was not the message that we needed to hear today. So, I am postponing that sermon to a later date even though it does address a certain issue related to this virus.

The sermon that I originally wrote focuses on the hypocrisy of certain religious leaders and what they are and are not saying about this virus. That sermon will be saved for a later week when it seems more appropriate.

Instead, we are going to be reading two different passages of scripture today in worship than what is printed in the bulletin. Our first scripture will be from the letter called James.

The author of this letter is traditionally believed to be the brother of Jesus although there is debate about that. James writes this letter to the entire community spread all over the known world. I think these words have something to say to us today.

**James 4:8 (NIV)**

“Come near to God and God will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.”

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We are living during a time of great anxiety and frustration within our culture and around the world. We are all being impacted in some way by the spread of the coronavirus known as COVID-19. There are many who are unable to be present in a worshiping community today because of fears of the spread of this virus.

The passage which we will be reading is a story from the gospel of Matthew. For the past few weeks we have been reading through the Sermon on the Mount that is recorded in the 5th, 6th, and 7th chapter of Matthew.

But this morning we are going to skip forward and read a passage from the 8th chapter of the gospel of Matthew. It is a story about a storm that comes upon the followers of Jesus and what happens to them and how Jesus responds to their panic.

**Read Matthew 8:23-27**

This is a hard time for lots of people. The most vulnerable are the ones being hit the hardest. People living paycheck to paycheck are being laid off from their jobs. Elderly are being exposed to the disease and are dying at higher rates than others. Ones suffering from depression are being pushed into darker places in their mental health.

We usually only hear about the impact upon the most powerful among us. The impact upon corporations, sports leagues, politicians, and actors. But we know that we are all being impacted.

Here at Allison Creek we have canceled Bluegrass and Jazz concerts and Session meets after worship today to discuss what Sunday morning will be like. Please pray for your Session as it seeks to make faithful decisions.

Each day we hear more bad news. We wonder how will we even survive. When I hear about a major event being canceled I can’t help but hurt for the small business people whose livelihoods depend on that event. The small vendors, hourly workers, and others whose bills continue to arrive but now they have lost a huge portion of their income.

The spread of this virus is confusing and disorienting. Many of us have defined ourselves by what we do or where we go and now those things have been taken away. Where do we find purpose when so many things disappear?

But for others of us the situation is more dire. What are you going to do if you are being told that you are to work from home but your young children are now home from school? What are you going to do if you are no longer receiving a paycheck in the near future and you have bills to pay, medicine to take, and food to buy?

In the passage that we read this morning, the disciples of Jesus have an unexpected natural event overwhelm their resources. The disciples are in a boat when a windstorm arises on the sea. Having been to the Sea of Galilee in Israel, I can tell you that this is not unusual. Because of the topography of the area, quick and violent storms occur.

In this storm that Matthew shares, the wind is so strong that the boat is being rocked back and forth and there is real fear that it will topple over, killing them all. But in the boat also is Jesus. But what is Jesus doing while the wind is rocking the boat back and forth? Jesus is asleep.

Jesus does not come rushing up to the others in a panic. Jesus is peacefully at rest. Totally non-anxious. In fact, they have to wake him up. Panicked, the disciples scream out to Jesus, “Save Us!! We are perishing!!”

Does Jesus take on their fear? Does he yell back, “what do you want me to do?” Does he yell back at them, “figure it out!”?

Nope, Jesus does not do any of that. Jesus calmly says to them, “Why are you so afraid? Why do you have such little faith?”

It is only then that Jesus rises up. Jesus rises up and Matthew says that Jesus rebukes the wind. This word “rebuke” is the same way Jesus treats the demons. Jesus rebukes demons and Jesus rebukes the wind. In other words, Jesus is in complete control of the situation. Jesus has all of the real power.

The pandemic that we are facing is nothing compared to what happened in the 14th century in Europe with the biggest plague the world has ever known. It was called the Great Bubonic Plague or the Black Death.

The Bubonic Plague spread through rats and misquotes from Asia into Europe. The Plague killed somewhere between 30 and 60% of the population of Europe. Somewhere between 75 to 200 million people died. Those are hard numbers to comprehend.

Even though the worst of the death toll occurred in the 14th Century, the virus continued to reassert itself in later years throughout Europe. And in the 16th century it took its toll on Germany.

The German reformer Martin Luther was in Wittenburg, Germany when the Black Death tortured its residents. And torture is the right word based on what this virus did to the human body.

When the plague struck Wittenberg, numerous people fled in fear of their lives. But Martin Luther and wife Katharine, who was pregnant at the time, remained in their beloved city in order to treat the infected. Despite calls for them to flee Wittenburg, Martin and Katharina were determined to help the infected.

Let us listen to these words written by Luther about this occasion:

“No one should dare leave his (or her) neighbor unless there are others who will take care of the sick in their stead and nurse them. In such cases we must respect the word of Christ who said, ‘I was sick and you did not visit me …’.

According to this passage we are bound to each other in such a way that no one may forsake the other in his (or her) distress but is obliged to assist and help others as we would like to be helped.”

What is our role as Allison Creek Presbyterian Church and as followers of Jesus Christ during this plague? We do listen to the words of James and our health care workers. We wash our hands, we avoid unnecessary contact, and we pay attention to our body.

Please pray for our Session as it meets after worship today to talk through the logistics and what this means for us here at Allison Creek and how we carry out ministry and worship.

But we also pay attention to the way that Jesus handled an anxious situation. We remain calm and non-anxious and trust that God is in control of the situation. While our culture panics and buys up all of the toilet paper on the shelves, we turn to Jesus who rebukes even the wind and the waves.

But like Martin and Katharina Luther, we help our neighbor in need. In the words of Luther, “we do not avoid place or person but go freely with God-fearing faith.” We seek out the needs of others, especially the most vulnerable, and do what we can to help.

We worry less about our own 401K and more about our neighbor who may be trapped in their home or may be struggling financially because their job and paycheck is on hold.

Our temptation is to be really anxious during these times. But when we begin to feel anxious, we are invited to remember the words of Jesus. “Why are you afraid? Do you have little faith?” Jesus rebukes the chaos and then the disciples realize. “What sort of person is this? Even the winds and the sea obey.”

COVID-19 is spreading rapidly. But there is something else that can be infectious. And that is kindness.

Let us use this opportunity to be the ones to share the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ and to calmly spread kindness and love. AMEN.

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-Given: March 15, 2020 in Allison Creek Presbyterian Church (York, SC)

-<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/chorusinthechaos/martin-luther-and-the-black-plague/>