"Slow Me Down, Lord" by Wilfred Arlan Peterson

Slow me down, Lord.

Ease the pounding of my heart by the quieting of my mind. Steady my hurried pace.
Give me, amidst the day's confusion the calmness of the everlasting hills.

Break the tension of my nerves and muscles
with the soothing music of singing streams
that live in my memory.

Help me to know the magical, restoring power of sleep.
Teach me the art of taking minute vacations....
slowing down to look at a flower, to chat with a friend, to read a few lines from a good book.

Remind me of the fable of the hare and the tortoise;
that the race is not always to the swift;
that there is more to life than measuring its speed.

Let me look up at the branches of the towering oak
and know that ... it grew slowly ... and well.

Inspire me to send my own roots down deep...
into the soil of life's endearing values...

That I may grow toward the stars of my greater destiny.

Slow me down, Lord.

May the words of my mouth and the mediations of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, oh Lord you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

“God Is Able”

We have a sweet passage before us today, Ephesians 3:14–21. It could have been chosen for any number of reasons. But the primary portion I’ve been drawn to is vv.16-17. In the ESV version, it reads like we’re starting in the middle of a sentence but the NIV expresses the thought well. “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. Paul is praying that the Father will [strengthen us] with power through the work of his Spirit such that we will think and speak and live by faith—such that we will be more fully transformed into His likeness, more aligned with Him in (our) inner being, to walk in a manner worthy of [our] calling (4:1).
Our inner being is the place where we’re strengthened by His Spirit. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians: 2Co416 … our outer self is wasting away, but our inner self is being renewed day by day. This is the place where we’re strengthened with the (Spirit’s) power to trust Jesus, and then to live in that trust.

I can’t think of a better word for us to hear this morning than this! I can’t think of a more appropriate or timely word. These are not days in which it’s easy to live by faith. All the things we are still hearing about coronavirus even today, still feel worrisome especially as we have been given the state government’s go-ahead to resume “normal activities” without any mandated precautions. Wow! There is such tense anxiety in the air right now. Over the past months, we have come to realize that this virus doesn’t just hit older and immune-compromised people. Children are not entirely unthreatened by it. Many have been hospitalized by it.

If ever there were a time when our eyes could be drawn away from Christ toward the waves of fear and doubt, right now is such a time! And if ever our trust could be fixed in the good intentions of our persistent efforts, right now is such a time. Our safety as we see it is tied up with how consistently and thoroughly we wash our hands, how conscientiously we maintain our physical distance, how deliberately we sequester ourselves from public life.

But that’s not where our safety comes from. That’s not how our health is maintained. Yes, each of these disciplines is important in a time of pandemic. And as we’ve stated, adhering to them is not just an exercise in self-protection; it’s how we best love one another. But our faith is not fixed in these practices. They are not the ultimate means by which we’re kept safe.

There is one God in heaven who is King and Lord of all. There is one God in heaven to whom every entity in this universe is subject. Even the occasional virus that’s new to humanity and vulnerable human beings has been known eternally by this great and glorious God! And we are His. He is our Father. We are His image-bearing creatures. And He reigns over us. He has named us, each and all.

No virus will touch us unless He has given it permission. No virus will take us unless He has appointed it to do so. And if the washing of our hands and the keeping of our distance has resulted in our sustained health, it’s not because those practices are foolproof. It’s because our God has purposed them as the means by which we’re being
taught to walk by faith in Him, and the way in which He has willed to achieve His purpose in us.

According to the riches of his glory he strengthens us with power through his Spirit in our inner being so that Christ may dwell in our hearths through faith. God our Father strengthens us inwardly through the work of his Spirit so that, through faith, Christ may take up residence with us, and enable us to grasp the limitless magnitudes of God’s love for us!

No virus can touch that! And no human effort can displace it! That is our power. That is our hope. That is our deliverance and confidence and life! Yes, that is where we live! And when we live there, it makes all the difference! When we live there, old things like fear and dread and hopelessness pass away. They die! And new things like courage and confidence and hope are born (2 Colossians 5:17). They live! That’s what happens when the life we live in the flesh we live by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us (Galatians 2:20).

