

# Be Encouraged!

Jesus says:



Covid-19 has been challenging, to say the least.

Because I went into “survival mode” way more than I care to admit throughout my life, I want to encourage people to desire to thrive with Jesus instead. It wasn’t until the song, “Thrive,” came out that the Lord opened my eyes to the fact that simply “surviving” wasn’t healthy, not as a born-again Christian who has the Holy Spirit living inside him or her.

Thriving and trusting in the Lord certainly doesn’t come “natural,” nor is it “easy.” We pray the following thoughts shared by brothers and sisters in Christ will encourage and lift you up, despite circumstances.

**Do You not know?  
Have you not heard?  
The Lord is the everlasting God,  
The Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He will not grow tired or weary,  
And his understanding no one can fathom  
He gives strength to the weary  
And increases the power of the weak.  
Even youths grow tired and weary,  
And young men stumble and fall;  
But those who hope in the Lord  
Will renew their strength.  
They will soar on wings like eagles;  
They will run and not grow weary,  
They will walk and not faint.**

**Isaiah 40:28-31**



At the beginning of the COVID 19 pandemic, I decided personal experiences and feelings should be recorded – the journals of individuals would add flavor to the historical record. I'm sharing one of my journal entries with you and I'm sure it is not an eye opening revelation - it may be something you've thought about or it may give you something to ponder.

Risk-taking is on a spectrum from low – scared of your own shadow, to high – daredevil. I'm in the middle and probably more of a risk taker than some people. I do balance my choices with responsible decision-making. This pandemic has imposed restrictions on our lives and as a good citizen, I will do as I am requested - especially to avoid harming others. However, I cannot put my life on hold. I could die tomorrow from anything and I will not waste the days I have left in my life sitting alone, unhappy and wishing I were doing something else.

I do not think people can be happy and be afraid at the same time. I do think fear can lead to courage and when you have courage, it can lead to feeling peaceful. Worrying can take up a lot of time and push other interesting and more positive thoughts aside. Worrying about the “what ifs” makes you fearful to take any action. One example - if I go to the store, I could get sick. True. If I go to the store, I can also buy what I need, I can buy what my neighbor wants, I may see someone at the store who is lonely and needs a short conversation, I can tell the clerk I appreciate her working, and I may see a pretty garden on the way – a sight I enjoy. I'll wear my mask, not get too close to people, and wash my hands when I get home. I don't fear going to the store - it is part of living.

If I live in fear of catching this virus, I am not living a happy life. If I live in fear – I am not trusting God. **“Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you:” (Psalm 56:22)** If I get sick, I could be uncomfortable and recover or I could die. If I die – I'll be living an ever-lasting life with God. That is not a bad thing!

I will continue to live my life without fear; I will have courage and faith in God, which gives me peace. In my notes from books I have read, I copied this down:

Where there is love, there is courage.

Where there is courage, there is peace.

Where there is peace, there is God.

And when you have God, you have everything.

Do I have fears? Of course! And sometimes I worry about the “what ifs” – past, present and future. Then I remember I am not in control - God is and He is with me. I trust Him as I go about living my life – happy to help others, facing challenges with courage, and enjoying the peace that comes with understanding God is in control.

Carol Hay, Panama UMC



## **“God, You Can’t Possibly Get Me Out of This Mess!**

**“And my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever.”**

**Phil. 4:19,20**

In the middle of August my truck failed to pass inspection for the last time so I traded it for another used truck. Due to COVID-19 I could not just walk into the DMV to register the "new" truck. I was told I would need to make an appointment online. The earliest available appointment was toward the end of October so I chose the second option of gathering all the needed paperwork to put in a drop-box located outside the DMV office.

That same day I received a call from my insurance agent telling me that NYS law required me to keep my old truck on my vehicle policy until the registration process was finished. That meant I would be paying insurance for a vehicle I no longer owned for possibly 2 or more months! This struck me as being unjust, so I called the offices of my NYS Assemblyman and NYS Senator. Then I emailed a County Official who responded that he agreed this was wrong but could do nothing about it.

After running out of options I told the Lord that I didn't see how He could get me out of this mess. The next day I was out of town for a family wedding when I received a phone call from the County Official I had emailed. He said he had taken care of everything and had personally delivered the completed registration card and sticker for the "new" truck to my house! I was able to have my insurance "back-dated" so I did not have to pay anything at all.

I guess I need to learn to NEVER tell God that there is something He can't fix!

Bev Yaiko, Edward's Chapel UMC

Added note: When I thanked the official by telling him he was an answer to prayer, he asked for prayer for health concerns. If anyone reading this feels led to pray for him too I'm sure God will hear and provide, as He knows best what is involved and what is needed.



I can't think of any other time in my short twenty-three years of life that I have seen God provide as much as he did through COVID-19. Although God provided before the pandemic and God will continue to provide after the pandemic, I think because the world was literally forced to stop the hustle and bustle of everyday life, we were able or at least I myself was able to truly take time to recognize God's purposeful actions and pieces of the puzzles he places in our life at just the right time.

Schools were closed. The Lord was still open. I didn't know how I would connect or continue to teach my students. God provided. Whether it was through a Zoom video chat to check in on them, or a visit to drop off supplies at a student's house and to see the smiling child you hadn't seen in months, God provided.

Restaurants were closed. The Lord was still open. God's eyes were seeing the reconnections taking place at dinner tables all around the world. People were pulling out dusty board games that were crammed way back into closets. People would actually stay for dessert and a cup of coffee because they didn't have a meeting or another activity to run off too. God provided.

Shopping trips were canceled. Time with the Lord in prayer was still right on schedule. Grocery stores were having shortages on food and other supplies. For those that were hungry or afraid to venture out to get food, God provided individuals to shop and deliver.

Weddings were canceled. Time with the Lord in prayer was still right on schedule. For those who wanted to get married, God provided an alternative destination that will be all the more beautiful.

For myself, we were waiting and waiting for our beautiful house. We didn't know how we would come up with the down payment. God provided. We didn't know how we would ever get through buying a house during the pandemic, God provided people, time, and patience. Without COVID-19 and our trust in the Lord, we would not have been able to get nearly as far as we did with our new home.

Real life was "closed" or put on hold. Some say that it still is. Although many missed out on large Easter gatherings, county fairs, weddings, graduation parties, summer picnics, God provided time for those simple, little moments that we often take for granted. My prayer each night since this pandemic has started and what I would like to leave this off with is....

**God, you already know the circumstances we are in. You saw this coming. You have a purpose with all of it. Continue to take it all out of my hands. You are the artist. I give you the paint brush. My trust is in YOU. Continue to use me to be a blessing to others who may be struggling during these times. Open my eyes to see and my ears to hear the little things that life runs us right past. Thank you for all you have provided and continue to provide. Thank you for your comfort. Thank you for your encouragement. We give You all the honor and glory. In your holy name, amen.**

Kari Gustafson, Park UMC



## **“All Lives Matter!”**

**“For You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother’s womb.”  
Psalm 139:13 NIV**

Driving home from Erie, my husband pointed out the sticker on the car in front of us. “All Lives Matter!” My heart swelled and Rich said, “Now THAT’s a good sticker!”

All lives DO matter, don’t they? Black lives. White lives. Red, Yellow, Brown and even Purple lives matter!

The lives of the destitute and homeless matter.

Handicapped lives matter.

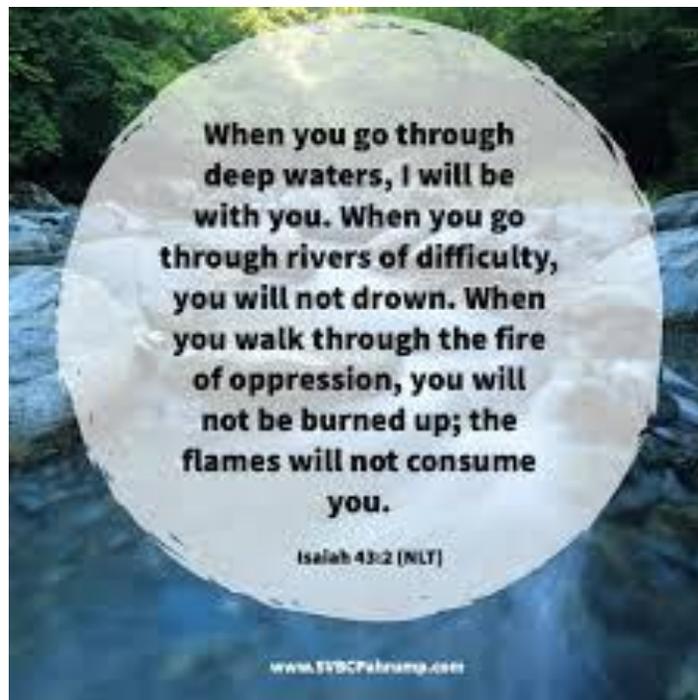
The lives of unborn children matter.

And on and on and on....

And if all of these lives matter to our Creator God, then they should definitely matter to each one of us.

Prayer: “ Father God, help us see people – all people, no matter what – through your eyes. In Jesus Name, Amen.”

Richard and Debbie Johnson, Edwards Chapel UMC



"I think of the trees and how quickly they let go," is a quote by May Sarton describing the fall season. It provides us with a wonderful analogy, as to what we need to do with our own lives. "Let Go!"

During this time, we need to remember that God is with us, and that we should not fear. We have all faced challenges this year -the death of a sibling, and the challenge of elderly parents have been two of our own personal trials.

On the other hand, we have celebrated life with our new granddaughter and the enjoyment of watching her grow and learn.

