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A Time Such As This

REJOICE! writers reflect during
life in the shadow of COVID-19

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Editing and Design: Leslie Hawthorne Klingler

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Phone: 1-800-245-7894
Email: RejoiceEditor@MennoMedia.org
Website: www.MennoMedia.org/rejoice

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A Time Such As This

Even my face feels unfamiliar. It's a mess of adult acne, which I hadn't struggled with until last week. My heart aches with new grief; until several days ago, I'd never wept over the news of a seriously ill parent and pandemic-reduced treatment options. All the while, my mind wrestles with unfamiliar challenges. How much should I impose my notions of worthwhile activity on teenage children with little to do and nowhere to go? How safe is it to go out for a jog in broad daylight on near-empty streets?

I'm trying to get my bearings in the shadow of this pandemic. I suspect already that my survival in a time such as this depends on believing in God's sovereignty and desire for me to thrive no matter what comes. Little by little, I must choose to be curious, open, and even hopeful about what this season will bring.

As a first step, I'm trying to loosen my grip on unhelpful attitudes and beliefs—disappointment, fear, self-interest, blaming—all that dead weight making my face break out and keeping me up at night. I pray for strength and grace to reach the point of feeling divested and free enough to work for the common good.

As I edit this publication, I already sense God unburdening my spirit. When I invited REJOICE! writers to contribute reflections on life in the shadow of a pandemic, their offerings poured in, soothing as a springtime rain to a parched land. As I edited their writing, I felt the Holy Spirit working divine healing in me.

When you read these meditations, I pray that you, too, will sense the mighty power of a faith-filled community working together in a time such as this.

—*Leslie Hawthorne Klingler*
REJOICE! Editor

Editor's Note:

The following meditations, offered in the order that they were received, were written by REJOICE! writers volunteering their time to reflect on life in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic. I am grateful to each one of them and to MennoMedia for distributing this book. May you be blessed as I have been by these windows into our writers' homes, hearts, and lives.

—Leslie Hawthorne Klingler
March 30, 2020

Inscape: Tulip in a Storm

Though we live alee of the gales that have raked Wuhan, Lombardy, and Seattle, still, there is foreboding on our street in Durham, North Carolina, broken only by the laughter of children from sheltered backyards. We listen for that laughter because it bears a hint of something beyond the face masks, the gowns and gloves, the doleful numbers, the grim silence that has fallen across the land. It feels like the torque of troubles has rung out of our lives much of what seemed humdrum, ordinary, mundane.

And in its place we now recognize the intense textures, the filigree, the inner depth and beauty of what had become customary.



“Front Door Tulip”
Photo by Jonathan Larson

“We now recognize the intense textures, the filigree, the inner depth and beauty of what had become customary.”

A phrase from holy writ comes to mind: “For now we see as though in a darkened mirror, but then, face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Poets have called this inscape—what a reborn eye perceives beyond a shopworn exterior: the vibrant heart of something rare, exquisite.

Such an object lies beyond the front door we scarcely pass through nowadays. Midst the greenery of the garden, we can see a tulip has sprung open. It doesn’t lift its deep red bloom very high. It trembles ecstatically in wind and rain. Fragile though it be, the tulip seems fearless in its place, happy to give what it has, inviting the eye to recognize and own the secret truth it tells. Beyond the advent of a springtime, it calls the eye to settle upon a landmark of joy and strength beyond telling midst a heaving, pitiless storm.

—Jonathan Larson

We Who Work, Watch, and Weep

Every night at 8 p.m., I click a link on my laptop, and a grid of smiling faces fills my screen. Since our church closed its doors in response to COVID-19 and Washington D.C. declared a public health emergency, a group of us have been gathering this way to pray the evening prayer from the Book of Common Prayer.

Each of our lives have changed dramatically in the past week. Most of us are self-isolating. All of us are figuring out what it means to take care of ourselves, our families, and our neighbors in a reality that we don't yet fully understand. In this chaos, I find myself looking forward to the 15 minutes every night when we stop what we are doing and come together in prayer. "Keep watch, dear Lord," we pray, remembering those working in the medical fields, making difficult decisions, weeping for the sick, facing unemployment, tasting the bitterness of canceled plans.

While I keep myself physically distant from others, these calls are a reminder of the ways this time can bring us closer together to comfort and encourage each other as we weep, watch, and work. "Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary," we pray aloud, lags blurring our voices into a glitchy cacophony, "Bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous.

I smile because even in all of this, there is joy, "and all for your love's sake."

—Katerina Parsons



"One bright spot that has come out of staying home has been the impulse to reconnect with friends in creative ways. I may live 600+ miles away from my childhood best friends, but we connected last week for a virtual game night and much-needed conversation and encouragement." —Katrina Parsons (center, top)

Remember How This Feels

The hardest part is the uncertainty. Every morning I wake up, and before my eyes have fully focused, I'm on my phone reading about everything that has changed since the evening before. I don't know if I'll be working from home for two weeks, or four, or eight. I don't know what my graduate school classes will look like now that they're online. I don't know when I'll next be able to travel to visit my family. I feel anxious. I feel charged up—desperate to be useful—or at least get out of the house.



Katerina Parsons in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, where she worked for four years.

“The small joys that I miss right now . . . are the same joys that families mourn in countries troubled by war and unrest.”

I want to remember how this uncertainty feels, because it's a window into what long has been reality for many communities.

Poverty is uncertain.

War is uncertain. We often talk about the physical and economic toll poverty and violence take on people around the world, but I wonder if we pay too little attention to its psychological toll.

The small joys that I miss right now—time with friends and family, graduation ceremonies, concerts, holy days—are the same joys that families mourn in countries troubled by war and unrest. For every person who loses her life to violence, there are hundreds more living in a state of suspension, unable to plan sometimes beyond the next day.

For those of us accustomed to planning our lives, I hope these next few months serve as an exercise in empathy. When we read about blockades and airstrikes, let us not just mourn death but also the fear and uncertainty that affect those communities. Let this experience empower us to demand a life of peace and flourishing for all.

—Katerina Parsons

Praise the Quiet Heroes



When the city began to close down, the local food bank put out an urgent call for volunteers. I signed up for a shift, wanting to do something, anything, to help out.

Of the twelve of us who showed up that afternoon, ten had never volunteered at the food bank before. The two experienced volunteers

patiently showed us how to pack dry goods into boxes to be delivered to homes. These regular volunteers are familiar with hunger's urgency. They also know that hunger isn't a stranger to our city. They have been working for years to make sure people are fed—which is why when this moment of intense need came, they were ready for it.

So many of today's heroes have, unknowingly, been preparing for these moments of crises their entire lives. The medical researchers developing a vaccine didn't start their work when the specter of

coronavirus first emerged in Wuhan, China; they have been studying similar strains for years. The community organizers providing care to older adults and people experiencing homelessness didn't begin planning their response when quarantines went into effect; they have been building trust in these communities for decades. The real heroes of this moment are those who have long been researching, working, and serving quietly—often without recognition—while the attention of the rest of us have been elsewhere.

Praise the quiet heroes. In this time of urgent need, we need to take their lead and support them. And, when this time has passed, may we be them.

“The real heroes of this moment are those who have long been researching, working, and serving quietly—often without recognition.”

—Katerina Parsons

Sheltered in a Time of Storm

I had just turned off the news to concentrate on sermon writing when the telephone rang. My daughter's compelling words got my attention. "Mom, you need to shelter in place! Now! Tim's really worried. They don't have the ICU capacity or enough ventilators and masks to handle exploding needs. of a pandemic." If mild-mannered Tim—a 30-plus-year respiratory therapist at Wichita's major hospital—was concerned about the COVID-19 outbreak so near home, I knew I should pay attention and promised to act on her warning.



Elizabeth Raid at her home.

“We’re learning that new beginnings involve letting go of assumptions and expectations of how we thought we’d live.”

I wonder what “shelter in place” means for the relationship that is developing between me and a wonderful man with whom I reconnected at a support group last fall. While we both grieve the loss of spouses, we recognize that new life can emerge from pain and loss. We’re learning that new beginnings involve letting go of assumptions and expectations of how we thought we’d live out our later years. We acknowledge the strengths and freedoms we have—flexibility of thought patterns, living more fully in the moment, and wisdom learned from life experiences. We wonder what gifts we might offer others for the healing of our world during this turbulent time. We rejoice in the companionship and blessings that our love brings. We remember that God is our refuge and shelter—a very present help in trouble.

—Elizabeth Raid

Bright, New Traditions

“It’s not fair!” my granddaughter shouted as she threw her books on the table and stormed to her room in tears. A high school senior, the pandemic shut her school and is depriving her of expected memories from her senior year. Traditions and rituals meant to last a lifetime are being snatched away, and friendships are being cut off without the opportunity to share hugs and tears.

My granddaughter allowed herself a week to grieve. She cried and ate whatever she wanted. When she accepted the reality of her losses, she began to see bright spots. Weeks before the shutdown, she had committed to her chosen college. For prom night, she and her dad dressed up and danced around the living room. Instead of hours at the gym, she organized her fitness routine at home, where other family members could join in. Her family is creating

“Traditions anchor us in time and place. They create connections through mutual experiences. Traditions teach us about life in community.”

new traditions of sharing food, movies, music, and other activities.

