

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

Romans 8:38-39



## **Pandemic Ponderings, a Faith Sharing Sunday September 20th, 2020**

*Twin Towers United Methodist Church*

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## WORSHIP GUIDE

*Before you begin your time of worship, find a comfortable place to be and gather whatever you might need: your Bible, some paper or a notebook, something to write with, your computer/connected device (if you intend to listen to music online), etc. Feel free to adapt this worship guide in any way that makes best sense to you and those you might be gathered with. (Consider inviting someone – a friend, a family member – to worship with you.) Commit to spending the next hour with God.*

**PRELUDE:** Listen and sing along to a song or hymn that blesses your spirit!

**WELCOME** – On Friday, March 13th, perhaps for the first time in its history, Twin Towers UMC suspended in-person worship for the following Sunday. We did so in concert with many of our sister churches as we watched a global pandemic unfold around us. Those days were filled with deep uncertainty and a rumbling of panic. By the following week, Governor Newsome had issued a statewide Shelter in Place order, and all of us hunkered down at home. This week, we cross the 6 month mark of that moment.

I remember those initial weeks to be utterly crazy. Like so many others, we were now juggling homeschooling with work while trying to pivot and adapt all aspects of life onto the internet. Six months ago, only a handful of us had heard of Zoom, never mind used it. Today, our youngest are adept at muting and unmuting themselves, changing their backgrounds, and we've started to say things like, "I'm all Zoomed out!" We don't just worship via Zoom, we go to school on Zoom, see our doctors on Zoom, hold meetings and interviews on Zoom, and celebrate birthday parties and baby showers on Zoom. But Zoom is just the tip of the iceberg! Our lives have changed through and through, individually and collectively.

And while there was lots of initial excitement about cleaning out long-ignored closets, eating our way through freezers, and baking sourdough bread, we have since experienced a whole host of other big emotions including anger and depression, weariness, grief, anxiety and fear. In fact, mental health is at crisis levels! As the weeks continue on, we've had to adjust our posture from responding to an emergency, to sustaining through an indefinite challenge while constantly pivoting with the changes. But it's not just the pandemic, the last six months have seen the unfolding of a national racial justice reckoning, devastating wildfires, something like

30 million workers unemployed, and a hugely contentious, divisive election season, among many significant happenings. We've been through a lot!

So today, it felt important to make space to pause, to take a deep breath together, and to look around: where has God been through it all? Where have you and I seen God, sensed God, and experienced God? How have we changed because of the pandemic? What have we learned - about ourselves, about God, about living...trusting in God and hoping in God? Today's worship opens space for us to mark time, and to give witness to our "pandemic ponderings".

**OPENING HYMN** - "We Gather Together", UMH 131

*Listen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P99vCDrkdFA>*

1. We gather together  
to ask the Lord's blessing;  
he chastens and hastens  
his will to make known.  
The wicked oppressing  
Now cease from distressing.  
Sing praises to his name;  
he forgets not his own.
2. Beside us to guide us,  
our God with us joining,  
ordaining, maintaining  
his kingdom divine;  
so from the beginning  
the fight we were winning;  
thou, Lord, wast at our side,  
all glory be thine!
3. We all do extol thee,  
thou leader triumphant,  
and pray that thou still  
our defender wilt be.  
Let thy congregation  
escape tribulation;  
thy name be ever praised!  
O Lord, make us free!

**OPENING PRAYER** – *You are invited to take a deep breath as you pray:*

We gather together, Loving God,  
to invite your presence and your blessing.

We thank you that you are here,  
moving in us and among us,  
loving us into our wholeness,  
transforming us into your likeness,  
and sustaining us through all that comes our way.

We hold on to that this morning.

We hold on to your presence through the overwhelming uncertainty that surrounds us.

Will the pandemic ever end?

We hold on to your love through all the hardship, distress, fear, and grief of these last 6 months.

Will a new day, your kingdom, ever come?

We hold on.

Open our eyes to see how you are at work, always at work, even when it feels impossible.

Open our hearts to trust that goodness and healing will come, and that beauty can arise from ashes.

Open our hands to grab on to you and to each other, and to join you - faithfully - in the work of hope-planting, healing, and justice-making.

We know that nothing but nothing can separate us from your abiding love.

For this, we give thanks. For this, we gather in confidence. For this, we pray. Amen.

#### **SCRIPTURE - Romans 8:18-28, 31, 35-39**

*Back at the beginning of August, our Dine & Connect team was standing on the steps of the gym, gathered with the guests that had already arrived. We begin our time each month with introductions and sharing something we are grateful for. When the sharing came around to Brian, Brian quoted from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 8, "We know all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." Brian went on to name how hard the pandemic has been but also pointed to the "good" that he's experienced along the way. That scripture rested in me...until now. That verse is, of course, a part of a much longer passage that contains two other well beloved passages, one that recognizes the Holy Spirit's role in our praying, and a powerful, powerful affirmation of God's ever-present, never-absent love. I invite you to listen now with your whole self, attending to what the Holy Spirit might be saying to us, to the church today.*

<sup>18</sup> I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; <sup>20</sup> for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup> We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; <sup>23</sup> and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup> For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

<sup>26</sup> Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. <sup>27</sup> And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

<sup>28</sup> We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

<sup>31</sup> What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?

<sup>35</sup> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;  
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God!**

## **FAITH SHARING -**

Today, we make space to share our own testimonies, faith sharings if you will, of how we have come through this most challenging, unexpected, and “unprecedented” time. While our eyes and hearts are invited to see and celebrate God’s presence and goodness, to lift up learnings, we

would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the losses we've experienced along the way, the grief that this season has brought, and the struggles that continue on. After all, our scripture passage today begins with Paul acknowledging "present suffering" even as he interprets them in light of "glory that will be revealed in us". Paul was not unacquainted with suffering! I think it's true that sometimes we can't see to the good until our hearts have been held and soothed in the pain or suffering we carry.