As we all face the road ahead together, as brothers and sisters in Christ, let us remember the word of God:

**Romans 8:38-39**

***"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."***

**Psalm 121:7-8**

***"The Lord will keep you from all harm - he will watch over your life the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore."***

**Mark 10:27**

***"Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.'"***

**Isaiah 40:31**

***"But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."***

Ann Damcott, Edwards Chapel UMC

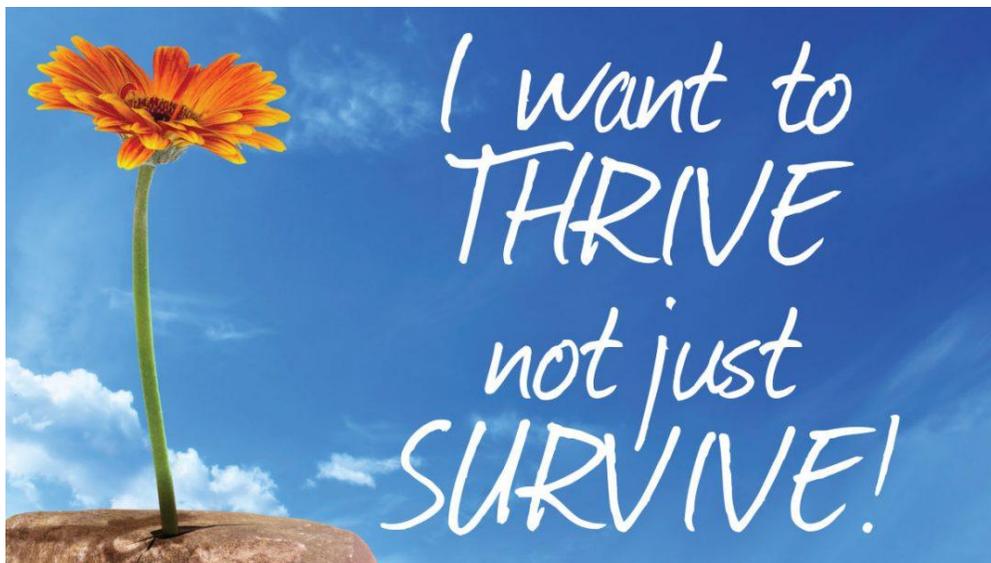


A message recently shared at my church from the book of Daniel spoke of the frequent decrees from King Nebuchadnezzar. It reminded me of recent times in our world with rules about this and guidelines about that and constant changes. In Chapter 3 when they are called before the King and facing the furnace, they basically respond with our God will deliver us and if he doesn't we are ok with that. In the face of death, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego remained true to God.

I recently listened to a volunteer who was assisting a woman struggling in her circumstances. She is preparing for a move, but the location has changed repeatedly, She has no possessions as her previous residence was condemned. The uncertainty of her situation is ever increasing. The volunteer was so kind and compassionate as he reminded her to cast all her cares upon the Lord. If God saves you from difficult circumstances or if he doesn't, still put your trust in Him.

Our clients face difficult circumstances every day. Some are of their own making and some are not. The only way real change can happen is through a relationship with Christ. We offer assistance through Love INC with the help of the Church for physical needs, but our real motive is to offer holistic help for not only their physical needs but their spiritual, emotional and relational needs by introducing them to God, God's people and God's Church through those relationships.

Susan L. Justham, Executive Director  
Love In the Name of Christ of SCC  
Helping Churches to Help People



## Covid Thankfulness

What strange times and what strange words to put in combination, COVID and thankfulness. But as strange as it seems, they can go together.

While COVID has caused separation in some avenues, it has also brought many of us closer together. I'm thankful for families that have come together around the dinner table at home. In our own home while Diane and I were quarantined we worked together on everything, I helped with food preparation, but not in the actual cooking or baking, that would have ended a successful quarantine!

I am thankful for the desire my churches had to gather again as soon as possible. The desire to worship as a family praising God can not be matched by Zoom. At the same time, I am thankful for the frontline workers who have devoted their lives to fighting COVID and its spread. They have sacrificed worshipping in community (for our safety) to praising Gods' faithfulness in hospitals and offices.

Most importantly, I am thankful for God, my Savior, and His Word! Where would we be without His love and strength!

### **Isaiah 40: 27-31**

**27 Why do you complain, Jacob?  
Why do you say, Israel,  
"My way is hidden from the Lord;  
my cause is disregarded by my  
God"?**

**28 Do you not know?  
Have you not heard?  
The Lord is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the  
earth. He will not grow tired or  
weary, and his understanding no  
one can fathom.**

**29 He gives strength to the weary  
and increases the power of the  
weak.**

**30 Even youths grow tired and weary,  
and young men stumble and fall;**

**31 but those who hope in the Lord  
will renew their strength. They will  
soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not be faint.**

I am thankful for my Savior who suffered and died for me on a cross. I am thankful for eternal life that enables us to live as best we can free from fear.

**John 3: 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."**

**16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.**

I am thankful for God leading us through the tough times, holding us every step of the way.

### **Psalms 25**

**4 Show me your ways, Lord,  
teach me your paths.  
5 Guide me in your truth and teach me,  
for you are God my Savior,  
and my hope is in you all day long.  
6 Remember, Lord, your great mercy**

**and love, for they are from of old.  
7 Do not remember the sins of my youth  
and my rebellious ways; according to  
your love, remember me, for you, Lord,  
are good. AMEN**

Pastor Warren VanDewark,  
Watts Flats UMC and Edwards Chapel UMC



Scholars do their best when it comes to translating documents from one language to another, but it is delicate work. Only rarely do nuances of grammar and meaning carry fully across the language barrier. Such is the case with 2 Corinthians 6:12.

**“You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted by your own affections.”**

So it reads in the New King James Version. Others have translated it as, “We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us.” Paul has been waxing eloquent concerning his deep love and concern for the Corinthian Christians. In previous letters (there were at least two, only one of which has survived), he had to give firm directive concerning both theological and ethical errors into which they had fallen, and wants to reassure them that the harshness of his tone was not due to anger, but because he was so grievously worried about the direction they were heading. According to the NIV (quoted above), he sees them pulling away instead of taking his warnings to heart.

This morning, I was arrested by the words as translated in the NKJV: “You are restricted by your own affections.” For more than a month now, we have been living with restrictions. Many are forbidden to go to work; we have been told to hunker down and stay at home. We can't go out in public without a face covering. We must stay at least six feet apart. Governors across the country have issued edicts like this which on the surface seem to be blatantly unconstitutional. We still have the constitutional right to assembly, the last I heard. It is easy to blame overreaching politicians for our plight, but I wonder if as long as we are being told to shelter there, we shouldn't look a bit closer to home.

Paul says we are restricted not by what someone else is doing, but by our own affections. There is no scientific or medical connection between COVID-19 and the things we as a people have set our affections on, but it does strike me as at least coincidental that it is in New York State where on January 22 our governor signed a new law granting almost unrestricted abortions for any reason and celebrated by lighting up the Empire State Building, that we find the epicenter of COVID-19 and one of the most restrictive lockdowns in the country. Our affection for untrampled “freedom” may be the source of our restrictions.

It's easy to pick on another's sin, so it is appropriate that I examine my own heart. How have my affections for the things of this world restricted my walk with Christ? How have I forfeited my freedom in Christ by my attachment to the pleasures and comforts of this life? What might I be more able to do for the Kingdom of God if I truly set my heart on the things of Christ? Do I spend money and time carelessly on my own comfort and pleasure, while the work of Christ struggles along on the leftovers? Have I busied myself with that which matters little while people in need remain in need? This little phrase from Paul challenges...no, it convicts me. I am restricted by my affections, and the only way to break free from these chains of my own making is to set my affections on things above, where Christ sits at the right hand of the Father (Colossians 3:1). After all, as Paul says in Galatians 5:1, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again (i.e., restricted) by a yoke of slavery.” Thank God for the freedom we have been given. Let us not relinquish it through false and unworthy affections.

Pastor Jim Bailey, Park UMC



**We can't always understand situations in our lives,  
but we can always trust in the One who works  
in and through them all.**

"Trust". This is the word the Lord put on my heart at the start of 2020, not knowing what the year would hold for my heart or our family. God has continued to whisper this word to me as we have walked through this COVID season. **"Trust in ME with all your heart, lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Me and I will direct your paths."** (Proverbs 3:5-6) It's not always easy to trust God when we cannot see the future but He is teaching me to lean on Him fully, to trust who HE is and that He will work all things out in His timing.

I think often of the Cross, how Jesus endured such a dark moment that led to the greatest miracle of resurrection. Often when we are in the middle of a trial or struggle, it's hard to trust God is at work in the darkness. We need to learn to lean on His truths and His Word alone for our joy.

I cannot tell you how many days since COVID began I have been feeling a deep heaviness in my tears and at just that moment a friend will send a text or email or call and share a scripture or song that is JUST what God knew I needed. One of those times was when our family found out the news that the new home we had been praying for would be ready for us the DAY before we would not have a place to live. God provided at the last second, just in time. Our oldest son was about to leave for college and had been praying for the Lord's timing and was hoping to 'see' the new home before he left for Ohio. We were able to walk through our new home the day before he left and as we did he shared Deuteronomy 6 with us and as we read it, our hearts were reminded to 'trust' God as I fought my tears yet again. **"5 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.10 When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, 11 houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, 12 be careful that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."**

It's not easy to trust God when we can't see the outcome of a circumstance, but that's precisely what He's been teaching me during this COVID season. We may not know what tomorrow holds but we know WHO holds tomorrow. **"Great is Thy Faithfulness...morning by morning new mercies I see. All I have needed Thy hand hath provided."** May we trust in His faithfulness. **Lamentations 3** reminds us that His mercies are new every morning. My daughter often leaves my husband and I little notes with Scripture in the morning to inspire us and tell us she's praying for us, and God has taught me so much about trusting Him through her.

We have been announcing in Sunday morning worship for people to share their testimonies or write them up. We had a Women's mini re-treat one Sunday after worship and the question was asked: "How have we seen God at work lately?" (Just like we've been asked to write about, so I took notes!) Here are some of the testimonies shared by sisters in Christ.

