

The Parable of Social Distancing

Lent 1 2021 (31 Jan - 6 March)



The Jesus of history has given the church a great template when it comes to storytelling. He told stories about things he knew about, and stories about things he knew his listeners would know about. He then invited them to look for the meaning and the signs of the coming Kingdom of God that can be encountered in the lives and stories of everyday people like you and me.

So this month we are going to think about what would Jesus say about social distancing. What lessons can be drawn from our common experience of living at a distance from each other? We are going to invite our writers to reflect on passages from the lectionary along with some of the parables of Jesus. We hope that our contributors will help us ask questions like: what have we learned about holiness, communion, freedom and love as we live out the parable of social distancing?

We want to ask what do we learn about **holiness** from being social distanced from one another? Keeping in mind that to be holy means as one dictionary put it: "holy living means that the Christian lives a life that is set apart, reserved to give glory to God..." It is a life of discipline, focus, and attention to matters of righteous living. Could holy living draw us closer to each other or apart?

The next question we will reflect upon is; what do we learn about **communion** and **community** by being physically distanced from each other? Keeping in mind Paul's analogy of the Christian community being like a body the one and the many all functioning together but becoming incapacitated if one part is left on its own. How can we understand presence in a socially distanced church?

What do we learn about **freedom** when we feel our ability to make personal choices has been limited due to compulsory mask wearing and limited travel? What have we learned about the church beyond the walls? Are we discovering a new freedom in worship? Are we encountering a new kind of church?

What lessons of **love** have we learned during this time of social distancing? Does love lead us into holiness? Does love lead us into community and communion? Does love lead us into a new kind of freedom? Does love invite us to take risks?

During the period of Lent we are offering an additional spiritual exercise entitled Lent Legacy. This is designed to help us see that Lent is not about giving things up but rather a time of reflection to pick things up. To help us re-engage with that which really matters.

Each week of the five week theme runs Sunday-Saturday and has its own subtheme, which contains daily Bible readings and thought triggers.

You can't escape holiness (31 January)

1. Deuteronomy 18: 15-20

1. **When God socially distanced himself.** Prophets are not soothsayers; prophets speak for God because the people asked God to socially distance from them (His holiness was too great. They wanted to escape from the fire of holiness).

2. Psalm 111

2. **Should we fear God?** Ask — what does it mean “to fear” the Lord, why is that a wise thing to do? Could wisdom help us understand any of the words: Freedom Communion, Holiness, Love?

3. 1 Corinthians 8

3. **Love and rules.** This passage is an example of how we need to consider how our actions and behaviours affect others.

4. Mark 1: 21-28

4. **When holiness breaks the rules.** Did the holiness of Jesus upset the man with the unclean spirit? Do we want a socially distanced God? Have we socially distanced the gift of healing?

5. Malachi 3: 1-4

5. **When the fire returns the voice of God is no longer distanced.** What has to be refined in our lives to bring us close to God again? What parts of our body need to become alive again to Jesus to create community, to experience freedom, to live out love?

6. Psalm 84

6. **Longing for community.** This psalm reflects the longing that comes from distancing. When exiled we long to be in community and communion with God.

7. Psalm 24

7. **To see the glory you must be holy.** This psalm, often sung at Church of Scotland Communion services, speaks of the longing to experience the glory. First we need to encounter the refiner's fire.

Your freedom is my freedom? (7 February)

1. Hebrews 2: 14-18

1. **The Bridge to Freedom.** Death is the result of our individualism, our rejection of personhood, our rejection of the image of God in community and our desire to be as gods creating and worshipping our own self image. Death is our ultimate imprisonment of self. Jesus is our bridge into true freedom bringing us back into personhood and community. He rescues us from death; he redeems our life for eternal living.

2. Luke 2: 22-40

2. **The lights shining on Freedom Bridge.** This reading links us into the word 'holy' again. It also links us back to the voice of God in the mouth of the prophet Anna. Both Anna and Simeon are God's messengers in his temple. See the link with Malachi 3: 1-4. The light of the world among us was recognised by those two older holy people. Interesting to note the prophetic words spoken to Mary. This child would bring conflict and pain into her life too. Where are the prophets today? Would we recognise them and listen to them? Have we become distanced from such older voices?

3. Isaiah 40: 21-31

4. Psalm 107: 1-22

3. **Distanced perhaps? But never hidden!** We may feel distanced from God. But we are not hidden. If we hold on his promises will be fulfilled. As we saw yesterday Simeon and Anna waited. Even in their old age they found strength to keep believing, to keep going. Those who wait and trust will find the strength they need.

5. 1 Corinthians 9: 16-23

4. **Love hold us together.** How can we endure the waiting, looking for the coming of healing and redemption? We must hope in the steadfast love of the Lord. Love holds us in community and frees us to believe impossible things.

