

THE OPINION PAGE

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OUR OPINION

Today, focus on all that's good in life

A reminder to readers: It's Easter Sunday. As the coronavirus pandemic occupies so much of our thinking, some might actually need a reminder that today is an especially holy day. Lately, it's hard to remember even what day of the week it is. For three consecutive Sundays, the Herald has published words of encouragement from pastors and representatives of numerous churches and denominations in Greater Grand Forks. It's a bit of a curveball, since the opinion page traditionally is reserved for editorials and thoughts on issues of the day. Meanwhile, we typically relegate religious news, notes and sermons to a dedicated religion page once per week.

But these are different times, and a few encouraging and reassuring words seem very much in order. The fact that these sermonettes have been published in the weeks leading up to, and on, Easter Sunday – and during Passover, which is April 8-16 – is sheer coincidence.

But in retrospect, the timing is perfect. A few examples of comments submitted over the past three weeks: From Paul Knight at Hope Church: "(God), during this time of crisis and fear, please bring the light of your presence and help us focus on your love, your care and your presence."

From Dan Antal at Trinity Free Lutheran Church: "God is not distant from our suffering. He does not sit idly in the heavens."

From Jeff Stephan of Bethel Lutheran Church: "Where there is fear bring faith, where there is doubt bring hope!"

From Mike Foltz of Sacred Heart in East Grand Forks: "As Christians, we are never without hope."

From Jeffrey Powell, of B'nai Israel Synagogue: "Because we are all created in the image of God, we pray for those afflicted to find healing and for those who experience loss to be comforted."

And from Nathan Johnson, of Freedom Church: "What would happen if rather than focusing on the what-ifs and on the uncertainties of our present scenario, we started to focus on the certainties? What if we focused more on what we do have, what we do know and on what we do understand? ... I encourage you to begin to simply focus on the blessings you have knowing God is with you."

Johnson's words resonate. What would happen if we spent a day – today, perhaps – focusing on our blessings rather than the dismal realities of the worldwide pandemic and the woes it has brought in the form of death, illness, unemployment and economic misfortune?

What if today, we spend our time focusing on the good health of ourselves, our families and our friends? What if we take a few moments to wish for a better day for someone who is sick?

And what if, for a day, we not concentrate on our own misgivings about sheltering in place and instead think of those families who have suffered real tragedy – more than just the depressing nature of social distancing – during this pandemic?

Remember, it's Easter, and it's Passover. We're alive. Most of us are healthy. The pandemic is bad, but it's not as bad here as it is elsewhere.

As Pastor Nathan Johnson suggests, let's count our blessings today.

In a fearful time, to turn to prayer

By Ivy Schulz

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Herald recently reached out to clergy members across the community, requesting they submit letters of prayer or words of encouragement for Herald readers.

How many times have you found yourself saying or thinking something along the lines of these lately? "These are some strange times we are living in." Or, "These are scary days." Or, "This is all just a bunch of bologna."

No matter your perception of the COVID-19 pandemic, these are certainly uncertain times. We are fearful. We fear the news reports. We fear the virus. We fear going to the grocery store. We fear the economic strain. We fear the way things have had to change so rapidly. We fear being stuck at home with our whole family for an indefinite amount of time. We fear being lonely. Fear, fear, fear, fear. For people of faith, we know that Jesus said, "Do not be afraid," and as faithful followers we really want to do as we have been told.

If only it were that easy. Scripture comes alive when we can relate to a story. As a pastor, I feel as though I can now say that I have a greater appreciation for Moses. Leading people, trying to remember that God was wandering with them and showing them the way, while at the same time not knowing exactly what the destination would look like or how long the wandering was going to be are things that not just pastors are dealing with, but school leaders, medical professionals, and pretty much anyone else you can think of are wandering in a wilderness. In fear.

Let's own that. Let's name it for what it is. At the same time, we can't let it control us or paralyze us. And so, we turn to prayer.

Join me: "Compassionate God, we are wandering in a land where we have no map. Calm us as we begin to feel anxious. In our walking aimlessly, join us and tell us that you're with us all along the way. Let our hearts rest despite an unknown timeline of crisis and grant us a safe rest each night, and at the last when we are brought to new life with you. Amen."

Ivy Schulz is pastor of Calvary Lutheran Church, Grand Forks.

Move beyond fear, care for others

By Shirah Kraus

We are living in a scary time. Some of us have lost loved ones. Others have lost jobs. And most of us have lost a sense of normalcy. In times of distress, our long-standing traditions can provide insight and support. This week, Jews around the world will be



celebrating Passover, the holiday of redemption.

During festive seder meals, we retell the story of our people. We remember their bitter labors and their miraculous liberation. And we remember the fear and uncertainty of the Israelites as they wandered in the desert to the freedom land.

