

March 22, 2020
You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God
Matthew 16:13-18

We live in strange times. Challenging times. There's COVID-19. There's a run on toilet paper. Stock markets are crashing. Is this the worst of times? Is there any good news? Any hope? How do we deal with life when things seem so insecure? Regular, everyday life can be challenging. When we add in the chaos, confusion and complexity of something like COVID-19, it's easy to be overwhelmed. How do we cope? How do we find hope? How do we respond to the craziness around us?

These are times to hold on to our faith in God. The most common command in Scripture is *"Do not be afraid!"* or *"Fear not!"* (over 150 occurrences). To the Israelites, faced with tremendous challenges and fears, God says, *"Be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid and do not panic. For the Lord your God will personally go ahead of you. He will neither fail you nor abandon you"* (Deuteronomy 31:6). Jesus' promise is, *"Be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age"* (Matthew 28:20).

We are called to be wise and thoughtful as we respond to the situations around us. Social media hype, panic-stockpiling of toilet paper, and other "strange" things are not helpful.

But we do want to be encouraged by God. We need to know God is with us in this

You are the Messiah

We sometimes have a picture of "gentle Jesus, meek and mild," calm and composed, holding a fluffy lamb. We're not sure how THAT Jesus can help when we're facing real challenges.

Jesus asks His disciples, *"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"* They replied, *"Some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets."* Then he asked them, *"But who do you say I am?"* Simon Peter answered, *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."*

Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God! He is God. And He IS with us!

When we read the New Testament, we assume it was the best of times. Jesus lived in nice, peaceful, idyllic times, right? No ... Israel was occupied by a foreign army. They were the frontline military buffer with their enemies, the Parthians. Their own kings, the Herods, were brutal and corrupt (John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod Antipas to indulge his stepdaughter). They were heavily taxed. Any complainers were brutally suppressed. Travel was dangerous. And, yes, pandemics were a thing, too.

If you angered the ruling elite, as Jesus did, they would kill you (Luke 4:29, John 8:59, 10:31 etc.). This is the rough, tough, knockabout world in which Jesus lived. It was hard times.

Jesus models a radical way of living and being in challenging times. The fact that we assume

His life was so idyllic speaks volumes about how He chose to navigate the stress He was under. He demonstrates virtues that shocked people in His time (and still shock people today). In the midst of personal attacks, crises, and overwhelming need, He models what are often called the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Dramatically different from the culture around Him.

This God, with us, in the midst of a crisis. Bringing love, bringing hope, bringing peace. Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of the living God – Jesus, Almighty God, our Saviour, our Hope and our Healer, is with each one of us – even as we are scattered and isolated.

Jesus replies to Peter, *"You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being. Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means 'rock'), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it."*

Jesus renames "Simon" as "Peter." This man's birth name was Simon. But at this point Jesus gives him a new name, "Peter" – the Greek word for "Rock." Simon/Peter's confession of faith is the rock-solid foundation upon which Jesus' church will be built. And knowing Jesus as our Saviour and strength is the rock-solid foundation that is going to get us through this.

Peter, of course, is the name by which most of us know him. In the Old Testament, when a person is given a new name – Abram is renamed Abraham, Saul becomes Paul – it signifies a change in relationship with God, the establishment of a new covenant. As Jesus gives Simon the new name, Peter, He is recognizing a change in relationship with God, too. Through Peter's affirmation that *"Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God"* he becomes a whole new person in Christ. The church is born: people who change the world – through Jesus.

Through our affirmation that *"Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God"* we have a new relationship with God, as well. God gives us a new identity: His children, brothers and sisters of Jesus. He is with us always!!! Nothing and none can ever separate us from Him (Romans 8::28-39). This new life in Jesus makes us people of God who can bear good fruit.

Remember the floods of 2013? The amazing stories of people coming together to help one another? This is way worse than the floods of 2013! We get write the stories that future generations will never believe and get tired of hearing, of how we loved one another. Like Jesus, can we live in these days with virtues like the fruit of the Spirit?

- Love – reaching out to ALL people, especially the lonely and forgotten,
- Joy – choosing to find hope and pleasure in the simple things of life,
- Peace – building bridges rather than driving wedges between people,
- Patience – pacing ourselves, finding some joy in the down times,
- Kindness – caring for other people's needs,
- Goodness – choosing to do what is right,
- Faithfulness – holding the course to the end,
- Gentleness – responding and reacting with grace rather than rancour,
- Self-control – not letting our fear, anger and other emotions run away with us.

Where do we go from here?