5. **Love is free to surrender freedom.** Servanthood and love. Humility and freedom are the marks of those who risk all for the sake of the Gospel. How far will we travel down such a road in order to bring others to Jesus?

6. Mark 1: 29-39

6. **The Freedom Giver.** Could the secret of his power of healing lie in his communion with his Father? Jesus distanced himself from the crowds to find the place of prayer in order that he could return to release the imprisoned in body, mind and spirit.

7. 2 Kings 2: 1-12

7. **The prophet is freed to pass on his mantle.** The challenge of being released from ministry in order to pass the calling to another. The challenge of seeing the fire to speak the voice of God. (See also Psalm 50: 1-6.)

Seeing with new eyes (14 February)

Starting on Ash Wednesday (17th February) we will be beginning a series of **Lent Legacy** prompts for action that will be published alongside the daily worship posts each day. They are reproduced below for reference.

1. 2 Corinthians 4: 3-6
 1. **None so blind as those who will not see.** They say love is blind. Perhaps if you are in love with yourself you will never see the beauty of another. Humanism, the belief in human nature as opposed to belief in the creator and maker of humanity, means that it become impossible to see beyond self to God. Revelation is the work of the Spirit of God. It is an opening of the eyes and the heart to God.
2. Mark 9: 2-9
 2. **A glimpse of his glory.** Here is a picture of heaven touching earth. A picture of two worlds intertwined. If we want to see the glory we require to climb the mountain with Jesus. To go to the distant place is not enough, seeing with new eyes is a revelation not a realisation. It is not an imaginary concept but a transformation brought about by the eyes of our heart.
3. Joel 2: 1-2, 12-17
 3. **The transformation of public worship.** Joel reminds us that even in the darkest of times when all seems lost that if we turn the eyes of our heart to the Lord and in turning return with sincerity — all will not be lost. Blessing can be a mark left after the turmoil. It's time to return and encounter the steadfast love of the Lord. The act of returning to public worship in true humility and penitence will change the destiny of our church and land. Sincerity is never an outward show but an inward transformation.
4. Isaiah 58: 1-12
(Ash Wednesday, Lent Begins)
 4. **Seeing makes us Culpable.** The true meaning of Lent is not about an outward show of discipline and abstinence. It is not a season of rule keeping. It is about an inward transformation that changes our will and our behaviours so that we become servants of the poor and afflicted rather than performers of services to the rich and powerful. True fasting is to “choose to loose the bonds of injustice”. **Lent Legacy: Think about one injustice that it is in your power and will to do something about and leave the legacy.**
5. Psalm 51: 1-17
 5. **Repentance is to see ourselves.** Lent is more than a time of introspection, it is a time for transformation. A time to cast away and a time to gather. A time to uproot and a time to plant new seeds. A time to weep and a time wipe away tears. Lent is not simply about our brokenness but it is about our rehabilitation of self and others. **Lent legacy: Reflect — what part of you needs to be rehabilitated?**
6. 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10
 6. **The enigma of discipleship.** The cost of discipleship is bittersweet. Seeing with new eyes causes us to be misunderstood and often kept at a distance. **Lent legacy: Consider — Who is it that God wants you to see with new eyes?**
7. Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21
 7. **Let our hands be hidden but God's love revealed.** We are called to live out the grace of God in such a manner that we are hidden but God's love is revealed. It's a distancing of the self to allow the love of God to draw near to others. **Lent legacy: Reflect — who is it that you need to back off from in order that God's grace can be encountered? Who is it that you could give hidden support to?**

Covenants, signs and promises (21 February)

Starting on Ash Wednesday (17th February) we will be beginning a series of **Lent Legacy** prompts for action that will be published alongside the daily worship posts each day. They are reproduced below for reference.

1. Genesis 9: 8-17

2. Psalm 25: 1-10

3. 1 Peter 3: 18-21

4. Mark 1: 9-13

5. Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

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1. **The rainbow still has meaning.** Noah's Ark is the story of the first lockdown. Devastation falls on all the earth. The writers of the story attribute the flooding of the world as a consequence of human sinfulness. While we don't see Covid as a judgement from God, it may be when the history books are written and the course of this pandemic understood, human nature and our behaviours will have contributed to its spread but also its subsequent defeat. The rainbow reminds us of the fragility of life but also that God promises to be with us in our darkest moments. **Lent Legacy: Try baking a rainbow cake and share it. Find a rainbow card and post it. Perhaps just be a little more colourful for the rest of your life?**

2. **The cure for the Covid Blues.** This psalm is a great encouragement, it invites us to rejoice in the fact that evil cannot prevail, even the evil of a pandemic. Goodness is all that God wants for his creation. We are called to lift up our hearts our heads and our souls to see that which cannot be extinguished the steadfast love and faithfulness of God. **Lent Legacy: Reflect — if God is faithful, who do we need to be more faithful towards?**

