

April 11, 2020 WholeLife Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2800 N Orange Ave Orlando, FL 32804 Social Distancing and Socially Distant by Greg Creek and Andy McDonald

Normally today would be one of our high attendance services as we give attention to the life, death and especially the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Tomorrow normally there are wonderful and meaningful sunrise services commemorating the resurrection.

When I was growing up we all gathered at my grandparents with all the cousins for a special lunch and of course Easter egg hunts.

This year regardless of your Easter traditions, outside of those with your immediate family at home, they are pretty much off this year. Churches which mark this weekend with high attendance, will be quiet and empty as we honor each other with social distancing.

For those of you counting, this is our 5th week to gather virtually and we don't know how many weeks it will be wise for us to not assemble together out of love for one another.

Even while Greg and I are here in the worship center pre-recording this service we and the musicians who were here earlier and our technical support team all work to practice social distancing.

And we are all weary of these new restrictions and how they have interrupted the flow of our everyday life.

One of results of social distancing is that we are more likely to become socially distant. You might be wondering, "did Greg just say the same thing? Has quarantine got to him?" I have been recognizing that just because you're practicing social distancing it doesn't mean you have to be socially distant. I can still call people, text people, video chat people, engage more deeply with people that I'm quarantined with and so on. What knocked me over like a ton of bricks was this idea that when we're not practicing social distancing, we can still be socially distant.

Humans are communal beings. There's a trove of science to prove it. That doesn't mean we're all extroverts; it just means that we're designed to be in relationship; and THAT doesn't mean that we all need to be married or matched up. It means that we need some type of relationship in order to be mentally stable.

There are some in this world who, prior to Coronavirus, were on the outside looking in, they were socially distant in a time when there were no rules about social distancing. For some, they were fine being on the outside, for others, they desperately wanted in. So the time that we're in feels like more of the same.

Regardless of where you were before, the reality is we're all kind of in the same boat now. Pastor Andy, as an extrovert, has been twitching a lot recently. But why on Easter have we devoted time to social distancing and the idea of being socially distanced? Does our current situation have any parallel to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?

Andy and I want to share some events during the passion week or holy week, which is a term people use to refer to the time surrounding the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We feel these events are especially meaningful in our current situation because how much social distancing was happening, and how much people were socially distant.

Jesus, his disciples, and lots of people had this moving event called the triumphal entry, where Jesus entered into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. This was super important in their culture because it is how new kings would enter their domain. But the people that were present, including the disciples, assumed Jesus was going to be setting up a kingdom, like I rule over this patch of land, and getting rid of the rule of the Romans. For the disciples, they thought it meant

power, prestige, money, fame. For those of you that are Hamilton fans, they thought they were going to be in the room where it happens.

The problem was that Jesus was not doing things right. Judas betrayed Jesus. Whether Judas betrayed Jesus to force his hand to become king, or whether Judas was looking out for himself we don't know. And so, Jesus, in his last hours before his death, gathered his disciples, including Judas, to celebrate the Passover meal. This meal was incredibly important in Jewish culture as it not only reminded them of their ancestors escape from slavery in Egypt, but also pointed forward to the Messiah. And so Jesus, gathered room in the room with his closest friends, was socially distant from most of them. Jesus shared a cup with the man who had already plotted to betray him. Jesus shared a table with guys who were fighting over who got the most prominent positions in this new kingdom that they were sure Jesus was establishing. So while there was no social distancing in order, they were all socially distant.

After the supper it says they sang a hymn and went out. Jesus leads them to the Garden. A safe social distancing from the normal multitudes. Once in the Garden he selects Peter, James, and John and the four of them socially distance themselves from the others and go further into the garden, and finally Jesus moves further alone socially distancing from them to connect one on one with his Father.

It was after this time of prayer and awakening the disciple to pray and more time alone with the Father that Jesus comes back to the disciples and says: "Still sleeping? Still resting? Look, the time has come. I, the Son of Man, am betrayed into the hands of sinners. Up, let's be going. See my betrayer is here!"

Then there is Judas feigned act of coming close and the kiss of betrayal and Jesus is arrested. Thomas had encouraged the other disciple when Jesus said they were going back to Judea that they should all go and die with Jesus! But now in the darkness, in the terror of the moment, all the disciples practiced social distancing and deserted Jesus and fled.

Then the people who had arrested Jesus led him to the home of Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of religious law and the elders had gathered. 58 Meanwhile, Peter followed him at a distance and came to the high priest's courtyard. He went in and sat with the guards and waited to see how it would all end. 69 Meanwhile, Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant girl came over and said to him, "You were one of those with Jesus the Galilean."

70 But Peter denied it in front of everyone. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

71 Later, out by the gate, another servant girl noticed him and said to those standing around, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." 72 Again Peter denied it, this time with an oath. "I don't even know the man," he said. 73 A little later some of the other bystanders came over to Peter and said, "You must be one of them; we can tell by your Galilean accent." 74 Peter swore, "A curse on me if I'm lying—I don't know the man!" And immediately the rooster crowed.

75 Suddenly, Jesus' words flashed through Peter's mind: "Before the rooster crows, you will deny three times that you even know me." And he went away, weeping bitterly.

Peter tried as hard as he could to be socially distant from Jesus.

From the home of Caiaphas they took Jesus to Pilate. The needed civil authority for the death penalty they sought. Jesus, practicing a sad social distancing from any who might stand with him, faces Pilate alone. He remains quiet. No engagement to defend himself against the charges brought against him. He certainly feels the pain of social distancing, the sense of utter aloneness.