Traditions anchor us in time and place. They create connections through mutual experiences. Traditions teach us about life in community. The Bible explains their function for instruction in doctrine, moral and religious teaching. “So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us” (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

I wonder what new traditions may emerge post-COVID-19. What new ways of passing on values such as generosity, kindness, and neighborliness are you experiencing or expressing to others? What ways are you able to re-frame traditions in this time of social intimacy and physical distancing?

—Elizabeth Raid

Resting in Shalom



Cyneatha Millsaps is
director of Mennonite
Women USA

I live in South-Central Elkhart, Indiana, once a vibrant and safe African American community—a community where everyone looked out for each other. In the wake of our new crisis, I find myself dreaming of what our community used to be and how we can get back to it.

Recently, leaders in my church decided we should open our building to families without access to Wi-Fi at home. Because our schools have switched from in-person to e-learning, many of our neighborhood’s low-income families cannot provide the basic tools that children need to thrive during these times.

Even as I write this, an awareness comes to the forefront of my mind: even without the pandemic—our children have not been thriving in the current educational model. Might this be our chance to try something new?

This picture is of my grandson, Prince Emery Curry, born just two months ago. Little Prince reminds me to hope and work for a better life for all the new Princes and Princesses. Together, we can fight for new families, neighborhoods, churches, nations, and a world that will allow these little ones to grow up in confidence and security—where all can rest in God’s shalom.

—*Cyneatha Millsaps*



Baby Prince Emery Curry,
Cyneatha Millsaps’s grandson

Two Bags of Sugar

Our government leaders keep telling us we will get through this. Our health leaders remind us of the protocols. Thoughtful people of faith are doing their best to reassure us. But I'm a doubter. I've never been quite sure that what we say about God is true. I have often thought that we are guessing at most of it.

But then, a couple of days ago, someone posted a mesmerizing performance of “We are not Alone” by a group of singers at Sandy Ridge Mennonite Church in Indiana. I hadn't heard it before, and in the early hour of that day—after reading too many news feeds about COVID-19 and its spreading heaviness—I clicked on it. That song, performed as it was by those singers, made me feel that we actually are not alone, that God is actually with us.

Then, I read a note about two bags of sugar. A woman in Calgary shopping for groceries spotted two remaining bags of sugar left on the shelf. A middle-aged gentleman, possibly a newcomer to Canada, she thought, was in the process of selecting both bags. But, he turned to her, handed her one of the bags, and said, “I see you need one.”



Empty shelves.

The thoughtfulness of that gentleman and the woman who understood it as it was intended reminded me that a caring human spirit comes from somewhere.

God-DNA is in us; it recognizes a reassuring song and a kind neighbor. In the heaviness of our insecurities and doubts, our God-DNA helps. God won't solve this for us, but God suffers with us. God is here, and that's enough.



Abe Janzen lives in Calgary, Alberta. He is married to Kathy. They have two children and five grandchildren. They have served three terms with MCC in Bolivia.

—Abe Janzen

COVID-19 Conundrum

Like many others, I am deeply concerned and am praying for the many around the world who have been affected by COVID-19. Following recommendations, I have counted my isolation as a contribution to “flattening the curve.” Why then, do I feel such peace, serenity, and contentment? Underlying it all is an abiding thankfulness. That is a conundrum.



Ruth Smith Meyer is a poet, inspirational speaker, and author. She lives in Ailsa Craig, Ontario, where she is a member of Nairn Mennonite Church.

Do I feel this deep peace because of the lack of activities clamoring from my calendar—wiped out because of the isolation appeal? Is it lack of stress because of the disappearance of “should-do-s” in my life? Is it because so many things I’ve looked at as necessities no longer bear that significance? Is it because, suddenly, political parties are focused on a single issue and working together instead of trying to negate one another? Is it because family and neighbors are looking out for each other in unprecedented ways? Is it because I can envision the possibility of society slowing down long enough to re-evaluate priorities?

Committee meetings are no longer being held; conferences have been deemed unwise, trips are being canceled; theater tickets languish unused; shopping trips no longer allure us; and classes have been put to a halt. The weight of these needed or anticipated events slides from our shoulders.

What I long for most is the physical presence of my loved ones, so I am finding ways to keep in touch. And, I want to feel the assurance that someone higher is in control of all of this.

“I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 121:1-2). There may be the answer to my conundrum.

—Ruth Smith Meyer

How Can These Things Be?

Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” (John 3:9). Our congregation read this passage gathered in worship just before the coronavirus imposed its isolation. Weeks before, we had chosen Nicodemus’s question as our Lenten theme. It seemed to express the range of Lenten emotion: perplexity, despair, but also wonder at God’s abundance.

Perplexed at Jesus’ talk of rebirth, Nicodemus asks his question. Later in the story, when Nicodemus takes Jesus’ body down from the cross, examines his wounds, prepares him for burial, and seals his tomb, does he ask again, “How can these things be?”

During this 2020 season of Lent, we find ourselves separated from the communities that sustain us and denied the casual contacts that orient us. Today, I stood with two strangers in line at a grocery store, clutching our

food, treating each other (one cheerfully, the other not) like hunks of hazardous material, like poison. How can these things be?

My hope leaps ahead to the first time our congregation gathers again. Whatever Sunday that is, it will be Easter to us, the rebirth of our body. My hope leaps forward still further toward a time when creation is restored, when all human divisions are healed, and diseases are eradicated. I cannot wait for that day when every tear has been dried—except, I think, the tear that accompanies this question whispered in wonder: How can these things be?



Leonard Beechy is sheltering in place with his wife, Sharon, in Goshen, Indiana. They are members of Eighth Street Mennonite Church.

“My hope leaps ahead to the first time our congregation gathers again. Whatever Sunday that is, it will be Easter to us.”

—Leonard Beechy

Through It All

Through it all: Dad's long illness and death by the time I was eight years old. Being diagnosed with incurable diabetes when I was eight years old. Surrendering my life to Christ to the best of my understanding, also at age eight. Dealing with the death of an elder brother in his 30s from the same disease that I have. Learning that I had an elder brother who died at age two. Being obligated to leave several fulfilling ministry positions to which I felt called. Surviving a serious brain hemorrhage against all odds.



Nadine Friesen

Through it all, God has always been faithful to me. Through it all, I learned to trust in Jesus. . . . Or did I? Why now is it so easy to be concerned and troubled by the COVID-19 pandemic? Is it because I'm labeled a compromised senior? Is it because all that I can control is how often I wash hands and how I sneeze? Is it because, even though God brought me through all those other things, God might

“Through it all, learned to trust
in Jesus. . . . Or did I? Why now is it so
easy to be concerned and troubled?”

not be able to handle this one? Does God hurt or love me less when I struggle with complete trust?

God continues to be faithful through it all. In God's grace, God accepts me as I am. God understands my lack of understanding and is forever present. What more do I need?

—Nadine Friesen

Right Now, It Is Like This

I am seated on my hotel balcony in Zimbabwe, stopping every so often to remind myself to breathe in and out. I tell myself to eat the colorful breakfast before me because the adult in me knows that my body needs nutrition.

This work trip from my university in Japan to several African nations started in late February, just when the virus was beginning to show its ugly head. We made the tough decision to follow through with the trip; after all, the virus was in Asia and not in Africa. But every day of the trip, we second-guessed the decision we had made—with good reason, as it turns out.

Here in Zimbabwe, I feel far away. It's a seven-hour trip from the comfort of my birth country, Uganda, and oceans apart from Japan, which I have come to love as home.

In my isolation, I find comfort in a Buddhist phrase that a colleague shared with me: “Right now, it is like this.” It encourages me to explore my circumstances and disabuse myself of any illusion of self-sovereignty. After four flight cancellations despite meticulous planning, I am sufficiently convinced that I am not in control. But, more importantly, my faith assures me that God is unfazed by the uncertainty that colors these days.

“Right now, it is like this” also helps me to forgive myself for the thoughts I've had and decisions I've made based on my limited knowledge and experiences. I do not know how the next few days will go, but giving in to paranoia and fear would get me nowhere. I am choosing to replace my plans with prayer and trust in God's sovereignty. I choose gratitude for the blessings I have now: a bed, free breakfast, and Wi-Fi to communicate with my family and co-workers in Japan tirelessly working on getting me back soon. “Right now, it is like this.”



During graduate studies, Rebecca Babirye belonged to Lombard Mennonite Church, Illinois. She has worked for MCC in Washington D.C. and is now a lecturer at Tokyo Christian University in Japan.

—Rebecca Babirye

Did He Catch It?

I vaguely remember another time when fears of contagion gripped our communities and families. It was in the 1950s, and the affliction was polio. By 1952, nearly 60,000 children had contracted polio, and almost 3,000 children had died.

I wasn't yet ten years old during the polio epidemic. Once, after a swimming outing, I was showing symptoms that my parents feared were polio related. My parents' fears were not unreasonable. Late summer was polio season, and parks and public swimming pools had been closed. People were scared. I was briefly hospitalized until the symptoms abated. An older cousin of mine wasn't so fortunate; she contracted polio and has suffered the effects of it her entire life.