I recently ran across a devotional based on Proverbs 21:31: *"The horse is prepared for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord."*

There are two important sides to this verse. The first part, *"The horse is prepared for the day of battle,"* is about more than fitting the horses with saddles and armour. Somebody has to think about how to breed the horses, feed the horses, raise food for the horses, house the horses, care for the horse's needs, train the horses, transport the horses, the list goes on.

Readying the horses is about wise preparation and diligent planning. It's about stewardship, strategy, discipline, and hard work. Clearly, just like there are lots of steps to get the horses ready, there are very important proactive steps to respond to COVID-19.

- We should be thankful for our amazing health care professionals. Pray for them.
- We should be thankful for our dedicated civil servant leaders. Pray for them.
- We should be thankful for our politicians, who (let's put partisanship aside) have provided calm, competent, and clear leadership.

We can prepare well and plan well, too. No, don't go and buy cases and cases of supplies. But, the best advice is, gradually add a bit more here and there to your regular shopping.

We can follow the best advice of the professionals and limit social gatherings, so more people don't catch the virus. It's not about whether I can manage the illness – it's whether all the people I interact with and who they interact with, etc., can handle it that matters. It's about love for our vulnerable neighbours.

Be well informed and proactive in the best safety and hygiene practices. We've all heard: wash your hands often and well, avoid touching your face, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands, avoid close contact with people who are sick, stay at home and away from others if you are feeling ill, cough/sneeze into your elbow, and then wash your hands again and again.

But remember, there's another half of Proverbs 21:31. It reads, *"... but the victory belongs to the Lord."* This doesn't diminish stewardship of our roles in preparing the horses, but it does remind us that we are utterly and ultimately dependent on the Lord.

Knowing *"victory belongs to the Lord,"* we need to choose to trust our faithful God. Doing so helps us to live differently by modelling courage rather than panic and fear. At times like this, Jesus-centred people need to be a calm and non-anxious presence in our anxious world.

Remember, Jesus, the Messiah is the Living God. He is in us. He is with us. He is for us.

Remember church is not just about services Sunday mornings! We are a community who connect with another all sorts ways, all sorts of times!

1. Our services are now ONLINE. For each Sunday there will be activities for parents to do with their children, for youth, and resource ideas for everyone else.
2. For your spiritual growth, our daily readings and prayers are available either in print, online, or as a daily email (sign up online) or email info@firstb.net. Over 200 people access these already – call someone and chat about what you're learning each day.
3. Previous sermons are online in print form.
4. Check with Mark to see if it is meeting online. If it's not meeting, communicate regularly with people in your group to maintain community.
5. Many people will feel more lonely, more isolated, and more afraid. Call people. Skype people. Email people. Text people. We can't physically visit people. Find creative - non-physical - ways to reach out and be the comforting presence of Jesus.
6. Ask if people need help getting basic supplies or medications. Help if you can. Safely, care for the vulnerable in the name of Jesus. See [Lethbridge Support Circle](#) Facebook.
7. We often say "*Prayer is the most powerful force in the universe.*" After all, we are calling on the Creator of Heaven and Earth. But often we are too busy to really pray. Spend some more time in prayer during this season.
8. Please continue to support the church financially. We're all tightening our belts: we get hit. But if you can help, bills will still need to be paid.
 - sign up for automatic withdrawal: call 403-327-2082 or email info@firstb.net
 - mail or drop off your cheque: 1614-5th Avenue S, Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3
 - e-transfer to giving@firstb.net

As a staff, we're trying to discern how to lead wisely and well through these uncharted waters! Pray for us.

- We won't be physically getting together with you much. We may phone, email or text.
- We will try to communicate really well through www.firstb.net and our Facebook Page.
- There will ALWAYS be daily devotionals and weekly services and sermons online.
- Some of us will be working from our offices, most of us from home.
- We will ALWAYS be available when you need us: email, call, text.
- We are moving existing groups and activities (Kids Kingdom, Youth, small groups) online as much as possible.
- We will be trying to figure out how to do more and more online, whether that be YouTube videos, or ... ideas??? Are there particular resources you would find helpful? Are there way we can stay connected well? How can we serve you?

To suffering Christians, Paul writes, "*God comforts us in all our troubles **so that** we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us*" (2 Corinthians 1:4).

God IS with us! As He is our certain hope, we can be His hope in a troubled world. We can say, with confidence, "*It IS well with my soul.*"

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 First Baptist Church
 1614 – 5th Avenue South, Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3
 (403) 327-2082
bruce@firstb.net