Our people fled Egypt, which in Hebrew means "narrows" or "straits" (mizrayim). But Egypt is not the only narrow place: "the whole world is a very narrow bridge," said the 17th century Hasidic Rav Nachman of Bratslav. But, he continues, "the most important part is not to be afraid."

We have all known fear. No one can escape fear, but that does not mean we must be afraid. Unchecked, fear can disconnect us and make us feel alone: we hoard, we fight, and we blame. But, if we acknowledge our fear and move past it, we can do better. As educator and author, Parker Palmer, reflects, our spiritual traditions can "take us beyond fear."

Instead of giving into our fears, I pray that we can be like one Passover hero, Miriam, who guarded her brother, Moses, who sang joyfully after crossing the Red Sea, and who drew water for her people as they wandered in the desert. Miriam did not give in to fear, but instead shared her gifts with her family and her nation.

We have so many gifts to share, too. We can donate blood, support policies that assist the most vulnerable, help out neighbors with groceries. Many of us can stay home, keep our distance, and wash our hands. We all have a role to play in this fight.

Though these are unprecedented times, fear is not new to the world. Now and always, we are called to experience our fear and move beyond it, to take care of ourselves and each other.

Shirah Kraus is a student-rabbi serving the Jewish community of Grand Forks. Shirah lives in Cincinnati, Ohio, where she studies at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. She has visited Grand Forks

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Rise up, meet the challenges of today

By Gretchen Graf

As the times require that we become more separated from one another, we are also discovering the deep connections which matter in life. People of many faiths (and of no particular faith) are discovering that the values we hold in common are strong and sustaining.

We all believe in the goodness of life and the joy of helping others. We hold gratitude in common for those who are putting their lives on the line for others – health professionals, grocery and restaurant workers, community leaders, and more.

As we consider how life will go forward through this disruption, we realize that every person in our community and our country has the same needs for health care, food, shelter, education, and connection. On the other side of this time, perhaps we will be more committed to sharing the world's abundant resources equitably with all.

As the news of this pandemic becomes harsher each day, it's tempting to succumb to fear. We simply don't know what tomorrow will bring. It helps me to remember that I don't live in the future; I live today. I only need to meet the challenges of this moment. And I can do that, one moment at a time. The universe is on my side and the strength I need is always supplied.

As a child I was taught that I'm a human being and that sometimes I have spiritual experiences which connect me with the love I call God. As an adult I realize that I am a spiritual being and the human experience I'm having in this life is beautiful and temporary. My "real" life is lived as part of the great energy of all that is – as a part of God. That life is eternal, and no matter what happens in this life on earth, it can't be taken from me. I am well despite illness. I am whole despite strug-

gles. I am eternal, although earthly moments may end. In that assurance, I face life without fear, for nothing can harm me. I give that thought to you, hoping that you, too, may find it sustaining.

Gretchen Graf, Pulpit Supply for Family of God Church, ELCA and UCC.

Peacefulness during these troubling times

By Jane Croeker

Meditation can be a useful tool in dealing with the thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations that arise during this and other challenging times in our lives. Through the practice, we can still our bodies and our minds and allow ourselves to recognize what we are experiencing. When we notice what is happening, we can gradually begin to understand and accept it. We can explore it with interest and without self judgment. As we continue to sit, we will notice that thoughts come and go, just as

the breath comes and goes. They arise and they fall away. They are impermanent, as is everything. We can treat them like clouds in the sky and let them float by, rather than attaching ourselves to them. The same is true for our feelings and what is happening in our bodies.

Meditation can be done while sitting on the floor or in a chair, kneeling, standing and walking. It is helpful to have an upright, but relaxed posture. If you are just beginning, you may wish to start with a few minutes. You will notice your breath at your nostrils, in your lungs, and/or deep within you and this can help ground you. It is normal for our minds to wander and when they do, we can gently bring them back to the present moment. It may feel forced or unnatural at first, but over time, most people find meditation to be a skillful way to cultivate peacefulness, even in the midst of troubled times.

Jane Croeker is a board member of the Lotus Meditation Center in Grand Forks.

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Letters should be limited to 350 words and must include the name of the author. Shorter letters are preferred. A telephone number should be included (the number will not be published). All letters are subject to editing for grammar, length, accuracy and clarity. The Herald will consider longer submissions for its viewpoint columns. These are limited to writers with specific or pertinent expertise on an issue. Viewpoint columns must include a photo of the author. Letters construed as advertising or "thank you" notes will not be published. Email to: letters@gfherald.com. Or send letters to the Herald at Box 6008, Grand Forks, ND, 58206.

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