3. **Baptism is our new rainbow sign.** This passage suggests that everyone receives an opportunity to see with new eyes and believe. Even those who have existed before the coming of Messiah. God's grace reaches into the past, the present and the future. Baptism is our new rainbow sign of hope pointing us to our new resurrected life in Jesus. Baptism speaks of a new freedom through dying to self. **Lent Legacy: If you have been baptised — lift a glass of water, drink it and thank God for your baptism even if you can't remember it, it's grace received. If you haven't been baptised — lift a glass of water, drink it and reflect upon how you too are invited to the waters of baptism.**

4. **The dangers of distance.** Love is the one word that sustained and strengthen Jesus in his times of great trial and temptation in the wilderness. It is interesting to note that the place of distance and retreat can be the place of temptation, or the place of sustaining strength. When we distance ourselves we must do so in the love of the Father and not through the temptation of the father of lies. **Lent Legacy: Consider — what are the temptations that come with introspection?**

5. **Your baptism removes distance.** This particular account of God appearing to Abram parallels the same story told in Chapter 15 and chapter 18 of Genesis. God's covenant this time is highlighted as everlasting. It speaks to us of God's eternal purpose that human beings might walk with him and in doing enjoy life to the full. It is not his intention that we should be distanced from his company. Just as circumcision was a sign that was received without choice by the Jewish community as a reminder of their relationship with God. So grace in christian baptism is received not earned or deserved by an individual. This is further demonstrated when infants are baptised. Look for the signs that speak of tGod's promised presence. **Lent Legacy: Reflect — what signs of God's presence might we revisit and wonder at? If you have been baptised, find out the date you were and celebrate it every year with friends.**

Covenants, signs and promises (21 February) Continued

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6. Psalm 22: 23-31

7. Romans 4: 13-25

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- 6. Exploring presence and promise.** In times of lockdown we can feel cut off from friends and family. Presence has become a concept we are all beginning to think more about. We recognise the importance of virtual presence but we long for in-person presence. The world declares a virtual presence of the Almighty but the writers of the psalms point to a day of encounter that will be even more real than that which we encounter through physical contact. **Lent Legacy: Take part in an online communion service at some point during Lent.**
- 7. A promise, give it a sign.** Here in this passage Paul explains how it is not the letter of the law that saves us but the life of faith. Abraham was righteous because he believed God's promise. Signs can be seen as markers of promises believed. Have you given something or someone the status of a sign? May some promises need some signs attached? **Lent Legacy: Believe a promise God made to us. Fix it with a sign. It could be a stone, a gift you give yourself, or a gift you give to another.**

The parables of Jesus, lessons learned from social distancing (28 February)

Starting on Ash Wednesday (17th February) we will be beginning a series of **Lent Legacy** prompts for action that will be published alongside the daily worship posts each day. They are reproduced below for reference.

1. Matthew 18: 10-14

1. **The Lost Sheep.** The shepherd seeks out the socially distanced sheep from the 99. Lesson learned no one is socially distanced from God. To be a person we must be in community. **Lent legacy: Reflect — who is it God is inviting you to draw back in to the fold?**

2. Luke 10: 29-37

2. **The Good Samaritan.** The priest and Levite are afraid to become unclean by touching the wounded man. The Samaritan takes the risk to save a life. Who are the Samaritans in our socially distanced communities? Have we been socially distanced long before the pandemic? Who are our neighbours today? **Lent legacy: Ask God's forgiveness for the times that we have by our judgemental attitude socially distanced ourselves from others.**

3. Luke 18: 9-14

3. **The Publican and the Pharisee.** Two men, socially distanced from each other, who was closer to God? It is the heart of true repentance to understand the amazing grace of God. What was the Pharisee missing out on? **Lent Legacy: Ask God if he will help you examine your heart.**

4. Luke 15: 11-32

4. **The Prodigal Son.** Three people socially distanced: a son and a father, and a brother and a brother. Who was the biggest risk taker? The father, the son, or the older brother? How do we measure risk against love and compassion? **Lent legacy: What risks would you take to bring harmony back into your family, your church, your neighbourhood?**

5. Luke 17: 11-19

5. **A real life parable about community, think about communal gratitude.** How should we express our gratitude when we come out of this pandemic? Who should we show `gratitude to? **Lent legacy: What would a letter of gratitude look like written to God? What would a letter of gratitude look like written to a friend who who is a key worker?**

6. Matthew 9: 16-17

6. **Old wine and new wineskins.** What has to change in the church to face the new reality that will meet congregations on their return to their buildings. Can you put the new wine into the old formats? **Lent Legacy: Consider —what part could you play in getting new wine into new wineskins?**

7. John 12: 24

7. **Parable of the seed.** A short parable with a big punch. What does it mean to 21st century post pandemic Christian Communities? **Lent Legacy: What practices in church life have to die in order to let new things flourish?**