Keith Harder walking El Camino de Santiago in northern Spain

“By 1952, nearly 60,000 children had contracted polio, and almost 3,000 children had died.”

I also remember the great relief and joy when Jonas Salk discovered a vaccine in 1955. I remember lining up for the shots. Then, in 1961, Albert Sabin developed a vaccine that could be given on a sugar cube. God bless those researchers and technicians who discover and deliver such gifts to humanity.

Why is there polio, smallpox, Ebola, SARS, AIDS, and now coronavirus? Are these mistakes in God's created design? Genesis says that all that God created was good. Are they flaws that humans have introduced? Some say that disease is a consequence of sin. Other devout Christians believe that diseases and their cures are part of the ongoing evolutionary process we call creation. The miracles of immunology continue to meet challenges posed by disease. We may not be able to figure it all out, but we are indeed fearfully and wonderfully made.

—Keith Harder

War with An Invisible Enemy?

I sometimes wonder about the description of our fight against disease as a war against an invisible enemy. I wonder if it's helpful imagery.

I read recently that the problem with viruses is that they don't know how to control themselves. They are deadly in their unregulated duplication; they take over, especially when the host's immune system is compromised. We live with elements of disease all the time; it seems as if disease processes are part of creation at least for now. So, what can we do to limit the impact of disease without thinking that we can eliminate it from the human experience?

War imagery can have unintended consequences when the war is lost; it often blames defeat on the losing side's fighters. In this war against COVID-19, will those who suffer or die of it somehow be blamed?

War is also famous for its collateral damage. Suffering and death—especially of the poor and weak—are sometimes labeled too hastily as “inevitable” and “lamentable.” Will society too readily accept the pain that this war against COVID-19 afflicts on the poor and weak?

Human existence is full of both fortuitous and unfortunate events. Maybe we should accept disease as part of life's journey in all its indeterminacy and mystery. We prepare as best we can and we do the best with whatever comes our way—knowing that we are not in complete control.

Even if disease is our enemy and we are at war with it, might we consider the notion of loving or befriending our enemy and letting the virus teach us? Can this disease somehow contribute to our lives? Can we learn from what is threatening, and what we did not ask for?



Keith Harder and his wife, Judy. They live in Hillsboro, Kansas, and belong to First Mennonite Church in Hillsboro.

—Keith Harder

The Prepper's Vindication

Preparing for the apocalypse has long been a cottage industry. Some have been stockpiling necessities for years. Such individuals and institutions are certain that world war, environmental collapse, and pandemics are sure to come. Their stockpile often includes weapons and ammunition—which they think are necessary to protect their hoard.

Along comes coronavirus. All of us are urged to practice physical distancing, shelter in place, and keep a sufficient supply of necessities. We are encouraged to have a full tank of gas, cash on hand, and a stocked pantry. This has led to many people stockpiling all kinds of things. Toilet paper, bread, and surgical masks are in short supply.

Some preppers are motivated by self-protection and the idea that other people are fundamentally threatening to their well-being. In some ways, preppers may be vindicated. Many of us are ill-prepared for the brave new world before us.

Whether we fall in the “prepper” category or not, our response to the current crisis or any future apocalyptic event needs to include building strong relationships and communities. Strong bonds of community are essential for the days of COVID-19 and whatever the future holds.

In the name of Christ, may our prepping demonstrate that we love our neighbors as ourselves.

“In some ways, preppers may be vindicated. Many of us are ill-prepared for the brave new world before us.”

—Keith Harder



For a hefty sum, all you billionaires out there can buy a disaster shelter for your family. Note: Read the article above and then decide if you're really interested!

Haiku Trio



Bruce and Neva Stambaugh taking a break on hike in Alaska. They attend Park View Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

“Awareness”

Coronavirus
Caught us unaware but it
Shouldn't have at all.

“Acceptance”

When we finally
Accepted the dire truth,
We self-quarantined.

“Acclimation”

We settled into
Reality when churches
Went to live-streaming.

—Bruce Stambaugh

Christians, Christ, and Crisis

Yesterday, we received a desperate call from a friend overseas whose government is closing down all businesses and policing the streets in an attempt to keep people at home. In this hand-to-mouth community, the government is offering no assistance as people are left to starve.

Questions that keep bubbling in my mental stew-pot include, “How are Christians responding to this crisis differently than unbelievers? How should we respond?”

We all are living in a disrupted reality—not a hypothetical situation for which we have simple solutions. We all are dealing with unanticipated closings, limitations, risks, and needs. Each one of us is feeling bombarded with fears, criticism, and blame.

Fear and anxiety are marbled themes throughout the Scriptures, but how do we translate them into live, compassionate action and attitudes? I want a quick-fix, just like the disciples did when they were about to be pulled under the turbulent waves while Jesus napped in the boat (Mark 4:35-41). These guys knew the strength of the angry sea. They were stretched beyond their limits in their efforts to stay afloat as their boat filled with water. I can hear them shouting with desperation and anger, “Don’t you even care that we are about to drown?”

Jesus did not answer with compassionate understanding; rather, he expressed disappointment and, perhaps, discouragement: “Why are you afraid? Do you not have any faith?”

I wonder if this is how Jesus is responding to me—to us—as we try to bail the water out of our boats.

—*Doris Steiner Diener*



Doris Steiner Diener engaged in one of her creative pursuits.

Blessed Be The Holders

Oh to be a child again
To have lap to crawl into when the world overwhelms
To have someone gently rub my back as I drift into sleep

But I am the holder
The lap and the back rubber
Offering whispers of peace

How about Legos? A craft? Play-dough?
Apple? String cheese? Banana?

Holding hope in the face of uncertainty
Holding grief and sadness for all the losses
Holding it together

Oh to be a child again
To have someone read aloud chapter after chapter
To have the snacks appear, meals hot and ready at the appointed times

But I am the holder
The reader and the chef
Offering routine and security

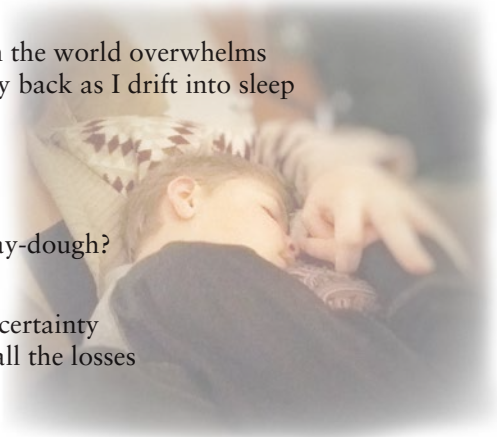
Send a card to Grandma? Make a fort? Read a book!
Crackers? Kiwi? Popsicle?

Holding the tensions of constraint and possibility
Holding endings, beginnings, and the thresholds in between
Holding it together

Oh to be a child again
But I am the holder
Doing and Being
Holding it together

Holding little hands
Holding space
Holding all the things
Together

—*Sherah-Leigh Gerber*



Let There Be Snacks

A restless night led to watching the sunrise
I made breakfast
and served snacks (and snacks upon snacks)

We played in the fresh air and sunshine
read stacks of books
and had snacks (so many snacks)

We've had extra screen time
cried, yelled, and stormed apart
and reconvened around the table for snacks (always snacks)

We are prepared, not panicked
We chose (and keep choosing) caution over crazy
We had (and continue to have) togetherness and joy

And there will continue to be snacks.

—*Sherah-Leigh Gerber*



Sherah-Leigh Gerber lives in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia with her husband and two school aged children. She serves on the pastoral team at Harrisonburg Mennonite Church.

Story Time

Our son is a teacher. Since schools closed, he has assumed primary care responsibility for his three children. His wife is a physician who will need to continue working throughout the pandemic.

Though we live in another province, our son asked if we wanted to participate in his homeschooling plan for our grandsons, ages eight and four. Could we FaceTime regularly and tell them stories from the past—childhood memories or events from our family histories?

My husband and I have plenty of time on our hands; we are in isolation because of our age and recent travels. We readily agreed to our son's proposal, and now we keep busy thinking about stories to share in an interesting way.

We are amazed how our grandsons listen intently to our stories and ask us good questions when we are finished. Sometimes, the boys turn the tables after we finish our stories and ask if they can tell us a story too. An added bonus during these online sessions is that we get to see the progress of our one-year-old granddaughter as she learns to walk and adds new words to her vocabulary.

In the past, everyone's busy schedules only allowed for brief video chats with our son's family a couple of times a month. Now, we get to communicate with our grandchildren regularly in an extended and meaningful way. In the midst of such a challenging time, this is an incredible gift and we are deeply grateful for it.



