

Read Gen 1.

Key: Genesis 1:31 (NRSV)

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

- God has created all things good and very good, including humanity. This is a fundamental value of Christians. We should place a high value on humanity and human life.
- This also means that our value cannot be indexed by other things that are culturally convenient. In this circumstance, our society will preference the “invulnerable,” bestowing greater privileges to those who are strong. Consistently, that is not the value that Scripture holds.<sup>1</sup>

Read Gen 3.

Key: Genesis 3:7 (NRSV)

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

- God has created us good, but we are broken. We will not always seek the highest and best good for ourselves or each other.
- Gen 3:7 in particular is striking because the acknowledgement of brokenness was a recognition of vulnerability, and a desire to amend it. COVID-19 has created in us a deep vulnerability. We are not in control of our own lives, we are at the behest of lots of other people, and specifically a virus which is unseen and uncontrolled itself. We might respond to this vulnerability with effort to control again, or to find power.

Read Jeremiah 29

Key: Jeremiah 29:4-9 (NRSV)

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD.

- Jeremiah is one of the large, sweeping prophets that tell the story of the Hebrew people in exile. The section here pertains to the people in Babylon. They were shaping a “new normal” after exile.
- God has them engage with the culture, to be part of Babylon – to fully open up to the new normal. It was a recognition of the circumstances as they were, engaging them on their terms, but also looking forward to a day when there would be a new victory (God would intervene and defeat the Babylonians).
- A significant temptation will be to continue to pine for what was, for myriad reasons. God permits us the opportunity in crisis moments to create a new way of being.

Read Nehemiah

Key: Nehemiah 4:16 (NRSV)

<sup>16</sup>From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and body-armor; and the leaders posted themselves behind the whole house of Judah...

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<sup>1</sup> In particular, take a look at the Roman Catholic theological teaching of the Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable, which is a value we share in the Reformed tradition, especially post Vatican II: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/option-for-the-poor-and-vulnerable.cfm>

- Both Ezra and Nehemiah are complex books that chronicle life after the exile. The crisis passed, and now the people are returning to a “new normal”.
- Chapter 4 deals with some hostile plots that were thwarted. The issue was it likely wasn’t “enemies” per se but other Hebrews who were left behind from the exile. Their narrative was complicated because of who was writing the story.
- As we move forward, we need to hold a tension between making clear decisions and being okay with their consequences, but not making enemies of those who disagree.
- This includes on Session as well. We will likely disagree with programs and approaches, but hopefully no one has anything but the best interests of the church at heart, and is taking seriously the charge to be engaging the Holy Spirit in discernment.

Read Ezekiel 37:1-14

Key: Ezk 37:4 (NSRV)

Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.

- Ezekiel is another major prophet (and a strange one at that).
- There is life in the brokenness we feel around us. We might perceive that there is nothing but dry bones, but God can and will bring them to life.
- This can bring hope in a couple ways – a highly regimented, social distanced worship can still be brought to life, as can a worship life that is different (see 37:11-12)

Read Matthew 25:31-46

Key: Mt 25:40

And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

- This passage speaks largely for itself. It’s interesting how this came in Matthew’s telling of the gospel right before Jesus is sent to his death. Caring for the vulnerable and the least of these is countercultural, but a hallmark of Christian life.
- However, the consequences of not doing so are clear, and bold: not caring for the least of these is a ticket to an eternal infliction of punishment.

Read John 14-17

Key: John 14:2-3

In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

- John 14-17 have been the lectionary passages for this year, and all speak to Christ’s preparation of the disciples.
- This is worth thinking about temporally as well – the Trinity is beyond linear time. They’ve been with us in our past, today, and in the future.
- We should not be fearful of a future, nor sit nostalgic for a past.
- Remember, too, Christ’s promise of not leaving us orphaned – our present is not the total story either.

Read Acts 6

Key: Acts 6:2-4

And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven

men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.”

- Even the early church had arguments, and had difficulties.
- The twelve gathered all the disciples – they led the group.
- They also delegated tasks, enabling everyone to have a voice and to achieve the mission of the church, while they could continue to the tasks they had at hand.
- In a time of chaos and uncertainty (which the early church would have been as well), it is critical to engage others and give everyone a sense of agency and an opportunity to serve. Session’s job now is even more critical in the ruling sense – keep determining what the Spirit is doing and how it’s guiding the people of God.

Read Romans 12

Key Romans 12:2

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

- Our call as Christians is to live by the Spirit. However, the Spirit is not bound by the will of the world, but instead by a different law – of good, graceful, loving, holy things.
- Our “marks” are what define in every moment including this one. Note that there’s nothing here about “doing what you’ve always done” but instead doing the holy thing in all circumstances.

Read I Corinthians 10:23-11:1

Key: I Cor 10:31

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.

- We are called to live by the Spirit. We are bound by a different law. We have freedom in the Spirit (Paul was often helping Jews who were considering this new sect that was following Jesus – even with the Gentiles! – by explaining that there is freedom from the Jewish law). But that freedom is not *from* things, but *for* things.
- We can replace “meat” with “masks” or “social distancing.” Sure, maybe we don’t *have* to, but what offense is it to someone who may have a pre-existing condition to look at them and say “I have the freedom not to wear this.”
- What we do as people of God is not to be at an advantage. Cultural perceptions of freedom are skewed to privilege advantage over others. This doesn’t necessary mean that perhaps we aren’t making considerations differently in other realms, but when it comes to the church, we must emphasize that what we are doing is not meant to confuse the conscience of others.

Read Philippians 2:1-11

Key: Php 2:4

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.

- We will be at our best when we do everything we can to emphasize the interest of others, which is the glory of God, and the humility of Christ.
- This means to keep lots of the other passages in mind.