One young girl shared she sees God in the Cross and the sky -Many shared they see God in nature: in sunrises, sunsets, the beautiful clouds, and colorful leaves and rainbows He provides -One woman shared that God speaks to me when He sends a cardinal just when I need comfort about a loved one who has died -Another shared that the Lord has comforted me when I need it, putting just the right person in my path or email in my inbox or scripture in a text or song on the radio -One mom tearfully shared that she sees God in her kids and their lives -One woman shared she sees God at work in the voice of one of the teens that sings on our praise team as she pours out her heart in worship to

bring us into His presence -A younger girl shared she's glad her family has been trapped in the house during COVID so they can spend more quality time together, making memories and growing closer to God instead of having a busy schedule like they normally do -One woman shared how a co-worker was asking about how God speaks to us and it led to quite a chance to share His love -One young girl shared how God led a friend back into her life and school because of COVID. Someone who she had been missing in her life so she felt He provided that for her -One woman shared how her daily walk with a friend is where she sees God at work as they share things on their heart and things they hear from pastors on a daily podcast on facebook as the friend was struggling with sleeping and forgiving someone and they talked about how God helps with that -One woman shared how God works in her through the Sunday morning sermons, prayers, worship, and Scripture -One young adult shared how a college roommate had to quarantine due to a COVID scare and she was praying for health for herself and her family and to not be anxious and at that moment her mom texted her and she felt that was an answered prayer! -One woman shared how God speaks to her through the people He brings in her path as He uses her to plant seeds and have conversations at work that lead to giving out Bibles to those who want one and ask for one -One woman shared how God was seen in her family as they recover from a tough season and broken relationship and also plan a wedding -One woman shared how God is daily giving her strength and healing -One teen shared how God is in school and pouring into people in the halls and classrooms, and in her quiet times in the morning and evening with Him, showing her that He's always there -One older woman shared how powerful it is to see God through her grandchildren's eyes -One shared how when fear hits, she sings a song from church "My fear doesn't stand a chance when I stand in Your love" (1 John 4) -One woman shared how a friend was battling anxiety and they started praying daily and reading Scripture to find freedom from it -Another woman shared how she sees God in the youth and their faith -We all admitted that as hard and stressful as the COVID season has been on us all, we do see God working in and through it all -It was obvious God was present in the room as people shared, reminding us all that He is always at work, working things for good (even the hard times and the dark moments) and that Romans 8:28 is a truth we can cling to.

**God reminds us to testify to how Jesus is at work in and through us (Revelation 1:2)** and I give thanks to God for how He's always at work, even when we can't see it. As the song, Waymaker reminds me every time I sing it:

"Even when I don't see it, You're working,  
even when I can't feel it, You're working.  
You never stop, You never stop working!  
Waymaker, miracle worker,  
promise keeper, light in the darkness,  
My God, that is Who you are!"

May these testimonies of God at work remind us all to trust in Him with all our hearts and lean not on our own understanding. We can't always understand situations in our lives, but we can always trust in the One who works in and through them all. Amen.

Rev. Erin Beckerink, Compass Ministries, Clymer, NY



## Expert at Beginnings

In our sin and rebellion, we have turned our world into a sad mess today, and many are feeling hopeless, anxious or fearful. But, in spite of our sinfulness, God, in His perfect love for us still has a plan bigger than what we see.

God is an expert at beginnings...look at creation. It was perfect! Even though Adam and Eve chose to sin, God showed them love when he banished them from the Garden of Eden. If they had continued to live in the garden and eat fruit from the tree of life, they would have lived eternally in a state of sin.

God knew Adam and Eve would choose to sin because He is all-knowing, great and wise. Satan is none of these...he is created...not the creator.

God had another beginning in mind when His perfect love was carried forward to His children today through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ! That includes each of us and those yet to be born. Receive His free gift of eternal life through repenting of your sins and relying on Him for the power to change. **John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."**

I'm anxiously awaiting another beginning yet to come when Jesus Christ returns and sets all things new and perfect again for eternity! Until then, whatever circumstances we find ourselves in that we may not understand, may we remember that God is in control. He does not change. He is the expert at beginnings. The God of creation is the God of today and forever. As in creation, He is able to bring good in all things. God is still on the throne and we are in His hands.

Karen Peters, Edwards Chapel UMC



## How has God worked during this COVID Pandemic

I've been in pastoral ministry for over 17 years. Prior to that, I was a lay person serving in just about every leadership position in the church. So, for 35-40 years, I've had a pretty good handle on the mission and vision of the church, how things work, and enjoyed and led the church in the annual rhythm of the Christian year. So, when 2020 started, I was ready to move us steadily toward Lent, Easter, and beyond, as we do every year. God was ready! So were we!

On March 12, I remember beginning to hear that things were starting to close down with concern that the coronavirus might be spread through close contact with others. On Sunday March 15, we gathered for worship (some of us, at least). We had one rule at that point: NO HUGGING! And, like your church, our church loves to hug and be in fellowship. I found myself on that Sunday morning reminding people (mostly the rule-breakers) that hugging was not allowed. We worshipping with 50% of our normal congregation present, thinking that we'd be back to full capacity in a few weeks, when the virus settled down. That final Sunday was a strange day, but it seemed temporary. God had a plan! We just weren't sure what it was.

The first few Sundays online were fun! We had a small team producing an intimate online worship service that felt like we were connecting well with the people at home, all over the place. We had hundreds of computers, which represented families and individuals from far and wide. Then, the drive to innovate to more and more began. But, Lent would arrive and we were still online only. "We'll be back by Easter!" is what we said. Yet, when Easter started to arrive, we decided that we would be online only, still. So, innovate again. Record sermons, record music, record, scripture readings, record opening and closing videos, produce it all, upload it, and sit home on Sunday morning, waiting for the upload to start as we watched worship from our couches, porches, bedrooms, kitchens, cars, camps, and wherever we found ourselves. The testimonies from people the first month or two was that they LIKED worshipping from home, but it just wasn't the same. Where was God moving and working. I found myself praying for this virus to be eradicated...and fast!

Once we got into a groove, I tended to lose sight of God's leading and was driven by the technology and all that needed to be done. You've all heard pastors say that they worked more in the past 7 months than at any point in the past 20 years. It's all true. I was working 60-70 hours per week writing, reading, recording, engaging online, planning, setting up and tearing down, and generally exhausted from all the long days with my team of dedicated volunteers. God was working!

Then, we began to plan for restarting in-person worship, which was another whole set of challenges to overcome, new technologies to upgrade and master, and the stress of planning safeguards and procedures for inviting people to come together. Another dedicated team of people were engaged and working hard to make it happen. Then, we came back together (sort of), which felt like the last Sunday we gathered, with partial congregation and no hugging. Where was God working?

It hasn't really gotten back to where we were, but I'm pretty sure God is asking the church to not go back the way it was. There are some things we will recover. There are other things we will stop doing, because we haven't missed those ministries. Through it all, going forward, we have a choice to make: do we embrace a new awakening that has come from this pandemic pause, or do we gradually go back to the subtle slide to comfortable. Let's ask God that question. I bet He'll give us a big hug and assure us that the future is bright, passionate, and filled with mission and vision. I'm ready for the next 17 years of ministry! Who's with me?!?!

Pastor Steven Taylor, Panama UMC



When Linda and I were first married, we lived in a tiny hamlet southwest of Wellsville, NY. Alma was a wonderful place to begin our life together. At the end of an 8 1/2 mile drive down Petrolia Road, it was nestled in the confluence of two valleys, and consisted of a couple dozen houses, the church I pastored, a one-bay fire department, and a general store. At the time, in addition to preaching at the church, I worked for the Department of Social Services in Angelica NY.

Unbeknownst to me, one day while I was at work, the county tore up about a half mile of the Petrolia Road in the big curve right in front of Elmer Watson's house in preparation for resurfacing. They only got as far as removing the asphalt before it began to rain. Did I mention that they neglected to post any warning signs? That evening, as I was driving home at my usual breakneck pace, I approached the curve on asphalt and immediately hit the now muddy clay surface of the curve itself. My little 1966 Falcon immediately took on a life of its own, spinning like a top down the road. God in his mercy and power somehow kept me on the road instead of my careening off into the ditch. Once the fun stopped, I got out of the car, walked back along the road, and picked up all four hubcaps which had popped off in the excitement.

I've had a few other times when I lost control of a vehicle, all of which were pretty exciting, none of which were particularly pleasant.

One of the results of COVID-19 with all the lockdowns, social distancing, and economic devastation we're experiencing is that uncomfortable realization that we have less control over the circumstances of our lives than we thought, and far less than we like. Like me in that spinning Falcon, no matter how tightly we grip the wheel, nothing we do can make it stop. It's not very fun.

In **2 Corinthians 7**, Paul writes about a time in his life when things were out of his control. He had written to correct some serious issues in the church, but once the letter was sent, there was little more he could do. He was being tossed back and forth and found the experience something less than pleasurable. In v. **4**, he says, **"I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation,"** quite a noble attitude, we might say. I work hard at my gratitude discipline, and find it a challenge to be joyful in ALL my troubles, even though they aren't really all that much. We look at Paul and say, "Wow! What a man of faith, to be joyful in all his troubles!"

Hold on. Two verses later, he says, we "had no rest, but we were troubled on every side. Outside were conflicts, inside were fears." Just two verses earlier, he spoke of exceeding joy in every situation, and here he talks about the conflict he faced and the fear he battled. Doesn't sound very joyful to me! It sounds like he was experiencing the same ups and downs we feel, at times confident, at other times wondering.