Matthew 27:15-25 Now it was the governor's custom each year during the Passover celebration to release one prisoner to the crowd—anyone they wanted. 16 This year there was a

notorious prisoner, a man named Barabbas. 17 As the crowds gathered before Pilate's house that morning, he asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you—Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" 18 (He knew very well that the religious leaders had arrested Jesus out of envy.) 19 Just then, as Pilate was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent him this message: "Leave that innocent man alone. I suffered through a terrible nightmare about him last night." 20 Meanwhile, the leading priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas to be released and for Jesus to be put to death. 21 So the governor asked again, "Which of these two do you want me to release to you?" The crowd shouted back, "Barabbas!" 22 Pilate responded, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" They shouted back, "Crucify him!" 23 "Why?" Pilate demanded. "What crime has he committed?" But the mob roared even louder, "Crucify him!" 24 Pilate saw that he wasn't getting anywhere and that a riot was developing. So he sent for a bowl of water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood. The responsibility is yours!" 25 And all the people yelled back, "We will take responsibility for his death—we and our children!"

Not only did the crowd vehemently space themselves from Jesus, Pilate symbolically washed his hands because he wanted nothing to do with Jesus either. They sent a man to his death and they cared so little about it they didn't mind claiming full responsibility for themselves and their children.

I can imagine as Jesus took his first steps under the weight of the cross there was a parting of the crowd. Was he practicing social distancing from them or were they socially distancing from him? I can't but wonder if in the crowds that lined the street, witnesses but not wanting too much identification with the condemned man Jesus, were there those he had healed? Was there someone watching with eyes that had been blind? Someone hearing shouts of mocking who had before they met Jesus lived in a world of silence? Were there healed lepers with their families who had been condemned to life times of social distancing before Jesus had healed them? Were they there. Now the pressure of their peers cause them to value social distancing from Jesus.

The three condemned men are crucified. Three crosses together but apart. There is mockery even from those of a shared fate. "So you're the messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself and us too, while your at it." Jesus hangs between heaven and earth alone. But even in this moment of social distancing he remembers his mission, he thinks not ill but well for those who have brought him to this place. He prays, "Father forgive them because they don't know what they are doing!"

But of all the social distancing and of all the feelings of being socially distant nothing surpasses Jesus' cry from the cross, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"

Here is the apex of aloneness. Social distancing has its pain but in this moment Jesus has a full cup of both social distancing and a sense of being socially distant in a lethal combination and he gives up his spirit. Jesus is dead.

What will happen? From this moment of apparent defeat, this moment of abandonment and distance what will the resurrection bring?

Throughout his life on this earth when people pulled away and were socially distant, or when there were times of social distancing in all those times Jesus was still there, still trying to minister to needs, to care for people. The last supper Jesus made sure his betrayer had a seat at the table.

And now in his forsaken death he bears all the sin of everyone and is forsaken so that none of us need be forsaken.

God longs to be with his children to not be distant but to be near. We hear this in the worlds of the Psalmist when he writes “The Lord is near to all who call on him” We hear it in Lamentations 3:57 where it says “God, you came near when I called you, and you said, ‘Do not fear.’”

We see it clearly illustrated in Jesus’ post resurrection encounters.

Jesus is near Mary at the tomb on resurrection morning

Jesus joins Cleopas and his friend walking the road home to Emmaus discouraged because Jesus is dead and he hides his identity and opens scripture to their understanding, he near with them.

Jesus is concerned for building Thomas faith and comes near him to let him touch the scars and know he is alive

Jesus is near to Peter as he has this intimate conversation and restores, reinstates, re-recruits his denier.

Jesus appears and is with and near to all his disciples.

And Jesus makes promises that spill all the way down to right now.

SAM: Testimony about great commission and Jesus saying he will be with us forever to the end of the age.

I will never leave you or forsake you. Jesus has walked in the shoes of social distance and the socially distanced and he has promised to be with you. He has sent the spirit to us to be a comfort and a guide. But, not only that, he has called us to be socially present with people. The charge Jesus gave us was to be his presence in the world. We have been tasked to include the socially distant, even in the midst of social distance. Our vision is to be a church without walls and right now, we’re doing great because our church isn’t meeting inside these walls. But the church, which is people, you and me, we are called to be includers, to not have people that are socially distant.

Christians have good news. Jesus came to break down walls, to bring those that were on the outside to the inside. He didn’t want people that were socially distant. He left giving us the charge to continue that work. It’s a high responsibility we’ve been called to, as it came from Christ himself.

Physical distance separates us now. I hope and pray this experience of coronavirus, of wrestling with being socially distant as we practice social distance, will make us more human; that it will make us more prone to inclusion. Most people alive will always remember this period of history. I hope we, as a society, emerge from these dark days like Christ emerged from the tomb, on a mission to engage in relationship.

Song: Jesus Paid It All

And now may the resurrected and living Lord Jesus Christ who paid it all, live in each of us by the Holy Spirit to enable us, even in this time of social distancing, to engage with one another so that none, not even one is allowed to be lost in being socially distant because you have sent us with resurrection life to be near. Amen



What is your best Easter memory?

How do you plan to celebrate the resurrection this weekend?

What is easy and what is hard about social distancing for you?

When have you felt the most socially distant?

How have you intentionally tried to connect during this time to avoid for yourself or relieve another's feeling of being socially distant?

Where do you see in the Bible Jesus practicing "social distancing"?

How hard is it for you to imagine Jesus and the disciples having the last supper and a lot of being socially distant was happening?

When have you wanted to practice social distancing with Christ's body the church because you felt socially distant??

If God really wants to be with his kids, and Jesus really promised to be with us to the end what are the implications for followers of Jesus? Who is it okay for us to let feel socially distant?

How will you harness Resurrection Life to make social connections for kingdom benefit, especially during this pandemic?



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