

## **Welcome to Worship**

Friends, we are doing worship in a new way during this season. The sanctuary is empty, but we are still the church. The church has always been the people, not the building in which we gather. Even if we cannot be together in this place, we are together in worship today by the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives and by the digital signal that helps us connect to one another. Wherever you are, and whether you are watching it live or as a recording, this is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

## **Opening Song**

### **“Spirit of the Living God”**

Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me.  
Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me.  
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.  
Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me.

## **Opening Prayer**

Come, Lord, come down, come in, come among us.  
Enter into our darkness with your light.  
Come fill our emptiness with your presence.  
Dispel the clouds and reveal your glory.  
Come refresh, renew, restore us.  
Come Lord, come down, come in, come among us. Amen.

## **Scripture Lesson**

### **Jeremiah 29:4-14**

<sup>4</sup>The LORD of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims to all the exiles I have carried off from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup>Build houses and settle down; cultivate gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup>Get married and have children; then help your sons find wives and your daughters find husbands in order that they too may have children. Increase in number there so that you don't

dwindle away. <sup>7</sup> Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because your future depends on its welfare. <sup>8</sup> The LORD of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims: Don't let the prophets and diviners in your midst mislead you. Don't pay attention to your dreams. <sup>9</sup> They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I didn't send them, declares the LORD. <sup>10</sup> The LORD proclaims: When Babylon's seventy years are up, I will come and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup> I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the LORD; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope. <sup>12</sup> When you call me and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. <sup>13</sup> When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me. <sup>14</sup> I will be present for you, declares the LORD, and I will end your captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have scattered you, and I will bring you home after your long exile,<sup>[a]</sup> declares the LORD.

## **Message**

**“Safe Havens and Cabin Fever”**  
**Rev. Leanne B. Thompson**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Willmar, MN**  
**March 22, 2020**

I have a confession. I love an occasional snow day, the kind that is a full-on blizzard and leaves no doubt that you are staying home. I used to secretly pray for a day where being home together was the only option. A day like that meant snuggling on the couch watching cartoons, blanket forts, homemade chocolate chip cookies, hours of board games, and chili simmering in the crockpot. A day like that meant quality time as a family without any interruptions, nothing else competing for time and attention. Rare, cherished moments, of love and togetherness in the safe haven that is home.

In the midst of the *busy* of life I would long for that Norman Rockwell-esque ideal. As we lived the reality of *divide and conquer* the obligations of life, I would long for the simple joy of being together. The occasional snow day was a nice respite from the normal pace of life.

The days of blanket forts are behind us, but I still crave the occasional excuse to cocoon into the safe space of home, settle in with a good book and a cup of

tea. I still appreciate the occasional excuse for a slower pace and a little more peace and quiet. But only for a day, maybe two. The reality is that there is a fine line between *the comfort of home* and *cabin fever*.

Is anyone else feeling just a little antsy with the state of the world? Is anyone else feeling just a little resentful to find ourselves under house arrest? I'm exaggerating just a little; nobody is making you stay home. But there isn't anyplace to go. We are experiencing COVID-19 cabin fever. The world has taken on a shape we don't recognize. And we have become bound, imprisoned, not by the walls of our homes, but by fears and anxieties about the unknown trajectory of this pandemic, about the economic impact to our communities, about the safety and welfare of those we love and those we don't even know. In many ways it feels like our lives have become captive to a force we don't understand and can't control.

It is in times like this that I return to the comforting and familiar words of scripture, and find in those stories, people like us, confronted with trying circumstances, and figuring out how to live a new normal.

I have always loved this passage from the prophet Jeremiah, the calm comforting assurance that no matter the circumstances we find ourselves in, "I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the LORD; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope." Those are words I need to hear right now. They are words I suspect you need to hear right now. "I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the LORD; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope." It would be enough today to rest in those words, to chant them like a prayer, to wrap them around ourselves like a hug. "I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the LORD; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope."

But there is more comfort to be found in this passage, and I want to take you there with me. Consider to whom these words were addressed. They were spoken to Hebrew people who had been taken captive and forced into exile in Babylon. They were far from home, far from anything familiar. The entire rhythm of their lives had been disrupted and they longed to return to the safe, familiar pattern of their days. But those familiar patterns, routines, and rituals were out of reach. It would have been easy, in those circumstances, to give in to despair. I believe they were giving in to despair. It's why God spoke through

the prophet to God's people, encouraging them to hold on to hope. But that *holding on to hope* was more than closing themselves in and enduring long enough to survive their exile. This *holding on to hope* was an active engagement in the world.

“Build houses and settle down; cultivate gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup> Get married and have children; then help your sons find wives and your daughters find husbands in order that they too may have children. Increase in number there so that you don't dwindle away. <sup>7</sup> Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because your future depends on its welfare.”

In other words, live where you are. It's not where you want to be, it's not how you want it to be. You feel like you have no control over your circumstances, but you do, because you have control over how you choose to live in the midst of these circumstances.

Friends, we are in exile. I am feeling that exile particularly strongly this morning as I sit in an empty sanctuary. Our familiar patterns, routines, and rituals have been disrupted. We don't know how this is going to go, or how long it is going to last. This pandemic is testing our faith, compassion and generosity. It is demanding of us a kind of isolation that leaves us lonely, anxious, and depressed. In a very real way, we need our homes to be safe havens, sheltering us and those we love from contagion. We can't afford to give into the despair of cabin fever.

We need to keep living. The living will look different in this season. The worship will look different in this season. But the need for compassion and generosity are greater than they have ever been. Our neighbors need us more than they ever have. I invite you, in this time of exile, to plant kindness, grow patience, offer love and compassion where you can, and, as God reminds us through the prophet Jeremiah “promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because your future depends on its welfare.”

We are separated at a safe distance, but we are in this together. And the God of exiles will hold us together, promising a future filled with hope. Please, friends, live as if you believe that promise is true, investing kindness and compassion into whatever future God leads us.

## Prayers of Intercession

With all the faithful, let us pray to the Lord,  
who is our hiding place in times of trouble,  
who surrounds us with glad cries of deliverance.

We pray for all who are hungry –  
whether hungry for power and glory  
or hungry for a simple meal.

Show the mighty  
that you alone can satisfy their deepest need,  
and feed the poor  
from the abundance of your good creation.

We pray for the church in times of trial –  
whether tested by tempestuous change  
or tempted by safety of the status quo.

Give us peace  
when anger and fear threaten to divide us,  
and challenge us to acts of compassion  
when we are tempted to give in to our own despair.

We pray for leaders in high places-  
whether determined to help those who suffer  
or distant from the cries of the oppressed.

Open their eyes  
to see your saving power at work,  
and open their ears  
to hear your prophets' calls for justice.  
Lord God, instruct us in the way we should go  
and let your steadfast love surround us always,  
in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior  
who taught us to pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,  
thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day, our daily bread;  
and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom, and the power,  
and the glory, forever. Amen.**

## **Closing Song**

### **“May You Run and Not Be Weary”**

May you run and not be weary.  
May your heart be filled with song.  
And may the love of God continue  
to give you hope and keep you strong.  
And may you run and not be weary.  
May your life be filled with joy!  
And may the road you travel  
always lead you home.