

Greetings to the beloved Saints of Mission Presbytery!

Dear ones, not once in my life did I ever dream that you and I would be in the spot that we seem to be in today. We can look back through history and see that such a time is not without precedent. I suspect that our lives of relative ease tricked us into thinking that times of pandemic were historic and perhaps interesting, but that in a time of medical and technological advances it could never happen to us. Well, we were wrong.

I am now aware of two congregations in the Presbytery who have members hospitalized with Covid-19. And at least two of our pastors are in self-isolation.

Beloveds, the time has come. If you are still worshiping in person as a congregation, it's time to stop doing so and make plans for worshiping virtually. Lives are at stake, including the lives of your pastor and your pastor's loved ones. I cannot tell you how much it grieves me to say this - but we cannot be worshiping together in person for the immediate future.

There is much that we can do to remain connected, to study the Bible together, to call each other for encouragement and support. The church where my family worships, Covenant in San Antonio, not only had virtual worship last Sunday. They also offered Adult Education via Zoom - where we could see each other, hear each other, see the shared lesson on the screen, and have the same kind of back-and-forth discussion you always enjoy in your classes. There are ways around this, friends. We are created in the image of a creative God.

We're going to send out a survey to congregations in the next day or so to ask how you're worshiping, whether your services are available on video or livestream, and also to ask what you need in your community. Elsewhere in this newsletter, again we're publishing the list of who are your regional reps, who are your Commission on Ministry reps, and who are your reps

from the Pastoral Care Committee. They will be reaching out to you. But please reach out to them as well, as needs emerge.

You can also reach out to your staff members at any time. As of today we have deployed staff to work from home. We are in the midst of moving to a new phone system at the office; until that gets in place, the main number is programmed to ring on Melody's cell phone. She can get you connected to what you need. But to avoid driving Melody totally crazy, please feel free to call or email any of us directly. We are here for you, even and especially during this time.

Keep in touch with the frequent postings on our Facebook page. Tricia and Ed have recently done tutorials on Zoom meetings. We will post any announcements there, as well as try to get them out on our regular newsletter mailing list - but the Facebook page will be the most timely.

When Paul and I moved into our house in San Antonio, there was a fig tree just next to the house as you come up the front sidewalk. I have never been a fan of fig trees, and this one was no exception. It was short and squat. The branches looked knobby. It just seemed so random with all the other landscaping around the house. It's really still there because of apathy - I just couldn't take any action to do anything about it. And so it has continued to "grace" our sidewalk now, for almost four years (!).

Now, I am thrilled that my apathy has kept that fig tree in front of our house. In spite of its less than attractiveness, it comes back every year. Just now there are new leaves coming on to it. This week, every time I've noticed it, I remember the words of the prophet Habakkuk - and that short, squat, knobby fig tree brings me renewal and hope - especially in this time. Hear the words of the prophet as found in Habakkuk 3:17-18:

*Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails,
and the field yields no food;*

*though the flock is cut off from the fold,
and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.*

Praying for you all - and hoping that you will keep our staff and your 129 sibling congregations in your prayers as well.