Since returning home early from their travels because of COVID-19,

MaryLou Driedger and her husband have been enjoying extra time to communicate with their grandchildren

—MaryLou Driedger

It's the Small Things

During our time in isolation my husband and I are finding it is the small things that have the power to make us grateful, make us laugh and capture our attention. Here are a few of them:

- A few months before the pandemic began, we asked a professional handyman from our church to install a more ecologically friendly toilet in our condo. We added a bidet hose because we'd read how damaging toilet paper is to the environment. A bidet can cut your toilet paper use by 75 percent. We've been particularly thankful about that decision since the COVID-19 crisis began, and toilet paper has been in short supply.
- My husband and I were watching the live stream version of the Sunday morning service at our church. Just as the pastor began his sermon, my husband let out a loud burp. He smiled and said, "That's the good thing about attending church online, you can burp if you need to." We both laughed.
- We have no balcony or yard and live on the fifth floor of an old building in the heart of a big city. During our self-isolation, my husband decided to put birdseed on a narrow ledge outside our living room window. It wasn't long before I heard him shout, "It's a bird!" Sure enough, a crow had landed on our ledge and was pecking away at the seeds. We watched it with fascination.

—MaryLou Driedger



"During my time in isolation, I am working through a book by Lynda Barry, called *Making Comics*. Lynda believes that we are all artists and too many of us had our artistic tendencies quashed as children. So, I have started drawing and putting my art out there. My oldest grandson loves to

draw, and so we have been exchanging drawings in the last weeks. Anyway, all to explain my sketch of the crow on our windowsill!" —MaryLou Driedger

What Did I Spread?

On Friday, I was briefly allowed into my closed school to get essential resources to prepare for the probable need to teach virtually. The custodian would bio-blast the rooms afterward.

I had made a to-do and to-retrieve list ahead of time, but I ended up bouncing around my room like a screensaver bubble. What will I need? What will I need? I asked myself as I carried my stuff out.

The halls—usually filled with chattering, energetic children—were eerily silent. I turned to use my hip to push open the outside door. Suddenly, a colleague appeared, and I jumped. I had run over my time slot. Her eyes were wide; she hadn't been expecting me, either. In a blink, I soberly considered the coronavirus from her perspective, with her health history.

We passed each other cautiously. I looked back at the door handle. I couldn't remember whether or not I'd touched it when entering. What did I touch? What if . . . ?

I turned to go to my car, but I couldn't just leave a colleague with that fearful glance. I reopened the school door and called down the hall, "Blessings to you and your family!" She turned, relief in her eyes and said, "Thanks, you too!" I felt a wave of peace flood my soul. There is no fear in love. Love never ends.

—*Berdine Leinbach*

Haiku

by *Berdine Leinbach*

Stay at home order
But divine scent of bluebells
Brings creation hope.



Berdine Leinbach is an artist teacher and member of Souderton Mennonite Church, Pennsylvania

Let These Others Go

At our Quaker meeting, my wife and I worship silently. Once a month, we gather for Bible study before worship. Today, we worshiped at home and met for our first Bible study via Zoom videoconferencing. We considered John’s story of Jesus’ capture and arrest.

As much as COVID-19 showcases how technology connects us, I find myself acutely aware of its limits. I live miles from any of my family of origin, so I use Skype to stay in touch. But during a crisis, I feel far away from loved ones.

Given the distances we face, whether long-standing or new, I take comfort from Jesus’ words. When his pursuers reach him, he says, “If I am the one you are looking for, then let these others go.” Then John continues, “This was to fulfill the words he had spoken, ‘Not one of those you gave me have I lost’” (John 18:8–9).

For the disciples here, separating (going) is essential. Their act of abandoning Jesus and one another actually fulfills Jesus’ promise not to lose a single one of his own.

This pandemic has separated us from dear ones and from normalcy itself. And as the outbreak continues, some of us may well reach the end of our earthly lives or lose some we love. But in God no one is lost. For us who follow the way of Jesus, for us who seek after God, no one will be lost. God will preserve us even beyond this life. This is a promise that I will hold on to.

—*Jeremy Funk*

“For us who follow the way of Jesus, for us who seek after God, no one will be lost.”



Jeremy Funk and his service dog, Levi. Jeremy is a copy editor who works remotely for Wipf and Stock Publishers. Jeremy, his wife, and Levi live in Baltimore, Maryland.

Still

Although I am chilled when I
walk the dog this dark morning
And the night was filled with
disturbing dreams
And there is no one in sight to wave to,
Still, this dead tree isn't dead but
shows tiny buds of resurrection
And a neighbor set out a pot of purple
pansies in last year's garden
And a rainbow has been painted and
hung on a closed front door.



Barbara Esch Shisler is a retired pastor, writer, wife, mother, grand and great grandmother. Her husband, Harold, took these photos near their home in Souderton, Pennsylvania.

Although terrible pictures flood the Internet from
around the world
And the sick and dying fill hospital corridors with
exhausted caregivers
And desperate shoppers are grabbing up the last of the essentials,
Still, stories keep coming of singing and dancing on balconies
And strangers dropping off groceries on porches of the hungry
And overworked people finally sit down in their chairs to pray.

So I catch sight of hope glimmering like gold,
Just briefly through the clouds on my way home.

—Barbara Esch Shisler



Put Your Arm around Me

Recently, at a busy intersection near my home, I suffered a bad fall off my bike. Tumbling to my right, I stabbed the pavement with my foot, and the shock caused my right knee to quiver and collapse. When I tried to stand up, my knee shook like Jello—and I found myself back on the hard pavement.

That’s when it happened: angels appeared in the guise of strangers. Waiting at the intersection when I had my accident, Mikey and his girlfriend jumped out of their car to help. Other cars pulled over, and the drivers attended to me. My friend Randy saw the commotion and stopped to help.

Mikey told me, “put your arm around my shoulder, and I’ll get you to the sidewalk.” The attention, close and personal, started me on the path to healing.

I fell off my bike just as COVID-19 was entering our country. Today, that event in my recent past already seems like a quaint time when we touched each other. Never could I have imagined then that physical distancing would soon become the new norm.

I think of the Good Samaritan parable in Luke 10. Jesus’ lesson counsels his followers to reject social distancing in favor of attending to people in need. Our new context of pandemic challenges us to creatively figure out how to offer compassion and healing while we physically discipline ourselves to stay apart.

—*Stephen James Penner*



Stephen Penner is a native Californian, former MCC worker, and retired Mennonite Church USA pastor. He enjoys freshly baked zwiebach, home made granola, singing in the church choir, golf, and any time he can spend near the Pacific Ocean.

First-Grade Good-Bye

She said good-bye to her first graders today.
The virus, once a distant specter in crowded China
now made its home, quiet and unnoticed, near
fields of deep green citrus trees, recently
stripped of oranges and tangerines.

The governor closed the school because of the unseen trouble.
For months the children had caused trouble.
She hated their senseless outbursts, their lack
of discipline and respect.

Too many boys came to her class raucous and tough
speaking rough words they didn't understand. A few
girls were hard too. They had seen too much
in their tender years.

Yet now as they
filed out into the unknown, she touched
their young shoulders, patted their fragrant hair, and
remembered the warmth of hearing a
young voice read a sentence for the first time.

—*Stephen James Penner*

Today

This morning the streets were still.
I walked slowly alone into the
heart of town. Six women stood outside
Cross-Fit, stretching and talking
standing six feet apart. Later when they
ran by me on the trail they breathed staccato hellos.
I was happy for the acknowledgment, the abbreviated
human interaction so I passed it on with a “*buen día*”
to an old man and a wave to a high school wrestler
out for a crisp run. We kept our respectful distance
but our eyes met in knowing ways.

This afternoon it is quiet. In my backyard
the wind shifts the orange blossoms and
the bay leaf tree branches slowly wave.
The puffed up white clouds drift serenely
across the blue sky. The blue scrub jay carries
crepe myrtle twigs to her nest
hidden among the grapefruit.
Later I know humming birds will sprint from
flower to feeder seeking nature’s sweet nectar.
I’ll sit alone, watching the day slowly pass.
Tomorrow will surely come.

—*Stephen James Penner*



Stephen Penner’s Californian backyard

A Poet's Call to Quietness

The poem below, written by Nobel Prize Winner Pablo Neruda (1904-1973) and posted by a Facebook friend, seems written for us in the present pandemic. "Keeping Quiet" calls us to withdraw for a while from those things that add to the trauma.

My husband and I were schooled in Quaker-style silence during our years in Durban, South Africa, when we were part of the Friends Meeting. Last Sunday, when our regular church service was canceled (with the option of joining into a Zoom gathering), we chose the silence of a meditative walk on a lovely trail bordering the Grand River. Amid birdsong and the quiet beauty of trees and geese along the fast-flowing river, we entered into silence and came away refreshed.

—Leona Dueck Penner



Trail bordering the Grand River in Waterloo, Ontario. Photo by Leona Dueck Penner

"Keeping Quiet"

By Pablo Neruda

Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still
for once on the face of the earth,
let's not speak in any language;
let's stop for a second,
and not move our arms so much.
It would be an exotic moment

without rush, without engines;
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.

Fishermen in the cold sea
would not harm whales
and the man gathering salt
would look at his hurt hands.

Those who prepare green wars,
wars with gas, wars with fire,
victories with no survivors,
would put on clean clothes
and walk about with their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused
with total inactivity.