In v. 6, he tells us what finally helped him through his doubts and fears: Titus had arrived with good news that comforted his soul. At the very beginning of his letter, he wrote these words:

**"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God."**

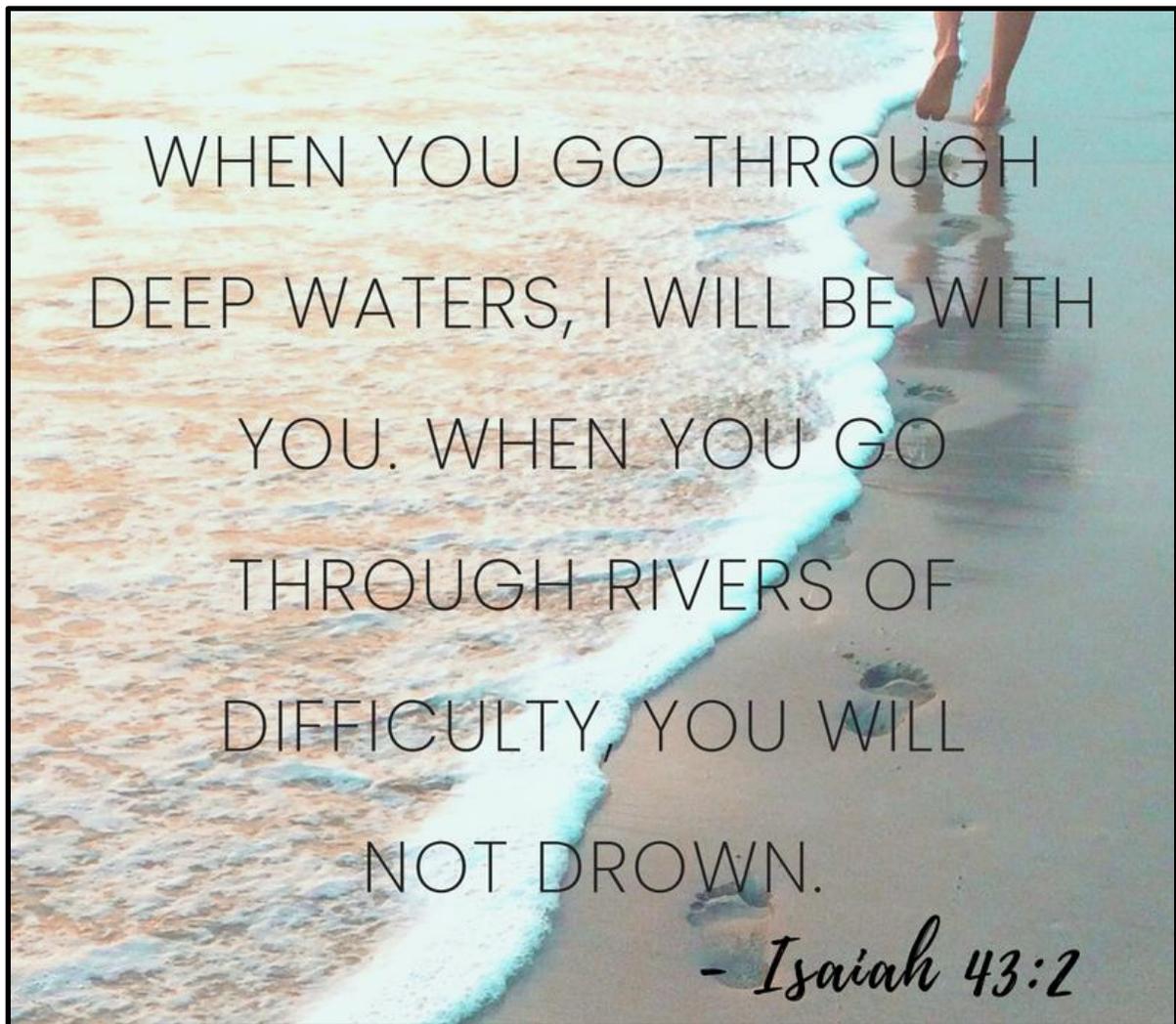
**—2 Corinthians 1:3-4 NIV**

Paul's comfort didn't come through some supernatural divine revelation as he studied and prayed. It came through the flesh and blood presence of his friend and fellow-worker Titus. In these weeks of social distancing, we've done as best we can staying connected through available

technology. It is helpful, but there's nothing that comforts like the face to face presence of another human being. It is perhaps the primary way God interacts with us, and there really is no substitute.

Getting through tough times isn't an unbroken path to glory. It has its ups and downs, its successes and failures. Just when it seems all is lost, God sends a Titus to reach out and pick us up. It's a process, as he said at the very beginning of chapter 7: "...perfecting holiness in the fear of God." I like that word, "perfecting." Maturity and holiness aren't something God lays on us with a divine magic wand. It comes step by step, inch by inch, as we stumble, pick ourselves up, and muddle our way through the conflicts and fears we feel, till we come out the other side and can say, "I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation." I'm working on it, and am grateful for my friends and colleagues who are doing the same, and especially for the Tituses who come alongside at just the right time, ministers of the Greater Comforter Jesus himself promised us. My little Falcon may be spinning, but it will stop, and I can get out, collect my spiritual hubcaps, and keep on going to my destination.

Pastor Jim Bailey, Park UMC



I spent the morning gathering bedding for neighbors in need in our storage space hosted at Bethel Baptist Church. As I was putting together sheets, pillows, blankets and comforters, I thought about my own bed and the comfort it provides on a cold night. I have a couple of pillows to aid in my sleeping position, a warm blanket and a stylish comforter making it a warm and comfortable bed that makes me feel safe and secure.

I found myself wondering about those who are struggling daily to find security? Where do those who have been battered or abused find safety in a world that appears unsafe?

It made me think of those nights that I have laid awake at night after a bad dream or those times that things seemed uncertain for a night or two. Where did I find safety and security? My mind went to **Psalm 121, " I lift my eyes to the hills, where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth."**

How do we help those who struggle with safety and security on a daily basis? Again the bedding came to mind. Come alongside them and surround them with love like the feel of a warm blanket. Be someone they can count on in good times and bad. And most importantly share where your help comes from.

Susan L. Justham, Executive Director  
Love In the Name of Christ of SCC  
Helping Churches to Help People



Four years ago, almost to the day, I started wearing a specialized mask. Not due to Covid 19. It was the ugly yellow "duck bill" mask required to be worn by cancer patients. For those who have undergone a stem cell transplant. The Covid 19 pestilence had not yet arrived on the scene but there's no shortage of other diseases that freely circulate in our society. The chemotherapy had killed off most of my immune system. The doctors and medical professionals told my wife and I that the mask and the habitual washing of our hands would be our first line of defense and then, fifteen months ago, my wife was diagnosed with advanced cancer and she too had to undergo a stem cell transplant. She became a duck bill mask wearer too. Who would have ever guessed that this would happen. We sure didn't.

The masks, the washing of hands and the prescribed medications became a ritual. So when the Covid restrictions and recommendations came on the scene, we were old hands at it. Though tedious, they are all good and serve their purpose, but our real first line of defense lies in our faith and trust in our Lord. It's our dependency on God's grace that has given us the strength to get through these tough times. One thing is sure, we have not been going through these trials alone. Our brothers and sisters in Christ are continually praying and supporting us. Encouraging us in many ways. But above all else, it's our Father in Heaven who gives us the peace, the strength, and the assurance that we are wrapped in His arms, no matter what transpires. We could not do this without Him. His word is filled with verses that help us get through each day.

**Psalm 91:5, 6. "You will not be afraid of the terror by night, or of the arrow that flies by day; of the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or of the destruction that lays waste at noon."**

**Isaiah 41:13. "For I am the Lord your God, who upholds your right hand. Who says to you, do not fear, I will help you."**

**Psalm 116:1,2. "I love the Lord because He hears my voice and my supplications. Because He has inclined His ear to me, therefore I shall call upon Him as long as I live."**

So my wife and I press on, knowing that in this day of the Covid 19 pestilence, and the cancer that has ravaged our bodies, our lives belong to Him. We are His children and He loves and watches over us.

Rell and Sharon Johnson, Park UMC



## **Jesus says, "Come, Come to Me!"**

**28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Matthew 11:28-30 NIV**

It seems that Coronavirus brings forth a variety of emotions: fear, anger, anxiety, mistrust, defensiveness, rebellion.... And that's just in my own head and heart!

Add to this all the other craziness that this fallen world offers and the thought has run across my mind more than once, "Where ARE you in all this, God??!!" As a believer, I know better than to let these kinds of thoughts begin, let alone enjoy any kind of welcome in my head and heart, but it's H.A.R.D. sometimes.

Recently it seems that the Lord is whispering to me, "Come..." more and more often. "My precious, precious child, 'Come...Come to Me and I will give you rest' and help and hope and strength and peace and comfort and anything and everything else you could possibly need."

We are not promised physical ease, are we - only spiritual victory. And we only have to come to Jesus. It's obviously not a one-time thing. It's a moment-by-moment, relinquishing-everything-into-the-Father's-very-capable-hands thing. Continually. Or at least it is for me.

Pray with me if you will: "Father God, Admittedly I am weak, but I praise your Holy Name that you are strong! I need you to be strong in and through me, Lord. I choose to come to you continually. Forgive me, cleanse me and fill me afresh with your Holy Spirit, for your honor and glory, for my good and for the good of others. I desire to live for you, totally trusting that you have a plan and your plan is perfect, despite circumstances. I desire this, but admit I need you to help me actually follow through with allowing this knowledge to go from my head to my heart! Help me learn what you would have me learn, Lord Jesus, each day. Help me yield to you where you know I need to. I love you and am SO thankful for your lovingkindness and mercy. Thank you for encouraging me to "come" to you continually for help, hope and strength. In Jesus name, Amen."

Debbie Johnson, Edwards Chapel UMC



“When was the last time you prayed for him?” I asked this question of a friend, a professing Christian who had been constantly complaining about our president, posting negative Facebook articles, and getting into heated online arguments with people she didn't even know. The second question I asked was, “Is this giving you any joy?” She never answered my first question and unfriended me with the second. So much for Facebook friends.

These questions are just as valid today as they were three years ago when I first asked them, and are valid for all of us no matter where we stand politically. Not only valid, they are essential for the Christian. Here in New York State we have the best (or worst) of both worlds: a liberal Democratic governor, and a fiercely combative Republican president. We get to hate one and love the other! It's easy to pray blessing on the politician with whom you agree. It's quite another to do the same for the one who tramples with impunity upon the values you hold dear. But we are not given the option of praying curses. Blessings are commanded of us, even for those who make our lives difficult.

