

A Time to Pray

Jonah 3:5-10

“Life is fragile, handle it with prayer.” Isn’t that a phrase that many of you have often seen? A lot of you remember the phrase, but do you remember where you read it. The phrase is located on the wall in the bathroom on the second floor. “Life is fragile, handle it with prayer” I think that is a perfect phrase to remind us of the importance of prayer, especially in this very difficult time.

The whole world is in turmoil because of the Coronavirus. Every day the number of infected and the number of deaths has been increasing in countries all over the world—and their citizens and their leaders are in panic. Many countries, states, and cities have shut down their borders, imposed travel restrictions and curfews, closed schools and restaurants, and taken other actions to curtail the spread of the disease. Doctors and nurses are doing their best to cure the infected and to find the right vaccination to protect against the virus. Many churches have also chosen to not hold services and close their church buildings in response to the government’s request that we keep gatherings limited.

The lives of people and the health of the economy of the world are in danger. The whole world is suffering from the virus and the end of the world as we have come to know it is here. In this very difficult time, there is **one** thing that all humankind can do together to change the world. We can pray for God’s help—and God’s mercy!

The passage that we read is a well-known story.

When the city of Nineveh fell into a sin, God ordered Jonah, one of God’s prophets, to go to Nineveh and proclaim that the punishment of God was near. But Jonah was afraid that the people of Nineveh would not like his proclamation and would kill him. Therefore, he decided to flee from God’s order. He got passage on a ship to Tarshish instead of to Nineveh. But, as we all know, the ship faced a severe storm and the sailors threw Jonah into the water to calm the storm. God did not let Jonah die. Instead Jonah was swallowed by a giant fish where he stayed for three days. While in the fish, Jonah prayed and grew in his faithfulness. After the fish “vomited” Jonah onto dry land, Jonah went to the city of Nineveh and served as God’s messenger.

As soon as Jonah arrived at the city, he proclaimed the message of God’s punishment. In Jonah, chapter 3, verse 4, we are told, “On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.’” Unlike what Jonah had feared, the people in Nineveh, including the king, listened seriously to Jonah’s proclamation that God’s punishment was near; they repented their sins by putting on sackcloth and praying. (Wearing “sackcloth,” which was a coarse-woven material “...was also a sign of submission, or of grief and self-humiliation and was occasionally worn by the Prophets.) In the same chapter, verses 5 and 6, we read, “The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.” The whole country prayed to God with fasting and putting on sackcloth.

The people of Nineveh’s actions—fasting and putting on sackcloth—were important ways of prayer in that time.

After David became the king of Israel, he also committed serious sins—his sins included taking his servant’s wife, Bathsheba, as his wife. In order to accomplish this, he had her husband Uriah killed in battle. God knew David’s sins and sent Nathan to rebuke David. In 2 Samuel, chapter 12, verse 9, we read, “why did you despise the word of the Lord, by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites.” After David listened to Nathan’s rebuke, he regretted committing sins to God, and he prayed to God with fasting. In the same chapter, verse 16, we read, “He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground.” David repented his sins with fasting and lying on the ground for many days.

Both the people of the Nineveh and David prayed to God in their own ways. And God listened to their prayers, forgave them and helped them. I think it is obvious that it is time for us, as individuals, as church congregations, as local communities, and as cities, states, and countries to pray to God for help. Some people believe—some pastors are even preaching that the Coronavirus is a punishment laid on the people of the world for the sinful life that many of us are leading today. I do not agree with that idea because the God who I know is a God who loves and cares about God’s creatures. My God is the one who loved the world so much that He sent His only Son that whosoever believed in Him—in Jesus—he would be given the strength to overcome any problem.

In Matthew, chapter 6, verses 5 to 6, Jesus said, “When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” The way to pray that Jesus suggested to his followers is the good and right way to pray. I believe, however, even though we pray for only one

second and do so without even closing our eyes or going into a secret room, God loves our prayers and will answer them—even as much as those given in solitude and for hours at a time.

I know we all want to survive this difficult time and help the people in the world who are suffering, but we often don't know how. However, as we all know, there is one way each of us can all contribute—we can pray—pray for God's help.

Friends and families of Woodstock first United Methodist Church, please do not be discouraged during this difficult time. We have the great tool of prayer—a tool that can make a difference.

Have you prayed for God's help for yourself and for the world during this trying time? It is a time to pray. Pray to God for the people who are infected, for our leaders, for the doctors and others who are working for a cure or caring for those who are infected, and, especially, for the victims and those most apt to contract the virus. I believe, the more we pray, the greater will be our voice.

Let us make time to pray for each other and for the world.

Thank you.