Life is what it is about;
I want no truck with death.

If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.

Perhaps the earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and later proves to be alive.

Now I'll count up to twelve
and you keep quiet and I will go.

Extravagaria by Pablo Neruda
(translated by Alastair Reid, pp. 27-29, 1974).

Mid-Flight Correction?

Technology and travel, daylight saving time,
internet, wi-fi, cell phones, fitbits, excessive gizmos
shriveled our world and proliferate our involvement.

The world is at our door, seeps into our days
until our calendars burgeon out of control.

It can be done, so we must do it.

No time for Sabbath rest, nor year of jubilee
as the Lord decreed to his people long ago.

We're in a modern era—no time for that
Besides, it would upset the economy.

Comes news of coronavirus in China—

But that's half a world away

—too bad, how sad for them.

We bring our citizens home, isolate them,
close our borders.

Then it's at our door and in our town.

Sound the alarm!

Schools close, voluntary isolation occurs,
businesses shut down, fear escalates,
sales plummet, cars and factories sit idle.

Politicians work together for once with common focus,
pollution decreases, porpoises cavort in canals,
families find time to play, to bake, to teach,
we sing from balconies and find community there,
we check in on each other, let neighbors know we care,
a sense of peace and relief accompanies our wondering.

Did God call “time out” for his world?

—*Ruth Smith Meyer*

Has God Had Enough?

Is it happening again? Has God had enough of us? In the days of Noah, God’s patience ran out. God witnessed too much misbehaving and finally said, “For I am grieved that I have made them” (Genesis 6:7). Is God punishing us as in the days of Noah? Have we been sent to our rooms for an indefinite “time out” to think about our violence, lies, gossiping, theft, sexual sins, immoral thoughts, and idolatry?



Dawn Mast is a freelance writer, mother of four kids, and wife of a family practice physician in Broadway, Virginia.

Noah and his family were sequestered on a boat for 150 days; they had five months to ponder God! No other people. No distractions. No destination. And, no Internet. Just water and the Almighty. Plenty of time to think and change.

There is no way to know why there’s a pandemic now at such a time as this. But there is a way to deal with it in much the way Noah did: ride it out and trust. “But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and He sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded” (Genesis 8:1).

What a promise to cling to as we hunker at home: God remembers us!

Some say this COVID-19 is a sign of the end times. Maybe.

Does it matter? Regardless, this pandemic should change hearts and get people moving to love with sincere intention and share the gospel. We need to pray boldly and seek the face of Jesus.

“Noah and his family were sequestered on a boat for 150 days; they had five months to ponder God! No other people. No distractions. No destination. And, no Internet. Just water and the Almighty. ”

—Dawn Mast

Remember the Healers

Many of us have stopped performing normal activities. The usual hustle and bustle of shopping for non-necessities, taking children to school, attending sporting events, meeting for coffee, and even worshipping with our church family have come to a grinding halt.

However, some individuals are busier than ever and will have little rest in the weeks and months to come. These are the first responders and medical staff who work valiantly for the rest of us.

As I watch my husband, a physician, caring for the sick—putting his life at risk for the sake of others—I’m reminded of Jesus. In Scripture, we read that large crowds followed Jesus (e.g., Matthew 12:15, Mark 4:1, Luke 8:42), seeking healing and a word of hope. Jesus gives these people just what they need—even if it’s not always what they want.

Fully human, Jesus must have been tired after all that healing! We know from Matthew 8 that Jesus spent entire days healing a leper, Peter’s mother-in-law, and a centurion’s ill servant. By day’s end, Jesus climbs into the boat and sleeps—not just ordinary sleep but that deep slumber that dulls one even to furious squalls. Healing people is exhausting!

Our spouses, friends, and family members aren’t Jesus. Nonetheless, health care providers are hard-pressed during this time of high anxiety. Bringing spiritual questions in the shape of physical issues, many individuals are seeking spiritual answers to earthly problems. During this time of unknown, let us remember to pray for those who are helping. Pray that the divine Healer will give them courage, strength, and wisdom. Pray that all of us will turn to Jesus.



Dawn Mast and her family belong to Grace Mennonite Fellowship in Lacey Spring, Virginia

—Dawn Mast

Singing for Baby Smiles

As the news about the pandemic gets worse, worship songs have been springing into my mind. Some are songs that I haven't sung for years, while others are from our last church gathering.

I'm not really a musical person, yet these days I find myself singing with gusto for my enthralled audience: our three-month old baby girl, Mariana. It doesn't matter if I hum when I forget some of the words, or that I'm out of tune. Every time I sing, I'm met with a big baby smile. Those smiles are a great motivator to keep singing, and so I do!

As I sing as never before, I'm impacted by more than just my baby's smiles. Each time I sing, I pay more attention to the song lyrics. I am reminded of the bigness of God's love; of the Lord's grace, compassion, kindness, and faithfulness. I affirm that my hope is based in Christ. By singing the words aloud, I am cementing them in my heart.

I have often felt that I know something in my head but struggle to know it in my heart. As a new parent, there are so many things that I just don't know at all! My anxious thoughts threaten to become louder with this pandemic. The worship songs that spring up in me show me what I truly know in my heart: that I can trust in Christ. And, for some moments, the anxiety slides away, and a peace that passes understanding takes its place.

—*Kristina Toews*



Kristina Toews with her daughter Mariana at three months. Photo by Jacqueline Quiring.

You Weren't Ready for This



William Loewen on a recent trip to Puerto Rico. He is the pastor of Trinity Mennonite Church, near Calgary, Alberta.

Like a lot of other people, I've been working from home more often lately. I'm also using this as a chance to catch up on housecleaning.

Housecleaning can serve as a productive break that allows one to move a bit between sitting tasks; it can be a manageable distraction in a new world where everything feels badly out of control; or it can teach a revealing lesson about our current lifestyle.

I recently washed the stove and quickly realized that hadn't really cleaned my stove in a long time. I encountered spills I had avoided, grease that had accumulated, and places I had ignored. A voice in my head said, "You're a mess! You weren't ready for this clean-up." The inner voice went on, "Did you think this mess would just disappear? Your neglect made it worse. Did you think that you would just leave it for the next tenants? Did you believe that if you waited long enough, that someone would do the cleaning for you?"

That voice was right. My previous decisions and inaction made that cleaning job harder.

The virus isn't to blame for much of what we see these days. It isn't the first time the weak and elderly have suffered among us; it's just revealing our neglect of them over the years. It isn't introducing hate and suspicion of others; it's only showing what's already there. Let's learn from this. Next time, let's heed the warning signs and take action before it's too late.

—William Loewen

Tidal Waves and Daffodils

From early news coverage, it seemed like COVID-19 would impact the travel industry. Certainly hotels and airlines. But publishing?

COVID-19's tidal waves feel relentless. In mid-March, Amazon stopped placing book orders to prioritize orders for food and medical supplies. The border between Canada and the U.S. shut down, making us at MennoMedia unsure if we could get curriculum, periodicals, and books printed on one side of the border to customers on the other. Multiple states and provinces have closed all non-essential businesses. Are printers essential? Publishers? It depends on the state or province.

It's been a dizzying two weeks at MennoMedia as we pivot one way, then another, to try and keep the supply chain open even as demand drops dramatically. The waves just keep crashing.

Yet, daffodils, my favorite spring flower, are about to burst forth here in northern Ohio. Yesterday, I walked along Lake Erie with my daughters. We heard and watched the waves crashing against the rocks. But we weren't there for that. We

were looking for daffodils. The path we walked is loaded with daffodils and other perennials. We hoped and expected to see blooms. Yet not a single daffodil was blooming.

We'll go out again this morning to search for daffodils. The waves will still be there, crashing against the rocks. If those daffodils are not yet bursting forth today with signs of new life, they will be soon. I'll keep hunting for them.



Hunting for daffodils along Lake Erie



Amy Gingerich and her daughter Grace Claassen

—Amy Gingerich

Prayers from a Rusted Truck

When days are long and fears are deep,
I walk to the woods
and rest my spirit
in The Garden of the Rusted Truck.
Here is ruin. Here are remnants.

Here is life discarded.
Why my spirit rises as my hands dig
deep in the soil,
finding a way through the puzzle of
broken glass, cracked plastic,
abandoned aluminum,
and one half of a small pink shoe,
I don't know, but

I remove the trash,
rake away the leaves,
wonder at the rich compost that remains,
plant a few daffodil bulbs
—it is the wrong season—
and drag a bench nearby
so I can sit and pray awhile.

—*Gloria Diener*



Gloria Y. Diener (Harrisonburg, VA) and her husband Gene were living temporarily with their son, his wife and two granddaughters prior to COVID-19. Gloria also has two grandsons in Amman, Jordan.



“Garden of the Rusted Truck”
Photo by Gloria Diener

Because I am old and you are young,
we cannot see each other right now,
beloved granddaughters.

We play hide and seek the stones in the woods.
When I find your pink pebble resting on
the rusted truck,
it's all I need of heaven
on this bitter spring day

—*Gloria Diener*

Won't go anywhere.
So much blocks the path—
twisted vines and broken limbs,
rusted motor
and missing tires.