**“I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”**

**—1 Timothy 2:1-2 NIV**

**““You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,”**

**—Matthew 5:43-44 NIV**

**“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”**

**—Romans 12:14 NIV**

How do we as Christians justify our criticizing, complaining, and castigating those in authority with whom we disagree, especially if we have failed to pray for them? It is a trap into which we easily fall, and it is deadly to the life of the spirit. There is no shortage of internet fodder for the complainer, and no lack of those eager to argue their side, none of which changes anyone's mind. When I click on the link that feeds my biases, I may feel justified. But in doing so, have I forfeited the justification that comes by faith in Christ? And when I read the article that condemns the other side, do I become partaker in condemnation, and by it a partner with the Evil One, the Accuser? And wouldn't I rather be partner with the One who came to bless and give life?

The time given us by our COVID-induced vacation is much better spent in the Scriptures which build up than in the media that only inflames our anger and fear. There is no joy to be found on television, the internet, or print. Joy is the gift of Jesus Christ, and I have found that when I seek him and obey his command to bless even those “on the other side,” the blessings return to me. It doesn't get much better than that!

Pastor Jim Bailey, Park UMC



## **Sunday, It's a Gift That We Didn't Know We Needed**

There is just something about a Sunday that just does it for me. It's the comfortable way it greets you with a warm embrace and a hot cup of coffee. The way the air feels on a Sunday is just so much more inviting than a droll Tuesday or finicky Thursday.

There's church to be had, big breakfasts to be made and warm beds to sleep into a little longer. There are board games to play or football games to watch and so much food to be eaten. It's like the Christmas of the days of the week.

If you're like me, you tend to try to cram all your housework and errands into Saturday so you can enjoy the delight of Sunday. And really, there is a good reason for resting in the blessing of a Sabbath. Some might say the Sabbath is required of us – but I look at it this way – it is a gift that we didn't know we needed.

In this hyper-driven, production-oriented world we live in – we need a day of rest. Where we recharge, we reconnect with God and remember what we're really here for. What is your purpose? You don't exist merely to answer emails, take phone calls and do laundry until you die. There are moments and hours and days chock full of beauty and grace that you need to slow down and recognize.

And today, the Sunday that I am writing to you from, I recognized this deep need for rest and readjusting – so much so that my soul cried out with joy to the Lord when I laid down to sleep. “Thank God for Sundays,” I thought, being thankful for the slow and easy way the day had gone. Thank God for sharing meals with the kindred souls I am blessed to do life with.

Thank God for football games where the Bills win and all seems right in the world. Thank God for peanut butter and apples with my kiddos right before bed.

Thank God for calls with my parents and sister, checking in and enjoying a conversation.

The one thing COVID has taught me is that the time we are given is incredibly important – and we do not have an iota of control over when that time may end or when a strong upheaval will come and wreak havoc upon it. So, dear readers, I urge you today to join me in the Sabbath. Rest. Rejuvenate. Worship the Lord and be at peace.

Katrina Fuller, Jamestown Post Journal



When I heard on TV that China had a deadly virus, I thought "oh, that's too bad"! Little did I know how it would affect all of our lives.

As many of you know, I've been on a cancer adventure since 2006. In the course of this fight, I've had numerous surgeries, radiation twice (10 years apart) and 9 different Chemos. I overheard my oncologist tell another doctor that if he wrote a book about me, people would think it was fiction because hardly anyone survives two kinds of cancers and all of the harsh treatments. I told them all I did was to keep breathing and the Lord did all of the work. I believe God guided the doctors to make the right decisions on my behalf. All through the years, I have had scans every 3 to 6 months and even though the doctors said it was impossible, I had seven years of remission.

In 2018 we bought a little trailer in a park in Florida and the doctor thought it would be good for us to go and get vitamin D in the sun for the winter. But he said I would need to find a good oncologist. The Lord led us to a wonderful young oncologist in Lakeland, Florida. We feel of all the oncologists in Florida, we got one of the best.

As we were having fun in God's beautiful sunshine, a tumor was silently and aggressively growing in my lung and so was COVID-19 growing more and more in the United States. Soon all of the activities were shut down and then the whole park shut down and no one was to go in or out, except for groceries and doctor appointments. Most of the residents left for fear that the borders of the states and the Canadian border would be closed. New York had many cases and at that time Florida had few, so our children thought we should stay in Florida. But we were well taken care of as our son and daughter-in-law and two granddaughters had moved within 30 miles of us. They would get us groceries and wipe them down. We would drive to their home and they would bring them to our car as we all wore masks. Our son is in the health care field and he didn't want to bring us the virus so we were all very careful.

In April, as we were thinking it was time to start home soon, the tumor decided to make itself well known and I started coughing up blood. I thought I would wait until the next day to call the doctor but around 2 o'clock am, we decided since it was becoming more difficult to breathe every hour, I had better call the emergency number. Of all the doctors who were on call that night, it was my doctor. I truly believe the Lord had his arms around me and he arranged that for me. My doctor told us to drive 30 miles into Lakeland to the hospital and the ER. Because of COVID-19, my husband had to stay in the car while I walked into the emergency room by myself. A CT scan was done and they found a tumor was throwing out blood clots and had filled both lungs. After tests and procedures and tests and procedures, 12 days later I could go home. While in the hospital with no visitors except on my cell phone, God gave me comfort and peace. The eyes above the masks of the hospital personnel were all kind and compassionate and I felt that the Lord was with me every moment of every day.

By the time I was discharged, it was into May, which was past the time we had planned to go home. But because of the virus my doctor wouldn't let us fly or stay in a hotel/motel so we couldn't go home. But there are a few couples who stay year-round at the park and we got better acquainted with them and the staff as we visited from our golf carts. It also gave us a nice time to have more time with the Lord and appreciate his goodness and the wonder of his miracles. I finally had a scan in July and my southern doctor said that looked good enough that we could stay in a hotel if we took our own pillows and wiped or sprayed everything we touched.

For every problem, God has an answer. As I look back at the last 14 years I have heard the words incurable, inoperable, stage four, palliative care and I am in awe of how Jesus is taking care of

me. I don't know why the Lord has chosen to leave me here while so many others go to their glory but my prayer is that I can be an encouragement to others when they have problems.

My motto throughout this adventure has been "whether I go or whether I stay, I'm a winner either way."

Carole Hunink, Edwards Chapel UMC



I finally got around to getting tested for COVID-19 antibodies. My wife is convinced that's what I had back on April 5 when I think I came down with the flu. I guess we'll know in a week or so. As I was driving home in a downpour, I got to thinking how blessed I am. It's spring, and the trees are starting to bud, the air was warm and fragrant with the earthy scent that comes with a spring rain, I live where the virus has affected very few people, am surrounded by good friends and family, am feeling well, and have a medical system that allows me to be tested.

It all made me think again of how very grateful I am for the blessings I have. I pity the unbeliever who is thankful, but doesn't have anyone to be thankful to. It made me think of a song by Steve Martin, of SNL fame. He is an accomplished banjo player, leading a bluegrass group known as the Steep Canyon Rangers. Awhile back he wrote a song entitled "Atheists Don't Have No Songs," a satirical lament over the plight of the unbeliever in not having songs of hope to carry them through tough times.

Christians have their hymns and pages (hymns and pages)  
Hava Nagila's for the Jews. (for the jews)  
Baptists have the rock of ages (rock of ages)  
Atheists just sing the blues

(Romantics play) Romantics play Claire de Lune.  
(Claire de Lune)  
Born agains sing He is risen.  
But no one ever wrote a tune (Wrote a tune)  
For godless existentialism.

For atheists, there's no good news,  
They'll never sing,  
A song of faith.  
In their songs, they have a rule,  
The "he" is always lowercase. The "he" is always lowercase.

(Some folks sing) Some folks sing a Bach cantata.  
(Bach cantata)  
Lutherans get Christmas trees.  
Atheist songs add up to nada.(Up to nada)  
But they do have Sundays free.  
(Have Sundays free)

(Pentecostals sing) Pentecostals sing, sing to heaven,  
(Sing to heaven)  
Gothics had the books of scrolls,  
(Numerologists count) Numerologists count, count to seven,  
(Count to seven)  
Atheists have rock and roll.

For atheists, there's no good news,  
They'll never sing,  
A song of faith.  
In their songs, they have a rule,  
The "he" is always lowercase. The "he" is always lowercase.

Atheists  
... Atheists  
... Atheists Don't Have No songs!

Christians have their hymns and pages (hymns and pages)  
Hava Nagila's for the Jews. (for the jews)  
Baptists have the rock of ages (rock of ages)  
Atheists just sing the blues  
Catholics, dress up for mass,  
And listen to Gregorian chants.  
Atheists, they take a pass,  
Watch football in their underpants.

Atheists  
... Atheists  
... Atheists Don't Have No songs!  
(DON'T HAVE NO SONGS)

Songwriters: Sharp Graham Paul / Martin Stephen Glenn / Platt Alfred Francis  
Atheists Don't Have No Songs lyrics © L A Films Music, Enchanted Barn Pub, French Broad  
Music

I can't speak to Steve Martin's faith (or lack thereof), but he has hit upon some truth here. The hymnody of Christianity is without peer. No other religion (and especially secular humanism) comes even close to the breadth and depth of music that has as its wellsprings Christian faith. As I drove home this afternoon, I was grateful to have a wealth of lyric and melody with which to express my gratitude and am equally thankful to have the same in time of lament. Someone once said that a faith that doesn't inspire one to sing isn't much of a faith at all. I have to agree. One doesn't have to be musical to have a song in the heart. After all, the Scripture tells us to **make a "joyful noise" unto the Lord. To him, it always sounds beautiful (Psalm 95:1, 95:2, 98:4 & 6, 100:1**

Pastor Jim Bailey, Park UMC



Well let me just say... if 2020 was a NASCAR race track it would be Talledega for sure. You are pretty much guaranteed that at some point during 500 miles at 200+mph nose to nose and side by side that the big one will happen!!! 2020 is the big one for sure.

When you have to change your everyday habits in just about everything you do, you learn a lot about yourself. Here are a few things I have learned.

