

Let's start with the good news New City:

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?...I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living! Wait for the LORD; be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

Psalm 27:1,13-14

Let's not forget any of these promises. In the dark, Jesus is our light. In death, he's our salvation. Jesus is a stronghold that banishes fear. We can experience and share in God's goodness in the land of the living through him.

Good news indeed. Great, in fact. I pray it dwell in your hearts richly.

The Servant Leadership Team has been in constant communication these last few days (and will continue to be) – and I've been reaching out to other doctors and pastors to get a feel for best practices for how we worship together. Unfortunately (and with a heavy heart), **we're canceling this Sunday's service.**

- (1) It's not because this is a 'non-essential gathering'. I would *never* describe gathered worship as non-essential.
- (2) It's not because we're afraid of what might happen if we do (we're not).
- (3) It's not because we just need to hunker down for our own safety (though we care for our own safety).
- (4) It's not because this is simply the socially responsible thing to do (though it very well might be).
- (5) It's because this is the most proactive way the church can love and serve the most vulnerable in our community and those whose responsibility it is to provide medical care.

Until midafternoon yesterday, our plan was to give everyone the freedom to make their own decisions about whether to attend, but to continue with our worship service (while canceling all childcare, shortening the service, changing many of the service elements to maximize social distancing, etc.). But yesterday afternoon we heard from a doctor who's been conferencing in on certain features of the national and statewide response, and it's clear that, while even seven days from now we'll know much more than we do, at least for this weekend we need not to meet. The facts we have tell us that suspending our gathered worship is the best way we can serve to slow the infection rate and continue New City's mission to love our city, especially our most vulnerable neighbors (and our church does serve the immunocompromised and elderly).

Please note that we're taking this one day/week at a time. We'll re-evaluate at the end of next week and will be in touch with you all throughout. In the case that things haven't changed by next week, we're prepared to do some sort of a live-streamed service (or audio recording that we can distribute) and will encourage everyone to take part. But this is a last resort, and I hope we can responsibly resume regular, in-person worship as soon as possible.

Let me close with a couple points:

- (A) The church has a really checkered history in lots of ways, but its history in times of epidemic has often been nothing short of glorious. I've been reading back through some of it over the last week. Here's one of the first Christian responses *ever* to a deadly epidemic (I think it was the second major epidemic in the Roman empire after Jesus – taking place around the year 260) – it's taken from the bishop at the time:

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead...[Non-Christians] behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away ...

It is *so hard* for the watching world to ignore the Body of Christ in times like this. Why? Because “drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains,” “transferring their death to themselves,” and dying “in their stead” really start to make us look like our Lord Jesus.

- (B) With that in mind, continue to look for ways to keep Heb. 10.24-25: “to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” Our ability to ‘meet together’ looks different, but find ways to do it, to love and serve, and to encourage. And continue to do the following:
- a. Be on the lookout for elderly neighbors (same if you live among the immunocompromised as some of us do) – while close contact with them might be unwise, there are other ways to check in on them, talk to them, showing practical love and interest in them – offering to pray with them and to talk to them about Jesus.
  - b. Let’s pray as a church family that we will have these kinds of opportunities. And if you don’t feel like you’ll have many of those opportunities yourselves, pray for those you know have greater access (Jen and I feel as though we’re surrounded with these kinds of opportunities; and obviously pray specifically for those who work in the medical profession!)
  - c. I’ll be reaching out to see if there are other ways we can love and serve and pray with and share Jesus with the poor community. I’m certain there will be ongoing needs for food, etc., and will pass them along as I’m made aware – but don’t think I’m the only one who can do that. This is a time to get creative, maybe remembering Prov. 14.4, that fruitful ministry is messy business.
  - d. Friends, we’ll see hard things in the coming days and weeks – maybe even in our own church family. But even if we see hard things, we don’t have a hard God. Start praying now for wisdom and compassion towards those who are affected by this.

Beloved, it’s an intense time. But let’s “count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (James 1.2-4)

And New City, are you ready for the gospel?! “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure 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.” (Rom. 8.37-39)

Don’t hesitate to reach out to me with specific questions or any issues that come up – and know that I’m taking extra time to pray for each of you (kids included) by name; if there are any prayer requests (related to this or not) let me know.

With love for you and confidence that in Jesus we have “strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.”  
--Pastor Luke

P.S. Please keep praying for Jonathan, Casey, and Eva’s safe speedy return (as of Fri evening, they’re still set to return tonight) – and for the Stryckers, with whom they’ve been traveling.