

KEEPING THE FAITH: PRAYING TOGETHER WHILE WE'RE APART

IN L. FRANK BAUM'S THE WIZARD OF OZ, ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS DOROTHY SAYS TO HER DOG AFTER A TORNADO SETS THEM DOWN IN A STRANGE PLACE IS THIS: "TOTO, I HAVE A FEELING WE'RE NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE." AFTER WRENCHING US FROM OUR ROUTINES AND STRIPPING US FROM OUR NORMS, COVID-19 HAS SET US DOWN IN A VERY STRANGE PLACE INDEED. THE WRITER OF PSALM 137 ASKED HOW DO WE SING THE SONGS OF ZION IN A STRANGE LAND? FOR MANY OF US, THIS STRANGE PLACE HAS MEANT LIVING, WORKING, MEETING AND SHOPPING DIFFERENTLY. ONE OF THE MANY EFFECTS OF COVID-19, BESIDES THE LIVES AND JOBS LOST AND BUSINESSES CLOSED, WAS THE INTERRUPTION OF CONGREGATIONS GATHERING TOGETHER TO WORSHIP, ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER, AND PRAY AND BEAR EACH OTHER'S BURDENS, WHETHER IN A CHURCH OR A STOREFRONT. IT'S TEMPTING TO SAY THAT COVID-19 CLOSED THE CHURCH, BUT THAT WOULD NOT BE TRUE. COVID-19 SPARKED CREATIVITY IN IDENTIFYING NEW WAYS TO WORSHIP, FELLOWSHIP AND GIVE. BELIEVERS REFUSE TO STAY SEPARATED FROM THE VISION AND MISSION OF THEIR FAITH.

LIKE MOST OF THE WORLD, BELIEVERS AND FAITH PRACTITIONERS TRIED TO "BE STILL AND KNOW" FOR A WHILE, BUT SOON ENGAGED AND ADOPTED INNOVATIVE MEANS FOR KEEPING THE FAITH. SOME USED FREE CONFERENCE CALLS, GROUPME, E-MAILS, DRIVE-UP CHURCH AND "STUMP" PREACHING (OPEN AIR, OUTDOOR) TO KEEP HOPE ALIVE, BUT THE MOST POPULAR AND CONSISTENT TOOL HAS BEEN ZOOM. AS WE REVIVED PRAYING TOGETHER, WE REALIZED WE HAVEN'T LOST OUR IDENTITY OR IMPACT BECAUSE WE ARE APART. IN THE VIRTUAL "FELLOWSHIP OF BELIEVERS," WE GATHER AROUND THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF PRAYING AND INVOKING THE HOLY AND REDISCOVER THE TRUTH THAT HAS SHAPED AND SUSTAINED THE GENERATIONS—WE ARE THE CHURCH WHEREVER WE ARE. PRAYING TOGETHER, READING AND STUDYING SCRIPTURE, PROCLAIMING THE WORD, GIVING PRAISE AND WORSHIP, AND SERVING OTHERS ALL LEAD TO A RENEWED SENSE OF BELONGING, COMMUNITY AND HOPE. AS WE SEND OUT THE ZOOM INVITATION OR CONFERENCE CALLS FOR PRAYER, WE EXTEND THE SUBTLE ASSURANCE THAT WE ARE NOT ALONE. GOD IS WITH US. WITH OR WITHOUT A BUILDING, WE ARE STILL THE CHURCH, EVEN IN THIS STRANGE PLACE. GOD LIVES IN US AND WE ARE A "TOGETHER" PEOPLE, IN NEED OF OUR GOD—AND EACH OTHER. WE ARE NOT ALONE IN KEEPING THE FAITH SO LET'S PRAY TOGETHER.