Those new things give us the strength to stand up straight and tall when the world arounds us is cowering in fear. They enable us to love when the world around us is retreating into dread. My dear 5th Avenue Family and Friends, it’s in days like these when the difference between God’s holy and dearly loved children (Colossians 3:12) and the people of this world shows up clearly. It is in days like these when our trust in God causes us to stand out for His glory.

Honor the CDC guidelines for the prevention of disease as your expression of love for your neighbor. But step into the gap wherever it opens up to bringing aid and comfort to those who are suffering, keeping yourself safe in your humanitarian acts. We have a higher calling - to serve. We are called to lay down our lives for one another, for our neighbor, in imitation of Jesus, who lay down His life for us (Eph.5:2; Joh.15:13).

We’re likely just now beginning to realize how much Christian fellowship actually means to us, how unpleasant it is to try to get along without regular contact with one another. I’ve been hearing person after person among us say that: I’m not sure how I’m going to make it in a season of isolation like this. And they aren’t talking about people in general, but about the body of Christ.

First, we need to remember this. We need to learn this lesson during this time apart and not forget it when we’re able to come back together. We love one another! We need
one another! We were made to love and need one another! And there’s no joy in being apart from one another. Praise God for technology that can facilitate our corporate worship during this season of forced separation. But let’s also note what it lacks. It can never replace the joy of looking into one another’s actual eyes or shaking one another’s warm hand. It can’t replace a hug or a touch on the shoulder.

Our unifying virtual recorded worship and preaching during this season has been an amazing connection in ways that did not occur when we routinely gathered in-person to worship. Virtually, our body is singing together in many different places around the community, remembering how sweet it is when we do it together in the same room, and how much we long to do it together again when it is safe for all persons. Oh, how we will lift all our voices and sing praises to our Risen Lord.

We need to name what is missing in our lives during these past months even though we’ve come together virtually and had this time together this morning. We need to be in touch with one another through the week. Brothers and Sisters in Christ need to hear from you. And you need to hear from them. So, don’t wait! Take the initiative. Don’t take the risk of sitting around wondering if you mean enough to someone for them to give you a call. Give them a call! Make it Facetime, if you have an iPhone or have Skype.

Continue and even ramp up our good care (to great care) of one another while we’re forced to keep our physical distance. Isolation is the breeding ground for fear and anxiety. Don’t let that happen to one another. Learn, my deep flock. Learn what you mean to one another to the praise of God’s glorious grace. And take good care of one another because Christ dwells in all of your hearts by faith.

I am so grateful to God for those that have stepped up to be a part of our Reentry Taskforce Team. If you would like to be a part, please give me a call. We need your prayers as we discern the work, preparations, and best sanitation practices needed and then how best to implement those practices. Your service to God in this way is just one more expression of your love for this awesome body of Christ. And let me throw in one more reminder for how we can display that love to the outside world. Never go out without thanking someone who has to be out—clerks in the grocery store who make it possible for us to buy food, gas station attendants, delivery people, garbage collectors.

We lift up prayers:
For those who are ill and isolated
For hospital staff and medical researchers
For the persons and areas hit hardest by the disease and its societal consequences
For wisdom and understanding for our national and local leaders as they make hard decisions
For the church’s wise, self-sacrificial love at home and abroad
For Christ’s glory throughout the world.

As you pray and finish this service and head off into the strangeness of this coming week, I urge you to do so confident that you are being strengthened by faith in Christ to walk in a manner worthy of the calling you have received, knowing this, that you’re filled to the measure of all the fullness of him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within you.

Stop the recording now and spend some time in prayer. Then you can hit Play to finish with us here or you could just stay with the service materials and finish it yourselves in your living rooms.

I’d like to conclude with this prayer:
I rely on you, Strength of My Heart,
to fill the gaps of my inadequacies.
Strength for me when I limp along weakly,
Unable to activate what is best in me.
Strength to turn toward those in need
When my heart is hollow, my mind shallow.
Strength to carry me though confusion,
To bolster my faith when it declines.
Strength for the times I am tempted
to turn from what facilitates my growth.
Strength for this time when the COVID-19 pandemic tries to destroy the human beings, and your creation. Your servant in Christ.
And all God’s people say: Amen!