Come ye apart and rest awhile.

Blue skies,
green pasture.

The song of the birds
and the hope of tomorrow.

—*Gloria Diener*



“Garden of the Rusted Truck II”
Photo by Gloria Diener

Going Live

On Saturday afternoon, we finally decided to close our doors to Sunday morning worship for the next day. I confess I was the one strongly recommending we do so.

After the decision was made, I sat with conflicting feelings: a gut feeling of relief that my folks wouldn't be tempted to come out along with worry that I had overreacted.

I had less than a day to transition to a virtual worship format. After 32 years of preaching, I was going to have to learn Facebook Live. I knew that it wasn't a complicated tool, just unfamiliar. The more significant hurdle was getting past my own insecurities about having my picture taken or appearing in video. Where should I sit? What background should I use? Won't it be boring to have just me on their screens? I had until 11:00 a.m. the next morning to get over my concerns and figure it all out.

My relief and worry turned to fear. I stewed over the worship and my sermon already written. I shifted, cut, rewrote, and carefully reviewed each word. I practiced how to set up my equipment.

Sunday morning came. I nervously set up, hoping all would go as planned. What if, after all this preparation, I didn't connect correctly? What if I spent 45 minutes just talking to myself?

11:00 a.m. finally arrived. I pushed the "Start live video" button and began to speak. All I could see was a picture of myself talking. Was it working? Then came the posts. "We are watching!" "This is cool." "Thank you!" My heart warmed that my people were there. It was at that moment I realized that we were still a community, and I forgot all about what I looked like!



A screenshot of Jayne Byler's first Facebook Live sermon. Jayne is a pastor serving at Stahl Mennonite Church, Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

—Jayne Byler

Oceans Apart

I have never felt so far away from my daughter Katie. She is living in London, England, where her husband is pursuing doctoral studies. Visiting is limited; we see them once a year because of the expense. But, I have always known that if there was an emergency, we could fly to see each other.

Now with the pandemic, things are different. If they or we get sick, we are separated by an ocean. Flights are grounded, and we cannot drive across the sea. I know I cannot be physically there for her, and this is excruciating.

Yesterday, Katie sent me an email with a photo of a flyer that was put in her mailbox. It's from a neighborhood association. The flyer says hello in 12 languages and the following: "We are a group of local residents who want to make sure that no one in our community is left isolated or without support." The flyer provides contact information with names and an offer to deliver medications, get supplies, top-up electricity or gas bills, or give a friendly phone call.

I keep going back to look at this flyer. Each time, my eyes fill with tears. In a city of nearly nine million people, where my daughter knows almost no one, she has local people to call.

I am giving thanks to God for neighbors. I don't live in a huge cosmopolitan city, but this has made me think about how I am called to reach out now more than ever. Who is my neighbor?

—Carol Penner



Carol Penner visiting England. Carol lives in Vineland, Ontario; she is assistant professor of theological studies at Conrad Grebel College.

Creation Catching a Break



Little man in nature.
Photo by Carol Penner

I live on a very busy road in the country. We have a beautiful view of orchards and the Niagara escarpment, but it's a thoroughfare that comes off the main highway. This morning, whole minutes have gone by without a car.

Canada has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by shutting down all non-essential activity. Most businesses and factories are closed, and no one is traveling to visit. The world around me is quieter.

While the pandemic is filling us all with fear and anxiety for loved ones, life goes on for the non-human world. In fact, the reduction in human activity is a chance for nature to get a break from us. I have been following the climate strikes led by teenage activist Greta Thunberg and other young people. This slowdown is a tiny glimpse of what life with fewer carbon emissions looks like.

I am perfectly aware that it is also a time of unprecedented economic meltdown. Many families, businesses, and governments are going into debt, and everyone is in the dark about how recovery will happen.

I am struck by the paradox that this virus—a natural disaster for human society—is a reprieve for the natural world we live in.

I don't have solutions on this beautiful Sunday morning. I see springtime swelling the buds on the peach trees. A robin just visited my bird feeder for the first time this year. All the while, I read about a virus that is killing thousands of people. It's time for Sunday morning prayer.

—Carol Penner

Pandemic Prayer

Great God,
you are an ever-present help in times of trouble,
and that's why we're praying now.
We are troubled and we're worried
things are going to get more troubling.
This virus is spreading around the world:
so many are seriously ill
or will be seriously ill,
so many health care systems are stretched
or will be stretched.
Be with frontline medical workers,
give them courage to do their work
and keep them safe.
Be with public health officials
as they make decisions for the common good,
and politicians as they roll those decisions out.
Help us to be kind to one another,
because anxiety can make us snappy.
Help our communities to be resilient
and expansive as we reach out to help
all who are isolated and afraid.
In these times of shutdowns and slowdowns,
when travel is restricted or banned,
as routines are disrupted and we spend
less time together or more time together,
help us zero in on what is essential.
Thank you that love is also contagious
and stronger than any virus.
You will be with us,
and we will be with each other
in sickness and in health.
Amen.

—*Carol Penner*

Self Quarantine

Lord, when I opened my window curtains
this morning you opened the windows into my soul.
Through the drizzling rain, I saw the daffodils
nod their golden heads. I heard the violets
giggling in my garden. I turned to morning
hygiene. The warm shower water on my back
matched the sound of gentle rain on the roof
to soothe my breathing as I faced another day
with my undiagnosed virus. I had no schedule
I was self-quarantined.

I listened to Copeland's Appalachian Spring,
my being filled with profound peace.
News of the spreading virus attempted to destroy
the surety that You are in your Heaven,
and all is well with the world.
I turn to You, Lord, and I am reminded that
You are a great King, the Lord Almighty.
You are causing your Name to be feared
among the nations.
I rest in you and your purposes.

—*Naomi Weaver*

Partners in Desperation

When times are tough, many of us default to a fight or flight response. We either withdraw into a place of fear and despair, or we aggressively try to take control so that we don't suffer. A pandemic, such as the world is experiencing now, is one of those times.

Elijah lived through a drought that was beyond human control; no one knew when it would end. People were dying of hunger. An unpopular prophet, Elijah faced the added burden of exile—earlier in the desert east of the Jordan River, and now in the foreign land of Zarepath.

It is here that a third way through the crisis presents itself: a path of small acts of kindness and community. God leads Elijah to a widow gathering sticks to cook one last, meager meal before dying of hunger. God asks Elijah to depend on this woman to feed him. Like Elijah, the widow is a victim of the famine and vulnerable to abuse in her society—a least-likely-to-survive person. But, by being together in their need, resourcefulness and wholeness are born. Elijah, the widow, and her household “ate for many days” (1 Kings 17:15)

This incident leaves us scratching our heads as to how it could have happened. But maybe the real wonder of the story lies in the way that shared suffering, shared desperation, and shared dependence on God give Elijah and the widow a way through a time of great need. The widow's willingness to partner with a homeless prophet to cook one small meal is the secret to a family's survival. The result of such a tiny act of mercy is not just physical well being but also fellowship and community.

This story reminds me that the best way to weather these COVID-19 days is to let small acts of mercy and fellowship drive out the shadows of fear. We need not withdraw and despair. We need not hoard and fight for control in a situation that is clearly beyond our control. There is a better way: everyday acts of mercy.



Byron Rempel-Burkholder and his wife, Melita, belong to Home Street Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

—Byron Rempel-Burkholder

Look At Those Birds!



A week ago today, my wife, Melita, and I ate sandwiches on a bench in St. Stephen's Green in Dublin. Ireland had just closed all restaurants, museums, and other public sites, including schools. The huge St. Patrick celebrations the day before had been canceled. Our only options were to sit in our hostel room or go outdoors.

Like the locals, we were nervous about where the COVID-19 pandemic was heading. The number of infections and deaths in Ireland was rising each day. We had the added burden of being called home to Canada early from a two-month sojourn of volunteering and traveling in the Emerald Isle. Our re-booked flight was two days away, and we worried about it being canceled.

In a rare moment of sunshine, we amused ourselves by watching pigeons congregating on the path in front of us. They strutted around, tilting their heads up at us and making beady eye contact with us. They were politely inviting us to toss them a few crumbs. When we refused, they graciously waddled off to other human feet and legs nearby. Two pigeons, though, remained in front of us, as preoccupied with each other as with our lunch. They locked beaks and shuffled in circles around each other. It soon became clear that they were in a mating dance.

Then it struck us how oblivious these creatures were to the human crisis surrounding them. In the world of birds, there was no pandemic. The pigeons were carrying on in their everyday lives of eating and loving in the moment, oblivious to global problems. They brought to mind Jesus' teaching his disciples not to worry about their lives: "Look at the birds of the air..." (Matthew 6:26).



Byron and Melita in Ireland

The point was reinforced the next day when we hiked the seaside cliffs near Dublin. Sea gulls soared beside us, above the crashing waves far below, relaxing on the lift of the breeze. It was as if the birds were reminding us that, even in the midst of a global upheaval, we can trust God for the best, whatever happens to us.

—Byron Rempel-Burkholder

Vaccine: Isaiah 43:1-3

Coronavirus?