- Brush your teeth every morning before you dawn your mask. You will definitely know if you didn't.
- Hold your burps until you are where you can remove your mask for sure. Especially after eating onions or garlic.
- Put a post-it note on your drivers side window that says in big letters, DON'T FORGET TO GRAB YOUR MASK. you will remember when you get to the supermarket door and it says masks required while yours is back at the car..
- It is important to have a vehicle with lots of drink holders. Vehicles make poor restaurant tables.
- Had to buy extra napkins for the vehicle glove box because the extras we got while dining in... well we couldn't dine in to get extras.
- And one of my most desperate ones was when the pandemic first broke out and they closed all the rest areas on the throughways!!! Yikes! You could not even go into a McDonalds for relief.

Lol... with all those inconveniences aside. Here are a couple of items that I did pick up on during the stay at home/lockdown period that I may have taken for granted..

- I found that you can be easily entertained while walking in the woods watching the birds, squirrels and deer instead of going to the movies. And it is free.
- I found that there are lots of things you can do in your own neighborhood.
- I found myself listening to the music I have playing in my woodshop in a different light. The lyrics took on a whole new meaning. One that is speaking to the times we are in now.
- One of my favorite songs that comes to mind during the pandemic is from Josh Wilson called..... Revolutionary.

-

Maybe you're not like me...Maybe we don't agree. Maybe that doesn't mean,

We gotta be enemies.

Maybe we just get brave. Take a big leap of faith. Call a truce so me and you can find a better way.

Let's take some time, open our eyes, look and listen, And we're gonna find we're more alike than we are different,

Why does kindness seem revolutionary? When did we let hate get so ordinary?

Let's turn it around, flip the script, Judge slow, love quick. God help us get revolutionary

What would Jesus do? He would love first, He would love first, hmm

What would Jesus do? He would love first, Yeah, He would love first. So we should love first!!

I realize this is a shortened version of the song, So if you want to catch the whole thing just look up the song title on You-Tube and catch it all.

What is happening today should be no surprise to the Christian community. Someone said to me that something Heavenly is about to happen because the Devil and his army are working overtime right now. I believe that.

**Luke 21-10 and 11 tells us what to expect..."10 Then He told them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. 11 There will be great earthquakes, famines, and pestilences in various places, along with fearful sights and great signs from heaven. 12 But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. On account of My name they will deliver you to the synagogues and prisons, and they will bring you before kings and governors...."**

As followers of Christ we should not fear the events of today, on the contrary we should be prepared and rejoice of what is coming soon when the Trumpet blows and we enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

May God bring Peace, Comfort and Provision as we pass through this moment in time.

Prayerfully Mark Peters, Edwards Chapel UMC



At first it didn't seem that this quarantine would affect us that significantly. But, Jon is currently home from his job at Chautauqua Golf Club. LEAH co-ops are canceled. All meetings at church have either been canceled or done via Zoom. Worship is livestreamed. Our Bible Quiz national tournament is canceled. No family gatherings for birthdays & anniversaries. O.K. So this does change the way we live.

As a family we have begun meeting together each morning around the dining room table. We read a scripture passage, discuss it and allow the Holy Spirit to teach & train us, and then we pray. We all take a turn at leading. It's simple and informal but, oh so powerful!

You'd think that we would have been doing this all along, but somewhere along the way, the pressure to accomplish schoolwork trumped our efforts at intentional discipleship with our children. The truly encouraging part is that we all enjoy our time together in the morning! We've had some great discussions and laughter.

**“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”**

**2 Corinthians 4:16-18**

Becky Cable, Panama UMC



**My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart  
and my portion forever.  
Psalm 73: 26**

I am an occupational therapist in a nursing home. The challenges faced by our precious elderly are pretty well documented. (Although for the most part, they are handling it with more patience and stoicism than the younger generations! ☺ ). At times, my heart aches for my residents as I observe them missing the visits from their loved ones. One lady asked me to remove my mask so she could see a smile. (I gave her a hug instead!)

Yet almost daily, I am also blessed by the small reminders of how God strengthens us in all situations and at all times of our lives IF we only open up and allow him to! It may just be a quiet word of encouragement I overhear between roommates or the opportunity to read a note from a loved one to an elderly gentleman with waning eyesight. Two little ladies have especially delighted me this year. One doesn't really remember where she is but she frequently and cheerfully sings "Jesus Loves Me" or loudly announces that "Jesus is in my heart"! Another sweet lady was obviously feeling homesick. I slipped a gospel cd in the player her family had provided. Even though she can't speak and can't move her right side, she was soon silently and enthusiastically praising her Lord with her left arm raised and tears rolling down her cheeks. (I may have had to grab a Kleenex for myself that time!)

As you face the challenges and frustrations of your day, don't forget to stop, draw on our Lord's strength, and sing a little verse of "Jesus loves me!"

Gwen Gleason, Edwards Chapel UMC



God's peace  
is not the calm  
after the storm.  
It's the steadfastness  
during it.



DrMichelleBengtson.com  
#HopePrevails



Abnormal is the new normal. In my wildest dreams, I never would have seen myself going into the sheriff's office and county jail while wearing a mask. I never would have imagined I'd hear our governor taking it upon himself to dictate to churches and synagogues the conditions as to when and how religious services could take place. I'm used to the shoe being on the other foot, with a clear wedge being driven between church and state. That people would be forced to die alone without the comfort of a family member by their side would have been unthinkable. And I wouldn't have thought people would be so afraid that they were unwilling to meet for dinner with family. But that is the world we're living in today.

This afternoon, my son Matt and I took a long-awaited motorcycle ride to Pennsylvania. My pistol permit application had been approved for renewal, and I needed to pick it up. At the sheriff's office. Wearing a mask. Had I tried that a year ago, I probably would have been shown the accommodations. But today, nobody panicked. They didn't even flinch.

Later, I read about our governor's edict giving permission and guidelines for the opening of churches. A statement like this a year ago would have spawned outrage; "The government has no business telling churches what they can and cannot do." Today, it's barely a blip on the radar. Because of fear. People are afraid; afraid for themselves, afraid for their loved ones, just plain scared.

I read once that the most common command in the Bible is, "Don't be afraid," or "fear not!" I haven't actually counted, but someone said that command is found 365 times, one for every day of the year. That exact number may not be exact, but it is a frequent command for a very good reason: there is much in this world to be afraid of. Those of us who grew up in the suburbs, went to college, and built a middle-class life for ourselves have been largely insulated from the fear that rages in the breasts of many people around the world. I don't know what it's like growing up in the projects, regularly hearing gunfire as rival gangs take pot shots at each other. I haven't experienced close up and personal the heart-pounding fear of sweeping a village in Afghanistan or Iraq, wondering if an IED lay just under the dust waiting to blow my legs off. I didn't experience the horrors of Auschwitz or the Soviet gulags.

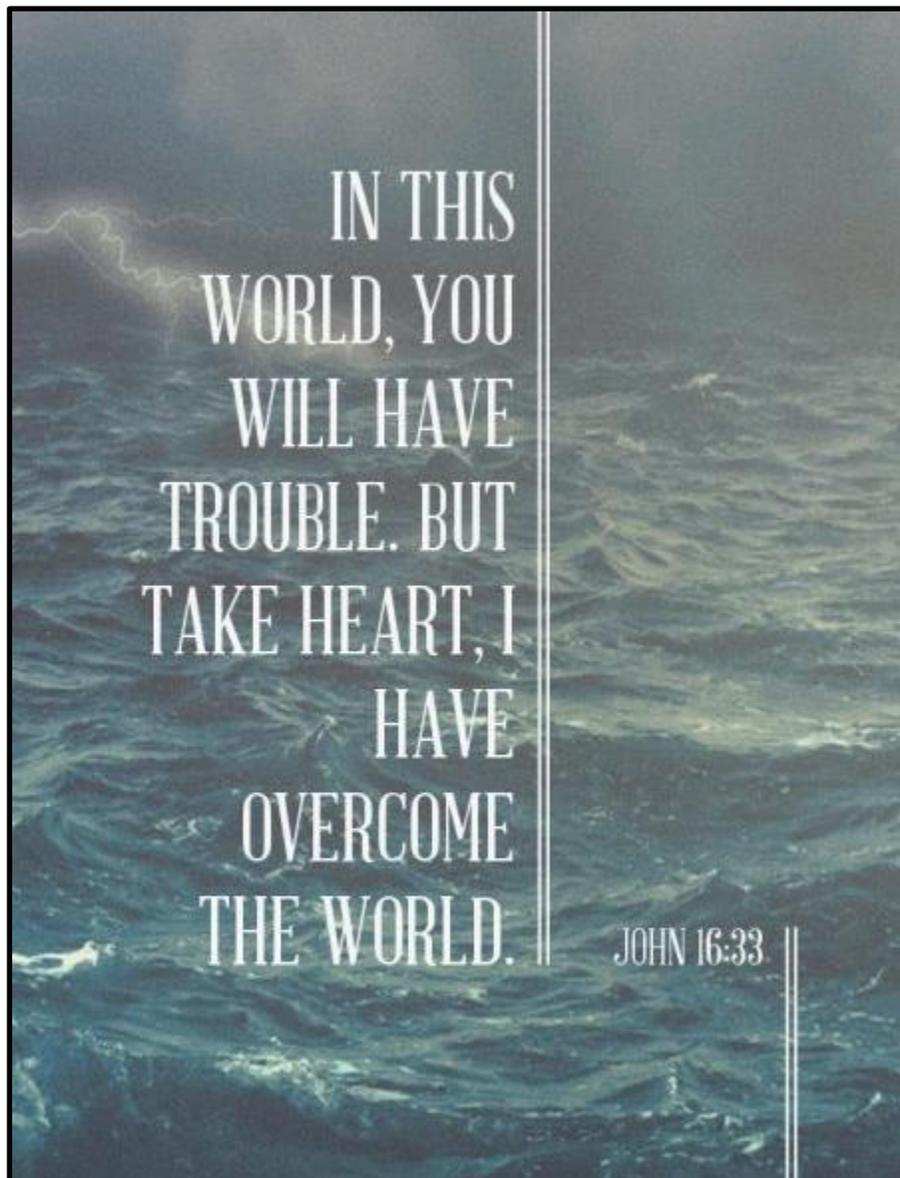
There is much in this world to fear, and often it comes in the form of someone with a Pepsodent smile and a three-piece suit telling me how he is going to make my life better and safer. But I wonder at what price?

