

Dear People of University Lutheran Church,

How do you praise God in the midst of a coronavirus pandemic? It's a question that came to mind as I stepped out of the shower this morning. Almost as fast as God raised it in my brain, He helped me to formulate an appropriate response. You see, I remember the Grand Forks Flood of 1997 like it was yesterday. As flood refugees, we were living in Thief River Falls with our good friends, Pastor John and Dee Wollenzien. They graciously opened their home to Margo, Erin, Michael, Kirby, and me. But soon came the time where I had to go back to see the damage the river had done to our home.

Interestingly enough, in order to get home from Thief River, I had to travel all the way to Fargo first, and then back to Grand Forks. The Red River was so high, Fargo was the only place where it was crossable. When I drove up to our home and got out of our car, I was very anxious. Would there be water on our first floor? No, thankfully there wasn't, but we sure had a basement full. Uffda! Walking back outside, I felt overwhelmed, and just plain sad. But then I saw it. The Salvation Army relief truck, and a very kind man who wanted to serve me lunch. It was delicious! Praise the Lord!

What? Praise the Lord for hotdish when your basement is full of water? Some might wonder if I am crazy. I probably am. However, about this point I feel clear: When terrible things happen to us in life, and unfortunately things like floods and coronavirus pandemics do happen, reasons to praise God still abound. It might be hard to see them in any given moment. For example, I was not praising God when I was staring at water lapping onto the top step of our basement stairway. Although, maybe I should have been, since we did not have any water on our main floor.

Truthfully, it took a kind, faithful, believer in the Lord, who brought me a warm lunch in the midst of a flood, to open my eyes and see God present for me in that crisis. There in that moment of grace, I found my reason to feel glad in my heart and to praise the Lord, because to me this was a sign that everything despite the monumental tasks ahead, would slowly recover and be OK again. Even in our darkest days, we would do well to praise the Lord for the good news that He is near us and ready to help us, as it says in Psalm 134:8, "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit."

So, in this time of the coronavirus, if you are struggling with your faith, if you are struggling to feel glad in your heart, and if you are struggling to find reasons to praise the Lord, look for little things to refocus you. What beautiful thing do you see outside? What act of kindness has been done for you? What small matter made you smile? Yesterday, our daughter Erin called me on FaceTime when I was at the church. There on the phone right in front of me was our 8-month-old granddaughter, Addison, smiling at me and showing me her new duck face. Of course, I smiled back. Praise the Lord!

I have no need to defend God from questions like, "Why does a good God allow the coronavirus to cause people so much trouble?" I will let God defend Himself. Still, some people need to wrestle with such a complicated question. I simply tell them that I have a very different kind of question. Like, where is God in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic? I am not one who sees Him "doing it" or "allowing it". Rather, I look for the ways God is present with us and working to help us through it. When I catch a glimpse of such moments, my heart feels glad, and I open mouth to sing praise.

You are in my prayers,  
Pastor Tom