Or is it corona virus?

Or COVID-19?

Be afraid.

But thus says the Lord . . .

Wash your hands, often, for twenty seconds or singing happy birthday or the doxology, for religious types.

Stay at home, behind a mask.

To be safe, buy a gun, maybe two.

Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you . . .

Schools closed.

Work places closed.

Libraries closed.

Restaurants closed.

I have summoned you by name, you are mine . . .

Businesses closed.

Parks closed.

Gyms closed.

Doors closed “until further notice.”

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you . . .

Pandemic.

Quarantine.

Flatten the curve.

Social distancing.

And when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you . . .

Empty store shelves.

No toilet paper.

No hand sanitizer.

Scarcity.

When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, the flame shall not consume you . . .

Fear.

Anxiety.

Uncertainty.

The unknown.

*For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior!*

—Ruben Chupp



Ruben Chupp, of Elkhart, Indiana, is wintering in Florida, attending Sunnyside Christian Fellowship.

See the Rain!

“He has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.” —Acts 14:18

It was raining on the first Monday after we informed faculty and students that everything needed to go online. The news was changing daily, and decisions that seemed sensible on one day seemed naive on the next. The century-old house where my office is located was nearly empty. I sat at my desk feeling melancholy, watching the rain through the windows. The gloomy morning mirrored my sadness at events canceled and anxiety about loved ones.



“Rain in view,”
by Valerie Rempel

At noon, as I dashed to my car to make one more grocery store run, something surprised me: it was the rain! Of course, I had known that it was raining, but all that morning, I had failed to really see it.

When you live in central California as I do, rain is something precious. And, here it was, replenishing the parched earth, preparing the soil, offering me hope for the future. The seasons will change, the trees will bring forth their fruit, the vines will be heavy, and the blessing of today’s rain will be made evident.

In the urgency of a crisis, it is easy to focus only on the present moment. Our preoccupation with the present is understandable; the moment’s concerns need attending to. But we also need visions of hope. The rain reminded me that God is still caring for the earth and for its people.

This season will also pass, and a new one will come. God is not without witnesses as God blesses the earth now and in preparation for the future. May each of us be among those witnesses.



Valerie Rempel is vice president and dean of the Biblical Seminary, Fresno Pacific University

—Valerie G. Rempel

Messages!



Doris Cober, on a houseboat with husband Jim and other family members on the Trent-Severn Canal system, pre-COVID-19.

The phone calls and emails haven't been good. I just learned that my brother-in-law was taken by ambulance to the hospital. My niece's son, 21 years old, had a cancerous lung removed yesterday and found out that the lung can't be reconstructed. Another niece's husband, with psychological issues, just

split a gas line. A nephew has returned from Mayo Clinic with the bad news that they can't do much to treat damage caused by football concussions.

On top of it all there's COVID-19. I get to receive all that bad news while in self-isolation after returning to Canada from the United States. I feel barraged by constant media updates about the deadly virus. Family members, their places of work closed, are looking at weeks of austerity and lack of income. My brother, in a facility because of Parkinson's, can't have visitors. My daughter-in-law, dealing with an ongoing lung condition, now faces unusual challenges with COVID-19. My friends in Zimbabwe don't have water to wash their hands as often as they should.

The heart-wrenching messages go on and on. Lord, help!

In the still of the night, I wake from a sound sleep, hearing the crystal-clear sound of singing. My mind hears the words, "Peace, peace, wonderful peace, coming down from the Father above . . ."

I haven't sung or thought of the hymn "Wonderful Peace" (Warren D. Cornell) for years . . . since my childhood! I can't even remember the rest of the lyrics. Nonetheless, from the dim recesses of my brain, my Heavenly Father pulls up these words to comfort me and give me peace.

—Doris Cober

Lament

John 11:1-45

Lord, the ones you love are sick
Notice. Come. Weep.
With Mary, Martha and the disciples,
We wonder at your timing.
We fear your delay.
We cry,
“Lord, the ones you love are sick,”
Have mercy.
Come.

—*Elaine Maust*



Elaine Maust “in my home office, remembering the sky is still the sky and the trees are still the trees.” Photo by her husband, Duane Maust.

Church Will Not Be Canceled



The altar table at Jubilee Mennonite in Meridian, Mississippi

Sunday's worship service, canceled. Potluck, canceled. Moms and toddlers group, canceled. Bible Study. Basketball. Care Groups. Community of Hope program. The Free Store. All canceled.

The wild and beautiful Jubilee: silenced victim of coronavirus. Only Jubilee's Food pantries—deemed essential services—remain open.

I trudge through the silent halls of Jubilee Mennonite Church and slip into an empty sanctuary. I switch on a spotlight; it shines over the purple-shrouded cross to the drum set below. I light three purple candles at the altar. sit on the front bench of my beloved church, and cry.

Lent. Week four.

I never expected to live long enough to miss stacks of dirty dishes filling Jubilee's kitchen sink and loads of soggy towels hanging limp from the kitchen island. How could a diverse, inner-city church be the church if we cannot worship, serve, and eat together? What will become of the precious Jubilee?

The Holy Spirit answers: Jubilee will prosper and grow because nothing can cancel the kingdom of God. "A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain" (Mark 5:26-27). The kingdom of God is unstoppable. Jesus said, "I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." (Matthew 16:18).

Church will not be canceled.

I stand, blow out the candles, shut off the spotlight, and walk to the office to discover new ways we will be Jubilee.

—Elaine Maust

Essential Travel

She tromps through the woods of our Mississippi farm,
Her walking sticks stabbing the earth.
My octogenarian mother lives with us now.
She may not leave the farm,
But every day she hikes.
My husband drives to the garden center,
To buy her flats of flowers.
I walk to the lake to remember,
The sky is still the sky.
The trees are still the trees.

—*Elaine Maust*



Elaine Maust's mom, Joyce Miller, tromping in the Mississippi woods.

Things Unseen

It was a dark and stormy night . . . That would have been the right setting for the meeting. Instead, it was a typically bright early spring day as we gathered in a board room to make emergency plans. Invisible and impalpable, this emergency felt unreal.



Lynn Graham belongs to Waterloo Mennonite Brethren Church, Ontario.

When I see the world around me appearing very typical, my mind does not know how to perceive COVID-19's threat. It's cognitive dissonance. I am at a loss as I worry that I can't trust my own understanding. Is it okay to act with caution but still trust my five senses telling me that it is a bright spring day in March—and that is that?

“Is it okay to act with caution but still trust my five senses telling me that it is a bright spring day in March—and that is that?”

I think I'll sit in this present moment and observe the principle of not predicting tomorrow's troubles. “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today” (Matthew 6:34).

The Bible talks about the things seen and unseen—indicating that there are multiple levels, natural and supernatural, to the activities of this world. For me at this time, the virus is operating on the level of the unseen. “We look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18). I remember that God is God of things unseen and is actively building his kingdom there.

—Lynn Graham

Living with Fear

One moment, I feel secure and confident that I will be able to face one step at a time, whatever happens. The next moment, I'm caught up in fear and anxiety.

Psalm 46:1-2 says, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change." But, well, I do fear.

I believe in God. I love God. And, sometimes, I am terrified. Maybe that's OK.

My fear often comes in anticipation of things I don't know will happen. I need to recognize that, do what is prudent, and then do the next right thing. I need to stay present instead of anticipating the future. I will work toward this in small steps. I will

- limit the news,
- do the daily tasks,
- show love,
- call or email someone,
- offer gratitude,
- notice beauty,
- get outside and walk,
- play with the dog,
- light a candle,
- watch the sunset,
- wonder at the stars,
- smell the air after a rain,
- practice centering prayer or mindfulness,
- see the goodness of those around me,
- create a flower arrangement, a clear countertop, and
- maintain a well-made bed and a peaceful corner.



Bev Regier and husband, Chuck belong to First Mennonite, Newton, Kansas.



Sunset at Bev's home in Newton, Kansas.

All of those things. And I will give myself some grace. Fear is a universal emotion. It protects us. Fighting fear can sometimes make it stronger. If my fear grows too strong, I will get help because we aren't meant to do this alone.

—Bev Regier

Make Sure They're Okay

I took a job as a special education paraprofessional three weeks before Kansas schools closed their doors for the remainder of this school year.

Each school day at our school began with the principal greeting the students, leading them in a breathing exercise, and repeating the school chant: “I am safe! I am loved! I can handle anything!” Teachers frequently told their students they loved them.

Kansas educators now are attempting to do something never done before: deliver virtual education to students while keeping them safe in their own homes. It's overwhelming. Although this is a public school, the word I've heard more frequently than any other is *grace*. There are so many questions. Along with answers comes the word *grace*. We are trying to do something hard, and we must give each other grace. Families and children need grace. We will make mistakes, and we will need grace.

One day, amid emails about making and delivering activity packets for students, a reminder came from the principal: “I know academics are what many are focused on, but we really need to make sure that students are OK emotionally. How can we do that? Perhaps that's where we should start before sending work packets? Just an idea.”