I grew up in a family where safety was ingrained in us. Taking unnecessary risks was frowned upon. It was a plain white vanilla world. I'm not complaining and I'm not blaming; it's just the way life was for me. As a teenager, I remember hearing that "the safest place to be is in the center of God's will." I wonder who made up that bit of drivel? Being in the center of God's will is like having a target on your back. In the parable of the Talents, the condemnation was saved for the one man who refused to risk the master's money. By contrast, the risk-takers were commended. I have no death wish, and no desire to make life more difficult for anyone else, but neither do I have a desire to merely live safely. What kind of life is that? Jesus calls us to a life of risk and danger. If you don't believe me, read it for yourself in Mark 8:34 and 35. The cross Jesus demands that we carry isn't a bangle we wear around our necks; it is an instrument of cruel death. No one genuinely follows Jesus who refuses a cross.

I am concerned about the future I see, but I am not afraid. When things get to their worst, Jesus told us to "look up, for your redemption draws near" (Luke 21:28). Things can get worse—lots worse, but our God is still in control, so I choose to look to him, to keep my heart and mind settled in the Scriptures which assure me that though there is much that is fearful, I do not need to be afraid, for

Jesus Christ who was crucified for our sins, was buried and is risen, ascended, and seated at the right hand of the Father, holding all authority in heaven and earth. And we are risen and seated with him, to God be the glory! In a greater way than we could have imagined, God has turned the tables on this tired old world, and in him, the abnormal is normal: in fearful times, we are not afraid.

Pastor Jim Bailey, Park UMC



The Revelation of Jesus Christ to John the Apostle is my favorite book of the Bible. I know many Christians who are almost afraid to turn in their Bibles to that book; its visions and symbolism seem strange and incomprehensible. Why read something you can't understand? It might seem odd, since I don't put much stock in most of the sensational "end time" prophetic literature so prevalent in the Christian book market.

The Revelation wasn't written to be a map of current events. According to its author, it was written to seven churches that were scattered throughout Asia Minor, They were experiencing some pretty severe persecution and needed encouragement. The good news for those of us who find it somewhat confusing is the word at the very beginning where we are told **"Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it." (1:3)** The blessing is for those who read, who hear, and who keep the words. I says nothing about understanding it all.

Verses 4-8 are framed by the phrase, "The One who was, who is, and who is to come," a reminder of the constancy and stability we have in God when living in an unpredictable and dangerous world. Notice that it doesn't say, "the One who was, who is, and who will be." That would imply that God changes. Instead, John tells us of the unchanging One who is in control, no matter how crazy life gets.

After the initial framing of these verses telling us of the constancy of Jesus, comes a declaration of who he is, followed by a statement of what he has done for us. John tells us that Jesus is "the faithful witness; a reminder of his having suffered and died for us (the word for "witness" is "martyrion," from which we get "martyr." A witness was one who gave his life for Christ, whereas a "confessor" merely suffered torture.), coupled with the hint that we too, are to be faithful witnesses. Secondly, Jesus is "firstborn from the dead," with an unspoken promise that we too, will rise again. After all, he is FIRST born, not merely born from the dead. Lastly, in spite all all evidence to the contrary, he is ruler over the kings of the earth. They may spout and dictate, but Jesus Christ rules. This is reminiscent of the first chapter of Daniel where Nebuchadnezzar boasts of his conquests, but Daniel reminds us that it was God who gave the nations into his hand. Jesus here doesn't rule by mere declaration; he IS ruler!

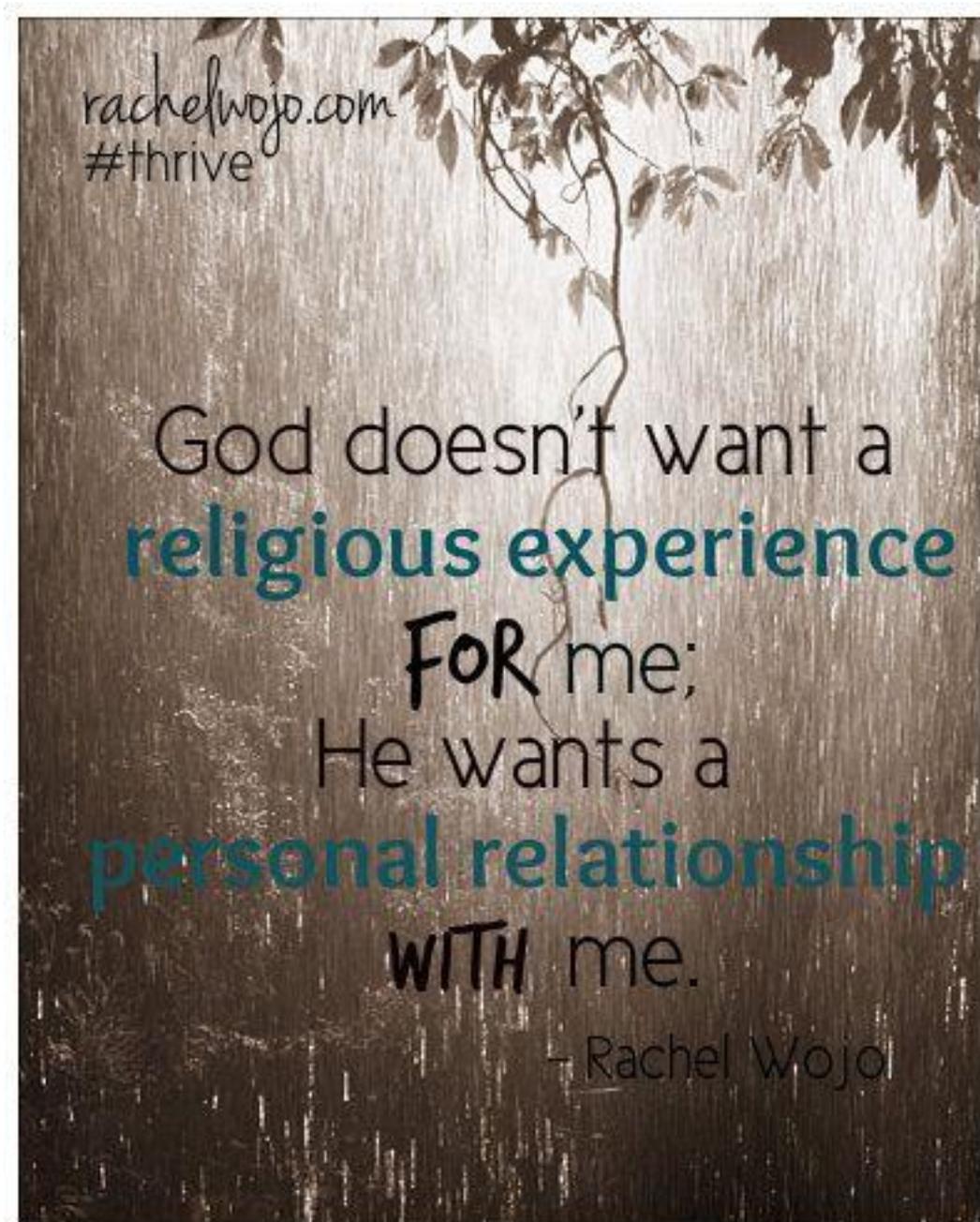
After telling us who Jesus is, John turns to what he has done: "he loved us, washed us, made us a kingdom of priests to our God." Textual critics debate as to whether this verse reads "washed" or "loosed," there being only a single vowel difference between the two words in the Greek. The effect is the same. If I am washed, I am separated from the dirt, which is another way of saying I am loosed from it. Washing perhaps adds the dimension of purity to this statement, but either word will do. Lastly, Jesus made us to be a kingdom of priests to our God. There is absolutely nothing in these verses that point to anything we do. It's all his work on our behalf, for which I am very grateful.

So far, the paragraph focuses on all Jesus Christ is in the present, and all he has done for us in the past. Finally in verse seven, John shows us what is to come: Jesus is coming in the clouds in fulfillment of the promise given to the disciples in Acts 1:9-11. The paragraph ends with the same declaration as it began, assuring us that Jesus Christ is fully able to accomplish what he promises.

In a world of constant round the clock news telling us how life has turned upside down, getting our vision focused on the eternal realities we have in Jesus Christ is essential if we are to not be swept along by the pessimism, vitriol, and fear being constantly pushed at us. Our hope cannot be secured by government, and our deliverance will not come through "settled science." We look, not to the things of this world, but to the One who entered this world, endured the worst it could dish out, and

emerged from the tomb victorious over sin and death. THIS is the One revealed in John's visions, and it is a glorious hope we are offered, if we will but grasp it in faith.

Pastor Jim Bailey, Park UMC



**Enter His gates with thanksgiving,  
and His courts with praise.  
Give thanks to Him, bless His name.  
Psalm 100:4**

I have always been grateful for my church and for my church family. It has been a part of my life, all of my life, minus a couple of rebellion years. But like anything that is "always" there for you, you tend to take it for granted.

Then Covid-19 hit. Initially, the pandemic took the opportunity to worship together totally away and even now limits what we can and cannot do as a church family. I have to say, I saw some great online messages and programs during that time, but I never went away feeling like I just visited home.

I recently read an article by Trent Young about how church attendance numbers are fading across the nation and online services have become very convenient for people. The problem with that for us as Christians is "you can't serve from your sofa, you can't have a community of faith on your sofa, you can't experience the power of a room full of believers worshipping together on your sofa."

"Christians aren't consumers, we are contributors. We don't watch, We engage, We give, We sacrifice, We encourage, We do life together."

I am very sensitive to the fact that there are some people that just can't physically or for some medical reason cannot attend church. I am so thankful that we have technology to keep these people connected.

But for the rest of us...The Church needs you. And you need the church.