So I invite you to begin there, to name and acknowledge the heartache and loss, to shed necessary tears and to groan loudly. Have some paper and a pen or pencil available. If you have a bell, have that on hand as well, or you can use a glass and spoon as a simple chime. Start with some deep breaths, grounding in God's presence and love, then honestly name before God the hardship, distress, loss and suffering you've carried. Share this with God! After some time to reflect, I encourage you to write what you've been carrying onto a piece of paper. Read each item aloud, and as you do, ring your bell or glass chime once.

When your writing feels complete, sing the refrain from "There's a Balm in Gilead" (UMH 375) or listen to it here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fcMxI\\_6xsk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fcMxI_6xsk)

May the balm of God's presence and love bring healing to that which we carry.

At the beginning of the week, I sent out 3 questions for you to hold and ponder. The questions were:

1. How has God "been working for your good" in and through this time of Sheltering in Place? [Alternatively: Where have you most experienced God's presence, grace, and abiding love?]
2. What has this season taught you, shown you, prompted in you that you might otherwise never have come to?
3. What about this strange and challenging time do you want to be sure to take into whatever season unfolds next? What do you most want to leave behind?

If you haven't already done so, take some time to reflect on and respond to these questions. Then, reach out and share your reflections with someone! This is an important way we share faith and make concrete our hopes and longings. Reaching out and sharing with a friend or loved one also builds our connections with one another, strengthening the body.

Paul's faith is founded on an unshakeable faith, trust, and hope. He calls us to the same. Paul's hope is not in the sweet by and by, that sense of delayed future fulfillment, but a hope that calls us into courage and action. Jurgen Moltmann, the German theologian who penned "A Theology of Hope" writes, "That is why faith, wherever it develops into hope, causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience. It does not calm the unquiet heart, but is itself this unquiet heart in man. Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the good of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present." Like Paul, Moltmann knows hope to be a powerful, urgent instigator, one that propels us into transforming present reality into future vision. Friends, confident that God is working for our good, even through these trying circumstances, let us cleave to that assurance, that hope, and join God in the good work of setting creation free, of calling forth life from the decay and rubble, of being clear signposts to God's always present, steadfast, and abiding love. May it be so!

### **SONG OF MEDITATION** - "Precious Lord"

Listen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVQTrNHGiKM>

**PRAYERS of the PEOPLE** – *Spend time in prayer. What did you hear for yourself through today's scripture and reflection? Talk to God about it. Then lift up the joys and concerns that are in your heart. You might write them down, speak them aloud, or pray them in silence.*

We humbly give thanks, O God, for coming through these last six months.

There have been moments of anguish and of desolation...for ourselves, our loved ones, and for your world. There have also been moments of great delight, wonder, and hope.

Through it all, has been your unwavering presence and grace, your abiding love. This is true whether we've sensed it or seen it. We trust it.

Our faith story is one in which goodness and light prevail over evil and doom, in which resurrection life comes from death, in which perfect love casts out fear.

And so we press on.

We press on trusting that you are God, that you hold the whole world in your hands. We press on trusting that your love empowers us to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things. We press on trusting that you are doing a new thing, even now, even through these devastating times.

Grant us courage, grant us wisdom for the facing of these hours.

Bless us with your edgy, impatient, and bold hope, O God, a hope that calls us into action to help remake our world and our future.

We want to come alongside you, O God, and be conduits of your healing!

We pray this in the name of the way-maker, the healer, the one who loved us through death into life, Jesus the Christ, who taught us how to pray saying, “Our Father....”

*I would be honored to pray with you and for you.*

*Please send a note via text, mail, or email or give me a call if I can do so.*

**SHARING OUR GIFTS**— *How might you offer yourself and all that you have to God this week? How are you being invited to practice generosity? Spend a moment listening for God’s direction.*

*You are invited to contribute financially towards the purpose and ministry of TTUMC. We are a congregation committed to being conduits of God’s healing in our neighborhood and beyond, and in so doing, impact the last and the least. You can contribute by mailing in a check, dropping off cash, or giving online via PayPal (visit [www.twintowersumc.org](http://www.twintowersumc.org)). Take a moment and do that now.*

*Please consider sending in a special donation for wildfire disaster relief and recovery. Thank you!*

**CLOSING HYMN** - “As We Go”, W&S 3183

*Listen:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z54MsMRS12Y>

As we go, may your Spirit go before us.

As we go, may we follow your lead.

May we live what we have learned,

share the message we have heard,

and be a light unto the world as we go.

**BENEDICTION** - Go into your week knowing you are loved perfectly, called to courage, and empowered as a disciple of Jesus to share God’s love with everyone you meet. Wash your hands. Wear a mask. Love your neighbors. You are not alone.

**NOW GO AND PASS CHRIST’S PEACE!**



You are invited to spend the next stretch reaching out. Pick up our directory and consider calling someone you don't yet know well or someone who might not know others. It doesn't need to be complicated. Perhaps something as simple as, "Hi! I'm calling to say 'hello'. How have you been?"



If you are on Facebook, please like and follow our page:

<https://www.facebook.com/ttuncAlameda/>

**Scripture for Sunday, Sept. 27th** - Psalm 95:1-7

This week, please hold in God's light:

- All those struggling with mental health concerns: anger, depression, loneliness, and with addictions. We know that this challenging season exasperates the stress and struggle.
- The upcoming elections - to transform the divisions, to discern our vote with faith and love.
- **Phillip Taddei** healing and recovery journey.