With those words, the principal gave grace to all those working for her. She permitted us to be who we already are: teachers who are deeply concerned for the wellbeing of the children we love. Grace offered. Grace received.



Boots for walking

—Bev Regier

Messy Worries, Messy Prayers

I am on my knees. Again. Tears stream down my face, and the only words I can find are, “Lord Jesus, have mercy. Loving God, have mercy. Help. Please help.”

I am sick again. Fever, cough, aches, and fatigue. Everything they’ve been talking about. There are no tests here yet, but the doctor gave me an antibiotic.

My boys are playing happily downstairs. I hear giggles and something about chasing dragons. I get up to get their pajamas ready for bed.

My prayer continues. “God, please help.” The reports, the stats, the news. What if it is “the thing?” I was with my sweet, medically compromised parents this weekend to celebrate birthdays. We went out to eat, played games, and watched the sunset over our favorite lake. We hugged each other a lot. What if I made them sick?

I ready the boys for bed. Read, pray, sing. They fall asleep quickly and soundly.

I come back to the only words I can find to meet the fear that is racing through me. “God, please help. Have mercy. Come to the aid of your people, your children of this world.”

By evening, my parents’ have figured out Zoom. The social media feed is full of opinions. The news spouts more reasons to crawl under this blanket and stay for days.

“God,” I whisper. “Thank you for being with us. I know you hear me. Please help. Please help everyone, everywhere.”



Kathy Dickson and her dog June-Bug at Seminary Hill Farm, on the campus of Methodist Theological School in Ohio

—Kathy Dickson

Hot Dog Roast on Wednesday

I am watching the toddler. He digs his little blue rake into the garden with fierce determination and pulls it across the soil. His brother comes with his shovel, and soon they are finding worms. “Got one!”

Let’s name him *Dirty!*”

“He’ll need a house!”

They’re thrilled. Fingers work furiously to build worm homes out of clumps of dirt, broken for the first time of the season. The ball of worry in my belly unravels for a minute.

I pull weeds, pull my rake through the soil. I touch the dirt and hold it. “Ashes to ashes”—the words roll through my mind. It seems the whole world is groaning. So much unknown, vulnerability.

“Where did he go?” The toddler holds his head close to the ground and pushes his fingers straight down until his fingers are hidden beneath the wet, dark soil. A broad smile comes across his face.

“Mommy, can we roast hot dogs?” It’s 11:30 a.m. on a Wednesday. Sure. Why not? Let’s roast hot dogs.

We sit around the fire, watching the smoke rise. It’s day eight of being home. I lean back against the chair, letting the sunshine hit my face. Birds sing and dance in flight as they move from swing set to tree, feeder to roof. The crocuses push through the earth, bright purple, breathing life into quiet beds. Spring is breaking into our days.

I hold out my hands quietly and receive it, grateful. The earth, this holy gift, is still feeding us, inspiring us, sustaining us.



Kathy’s two boys looking for worms

—Kathy Dickson

My New Coworkers

Some social media lightheartedness asks you to reflect on the activities of your “new coworkers” (i.e., your children, your pets) if your arrangement now includes working from home. So, here goes.

My new coworkers

- run around slaying dragons with foam swords;
- load dishes in the dishwasher with plates on the top rack and half-full juice cups on the bottom;
- knock our harp into nearby potted plants during hide-n-seek, mashing dirt into the carpet;
- help me to make muffins, eating just as many ingredients as went into the pan;
- transport worms from the leaf pile to the garden, scattering garden tools across the yard;
- Paint pictures and wipe their hands on the kitchen chairs;
- try to hang their artwork with clear tape they’ve stretched out longer than their bodies;
- insist on wearing scuba masks and rain boots;
- really like snacks;
- try their skills at peek-a-boo and jack-in-the-box while I’m on Zoom;
- live in the moment and don’t watch the news;
- want to pray holding hands;
- sing loudly.



Kathy's new coworkers, JD (age 2) and Evan (age 5) looking for worms

They are hope.

—Kathy Dickson

There Are Always Hurdles

Friday, March 13. Our high school's first track meet of the season. One of my former athletes, now a college athlete with a scholarship, arrives for the event. His season has been canceled, and he doesn't have anywhere else to be; our team is his only family.

Saturday, March 14. Several of my former athletes now in college are affected. As I contact each, my message is simple: keep working, stay healthy, I hear your grief.

Sunday, March 15. As we coaches analyze the results of our first track meet and plan for the next, we receive an email announcing that school is to be closed and athletics ended. It is justifiable, but we know that our kids will grieve.

When coaching hurdlers, we sprint coaches always say, "Sprint through the hurdle." Don't jump. Sprint. In order to be able to run full speed at a barrier, hurdlers learn aggressive perseverance. The hurdles sometimes win, sending athletes full force into the track. The athletes must learn to get up and finish the race. Other times, the hurdlers actually sprint through the barrier with enough force to shatter it into shards. Whether they win or not, they proudly grab a piece of the hurdle and save it as a trophy—a reminder that obstacles are not impenetrable.



Craig Morton with two of his former athletes.

"Sprint through the hurdle."
I preach this to my athletes since there are more hurdles in life than on the track. There's always another hurdle. Sprint through this one, too. And the next.

—Craig Morton

Ashes and Preparation

I'm the family cook. I do the shopping and most of the laundry. As a work-from-home professional, I usually embrace these activities, folding them into my daily liturgy of work, prayer, and reflection. I appreciate the simplicity of necessary work; the unnecessary but joyful act of baking cakes and pies; the functional job of providing nutrients from the store or garden to the table. I consider these activities divinely appointed, fitting snugly into online university teaching and high school track coaching.



Coach Morton on the track

But today, as I was thinking about the food in the house, I began to contemplate news encouraging “flattening of the curve.” They say we might all get sick, but we have to make sure not to do so at once. We need to spread out the cases. That means I may become intimately familiar with COVID-19.

My response? Clean more thoroughly, bake more often, and make sure there are leftovers in the freezer.

The divine nature of our work is reflected in the benefit that it provides for others. Our garden feeds more than me. My cleaning—especially now—safeguards others. By cooking good food, I fuel my family to be healthy and available. As our work benefits others, we gain joy and gratitude.

Now, every cough, itch in my eyes, scratch in my throat—likely a symptom of seasonal allergies—reminds me that I am vulnerable. Considering that COVID-19 arrived during Lent, it is a suitable reminder of the ashes and dust from which we are made.

Knowing that—sooner or later—I will not be here, I wish to work, preparing my gifts for others.

—Craig Morton

The Dog Is Hungry

I am a creature of habit who assumes there's a set way to do things. Each day the sequence is the same. When I'm at the point in the routine when I fix my wife's lunch for her to take to school, Mika, my dog, looks at me with quietly demanding eyes.

"Can I get some food too?" I fill her dog bowl, and she's satisfied.

When COVID-19 entered the scene, daily routines were altered. My wife doesn't go to work now, and I don't make her lunch. Mika's hunger goes unnoticed, and she goes unfed.

See how that works? Each action is linked to the next one. Break the chain, and the dog goes hungry. How many other chains have been broken?

When the ancient residents of Judah were cast into Babylonian exile, old routines broke, and new ones began. The synagogue, written texts, and the rabbinic movement all started in the darkness of Babylon.

Yes, familiar routines are breaking apart, and the dog is going hungry. But the dog must be fed. Away from our church buildings, enclosed in our homes, reaching to find community, I don't want just to pass the time. I want to create new rituals.

—Craig Morton



Mika is hungry (and so are we, looking at Craig's cooking!)
Photos by Craig Morton

Backroads Community

Please don't take us back to normal; our normal was not a good life. On every continent, divisions and divisiveness were being pursued and praised. COVID-19 startled us because we were preoccupied with "me first" and "us first." Fierce individualism has been our "normal" for centuries.

This morning, I noticed how lonely it has been driving to work. My backroads community has shrunk! We who used the backroads formed something of a community among strangers. I—and others, I believe—loved stopping at stop signs just to see if there were familiar faces inside the other vehicles. These days, I rarely encounter anyone at the stop signs!

I've been thinking about how we might shape a new normal that builds on what until now have been only loose, self-serving communities among strangers. I wonder, for example, if my backroads community could somehow become more of a real one—a group of people who not only share the roads but also know one another in meaningful ways. When one of them loses a job, for example, could God use me to help meet their needs? That's not normal now, but a desire for a new normal is growing in me.

Many of Jesus' early followers spent their days doing life together. Could the church look more like that today? Until now, most Christians have focused our time and attention on our individual lives, coming together only once a week. Why not? Society affirms that this is normal.

Normal life until now has reflected the notion that our human universe is growing and expanding. We've been hurtling apart and away from one another in pursuit of that brave new world. The question is, where are we going? Maybe, these days of COVID-19 will bring us back to our revolving earth and limited creation—to the circle of abundant life. Maybe this pandemic will return us to one another, to a place where backroads communities love one another as neighbors. All I can say is, I sure hope so. God, please don't take us back to the old normal.

—Karl McKinney



“Backroads.” Photo by Karl McKinney of a sunset from Horn Road,
Lebanon, Pennsylvania. March 2020

A Time
Such As
This