As for me, Covid-19 has given me a new appreciation for my church, my church family and my freedom to worship. I am excited for when we can get back to all of our church functions, even those pesky committee meetings.

Susan J. Coburn Edwards Chapel UM Church

**Church (Take Me Back) Cochren & Co**

Verse: Take me back  
To the place that feels like home  
To the people I can depend on  
To the faith that's in my bones  
Take me back  
To a preacher and a verse



In my mind's eye, I see her leaning over in her wheelchair. Her head is bent down, her eyes are closed, and her hands are clasped together. She'll tell you she's not sleeping, just resting her eyes. This is the pose that you will find her in at any moment of the day.

Two months ago, my niece went to her house to get her up for the day. When she went to her bedside, she was lethargic and hard to wake up. An ambulance was called, and she went to the emergency room. In the world of covid 19, she could have 1 visitor and it was my niece Nina who began relaying messages about her condition. Hours later she was admitted to the ICU, but within days she was transferred to a larger hospital an hour away.

This Italian woman is my 82-year-old mother in law, who after her heart rate was low subsequently required a pacemaker. In the hospital she could have two designated visitors who could see her one at a time while she was in ICU. They couldn't use the waiting room and in some areas of the hospital, the waiting rooms were removed. Her two oldest sons were chosen and went as much as they could, waiting outside in between visits. She spent a few weeks in the hospital and then was moved to the nearest rehab facility that would take her insurance, Warren Manor.

Thus began a two week quarantine for Covid 19. She had to remain in her room. Therapy was completed there and her meals and meds are delivered there.

She is a much-loved mother and grandmother and she's not used to not seeing family daily. But she does have a cell phone so communication is there. She has even learned to text limited messages.

But, in the world of Covid 19, there are rules. Once quarantine is over, our first arrangements to visit were canceled for illness in her room. Another arrangement has been made and again the two older sons will see her with masks on at a six-foot distance with no physical contact or passing of items. Window visits can now occur when it's higher than 60 degrees outside, but at 82, she finds that idea hard as her roommate has the window side. And now in October 60 degree temps will be hard to find.

Between the hospital and rehab most of her family haven't seen her in months. Her voice on the phone sounds strong and we talk and share news but there is the sound of tears in her voice as we talk and say goodbye. We can't visit until the weekend. And when we do, temperatures and health screenings will occur. And again, just two people can visit and masks, social distancing.

I thank God she is mentally with it so she understands the reason that no one is visiting. It hurts but she knows it's not by choice.

Covid 19 is a real health issue but it has affected so much more. Relationships of families in nursing facilities has been so sad. Love, visits, warmth and care are missing for the residents. Oh, the staff do their best, but it is the visitors who shine light into the souls of their loved ones. And the light burns while waiting for the rules to change.

When can visits happen? When the resident is on hospice or at end of life. Precious time lost.

Hopefully my mother-in-law will be released soon. Back to home where visits are easy, and hugs are shared. But, even there, she fears Covid. It's a new fear in her life. One we take seriously. So we take one day at a time, praying daily for our loved ones here and around the globe for health and love.

Linda Carson, Park UMC



**“Blessed is the man  
Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,  
Nor stands in the path of sinners,  
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;  
But his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
And in His law he meditates day and night.  
He shall be like a tree Planted by the rivers of water,  
That brings forth its fruit in its season,  
Whose leaf also shall not wither;  
And whatever he does shall prosper.”**

**—Psalm 1:1-3 NKJV**

It is amazing the number of people who are glued to their televisions and computers during this pandemic. Listening to the news, one would think nothing else in the world is happening, and being stuck at home, people are listening to the news 24/7, either broadcast or online, and almost all of it is fear mongering. If we fail to wear masks or social distance we could be responsible for someone getting sick and dying. If we open businesses too soon, or if schools open in the fall, we could be in for a second wave, worse than the first. It's no wonder people are nervous and uneasy. Add in the recent death of Mr. Floyd and the protests and ensuing violence, and it's no wonder people are worried and fearful.

When watching the news is the first thing we do in the morning and the last thing we do at night, we are doing the very thing this very first psalm tells us not to do. We are walking in the counsel of the ungodly, standing in the path of sinners, and sitting in the seat of the scornful. Note the progression: walking, standing, sitting. The more we tune in to this stuff, the more comfortable we get with it. There is no blessing in such behavior. We may pat ourselves on the back for not actually being on the streets throwing bricks at store windows, setting fire to buildings, or looting, but when it comes to having a healthy soul, vicariously participating in such things is just as damaging as if we were there in person. What we take in affects us, which is why we are told instead to delight in and meditate on the law of God.

Sending down roots into the old news of this world is like trying to grow in a desert. Planting ourselves in the Garden of God's Word is the only way to blossom and bear fruit that nourishes the soul. We become like whatever we worship, whatever we set our attention upon:

**“The idols of the nations are silver and gold,  
The work of men's hands.  
They have mouths, but they do not speak;  
Eyes they have, but they do not see; They have ears, but they do not hear;  
Nor is there any breath in their mouths.  
Those who make them are like them; So is everyone who trusts in them.”**

**—Psalm 135:15-18 NKJV**

Notice the last sentence. If I set my attention upon the things of this world, I will become as jaded, worried, and hopeless as those we are watching. Only when I focus on God my Savior do I find hope and rest. Only then does my spirit flourish.

Pastor Jim Bailey, Park UMC



**“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.”  
Proverbs 3:5**

The Love Your Neighbors Campaign is wrapping up with over 300 signs placed throughout our community. When this campaign first started I found myself watching the bottom-line and fretting. I knew the expense involved to kick-off a new campaign and I was concerned because it was going to take a lot of sign requests to cover those costs. I believed that God had it under control because this campaign was all His, but I did not act like it. How often do we believe a certain way, yet our behavior does not follow suit? Proverbs 3:5-6, common verses most believers know, tells us to trust with ALL our heart. It does not say with some, most or a portion of our heart, but with ALL our heart. It doesn't say believe it, but don't act like it. It says to Trust With All Your Heart. Thinking, acting and believing!

When I stopped focusing on the bottom-line, God blessed the Love Your Neighbor Campaign. I had three goals for the Love Your Neighbor Campaign. 1. To bring recognition to the ministry. 2. To raise some funds And most importantly 3. To love our Neighbors. We have accomplished all three. The expenses have been covered and we have raised some funds. Donations came in because recipients were blessed and others wanted to give just to bless the organization. We have seen an increase in calls to donate material goods for our neighbors in need. We have seen an increase in others asking what do we need to assist our neighbors. I have had the privilege of hearing stories from my Love Squad volunteers delivering signs and those who requested signs for loved ones about the joy it is bringing to others. I have had people thanking our organization for doing the Love Your Neighbor Campaign because they love *seeing* the signs.

Many rewards come with Trusting the Lord with ALL of your Heart, so much more than a successful fundraising campaign.

Susan L. Justham, Executive Director  
Love In the Name of Christ of SCC  
Helping Churches to Help People



## **He restores my soul.**

### **Psalm 23:3a**

As we walk through a season of disappointment, uncertainty, and loss, **verse 4 of Psalm 23** is very comforting:

**Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.**

But the preceding verse 3 has been of greater comfort to me recently. While the world around us seems chaotic, I am still more disturbed by the chaos within my own being. I continue to recognize that my rebellion toward God takes many forms, but it is often most hidden to me and others in acts that look like obedience. When my motives are not rooted in the love of God, but are rooted in my own selfishness, actions like prayer, Bible study, evangelism, worship, and service toward others can be a form of idolatry. Are my prayers fear based because I fear financial instability, sickness, or loss? Am I serving God because I am hoping he will provide comfort, safety, and self-sustainability? Perhaps I am building a resume like that of Matthew 7:22, where Jesus responds with some of the harshest language in the New Testament.

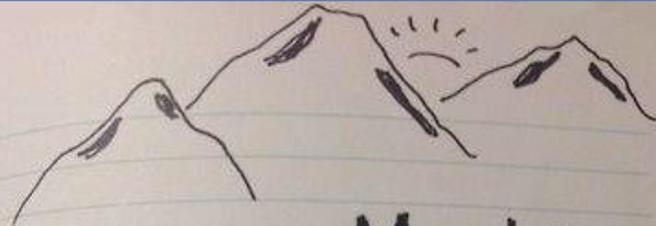
What do we do when we feel helpless to fix ourselves, not to mention the problems that surround us? God invites us to rest and be renewed. In Psalm 23:3 the word "restores" (ESV) is the Hebrew word "shuwb." This word shows up 1066 times in the Bible and is often open to multiple interpretations. Psalm 23:3 is no exception, and the meaning of "restores" is not fully agreed upon, but here it seems to indicate a bringing back or returning. Over 600 times "shuwb" is translated "return" or "return again" and another nearly 200 times it is to "turn" or "turn back." In other words, Psalm 23:3 is most likely talking about repentance. The best news is that this repentance is in the hands of our Good Shepherd. Read Psalm 23:1-3 and notice who is leading us to rest and renewal. He is also working in us a deeper repentance.

So if you are like me and often wonder what you have to do to change so that your motives are cleansed from idolatry and selfishness, remember that God has taken up the task of restoring our souls to operate how they were originally intended. Our job is to trust Him to do it.

*The greatest burden we have to carry in life is self...Our own daily living, our frames and feelings, our especial weaknesses and temptations, and our peculiar temperaments, our inward affairs of every kind, these are the things that perplex and worry us more than anything else, and that bring us oftenest into bondage and darkness. In laying off your burdens, therefore, the first one you must get rid of is yourself. You must hand yourself...into the care and keeping of your God, and leave (it) there. He made you, and therefore He understands you and knows how to manage you, and you must trust Him to do it.*  
– Hannah Whitall Smith

Kevin Yaiko, previous Missionary in Hungry for 13 years with wife and 4 children (Edwards Chapel UMC)





"I look up to the **Mountains**  
— does my help come from  
there? My help comes from  
the **L**ord, who  
Made heaven and earth!  
He will not let you stumble;  
the **One** who **WATCHES**  
over you will **NOT** slumber."

Psalm 121: 1-3

