



A sermon from National Bishop Susan Johnson for May 17, 2020 (Easter 6)

Grace to you and peace in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

It's wonderful to be with you today in this way during this time of pandemic. Our national office is closed and I am working from home. It is easy to feel isolated and dislocated from the church that I am called to serve. And yet, I've joined in three different synod council meetings by Zoom, and I've joined congregations from each synod in worship. The synod bishops and I are meeting more frequently than ever. So are our national and synodical treasurers. In many ways I feel more connected to the church than ever before.

There is no doubt that the way we are being church is different in these times, and it may last for a lot longer than any of us had anticipated... But there is also no doubt that we still are a church, called to follow the way of Jesus and participate in God's mission to love and save the world. In today's gospel lesson Jesus reminds us that if we love him, we need to keep his commandments, to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and love our neighbours as ourselves.

If you are like me, then there are days when it seems pretty easy to follow this directive and there are days that it seems a lot harder. In this time of pandemic, it is easy to have days when I can get so anxious and worried that all I'm thinking of is myself. But there are other days where I am way more concerned with those who are working on the frontlines, for those who are mourning people who have died from COVID-19, for refugees living in camps with poor sanitary conditions, for homeless people in Canada, for those living on reserves with boil water advisories. And although I am not able to do very much directly to help, I increase my prayers and I increase my donations.

The wonderful thing is that Jesus does not just ask us to keep his commandments and then abandon us. Jesus promises not to leave us orphaned. In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus promises to send us an advocate, to help us and guide us in the ways of truth. This is, of course, the coming of the Holy Spirit that we will celebrate in two weeks on Pentecost.



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Although today's Gospel lesson comes before Jesus' crucifixion and death, it is very similar to the messages of assurance that Jesus gives in his post-resurrection appearances. God is with us. Jesus is with us. The Spirit is with us. We are not alone. As Paul reminds us in the reading from Acts, in God we live and move and have our being.

In my lifetime, I have never experienced such a time as this. Prolonged isolation. Churches closed. The loss of many leisure activities. My work life totally restructured. For those who are working on the frontlines there is the real and present danger of getting sick or dying. For many people there have been loss of jobs, for many others great financial worries. We can keep in touch with loved ones by telephone or a number of electronic means, but it's not the same as being together, or giving and receiving hugs.

There are two natural kinds of responses we can experience in such disorienting times. To feel the absence of God: To ask where God is. To blame God for the pandemic. To ask why our prayers and not being answered. Or there is the opposite response: To feel more closely the presence of God.

If you are in the former camp, I totally understand it. But please hear me that God is with you. However, I'm firmly in the latter camp. I'm finding with fewer options of things to do and with a much more regular daily rhythm to my life that it is easier to have a regular and increased prayer and devotional life. I've been choosing a hymn each day and writing a prayer to go along with the hymn and encouraging you to join me. I sing the hymn most days and post it on social media. During my singing and my praying, I am so aware of God's presence. When I go out for my daily walk I have been so aware of God's presence in wind, and snow, and flooding, and the slow greening of a late prairie spring. I am so aware of God's presence with me when I get an unexpected call from a friend checking in on me. And in the smiles of grocery checkout clerks. In the kindness of people politely taking turns and keeping appropriate physical distancing measures.



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My favourite prayer is “O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

These are challenging times with unknown endings. But God is with us. Take courage in God’s presence and rest in God’s love. We may be changed, but our beloved church will come through this as well.