

Gratitude Amid Chaos

By Scott Runyon

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First Baptist Church Birmingham
(broadcast on Facebook Live)

2 Timothy 1:7

Welcome to the first Live Streamed worship service of First Baptist Church Birmingham!

Welcome to you who typically would be sitting in a pew in First Baptist Birmingham's beautiful gothic sanctuary listening to Myra with her experienced hands floated over the piano keys reminding you that you are in the house of God. Maybe you would be thumbing through the weekly program for the first song we will be singing together. You would set that program down and watch as the Worship Leader says a few words to draw us together into worship. Thank you for adjusting your schedule and being open to encounter God in an altogether different way, through technology. You are welcome here.

Welcome to you who have moved away from Birmingham and haven't been with us in worship for a long while. Thank you for taking interest

in what we are doing and showing up online. You are welcome here.

Welcome to you who are not part of the typical crowd that worships on Sunday mornings in Birmingham, but might know someone who is or simply saw the video someone shared yesterday talking about this service and you wanted to simply check it out. You are welcome here.

Also, welcome to you who are not watching live, but reviewing this video after the live broadcast. You might be part of the First Baptist family or you might not know anything about the church, but are simply checking out the video. You are welcome here.

And welcome to you who are not following on Facebook Live, but have called into our conference call line and are listening right now with hopes to find something meaningful over the phone. You are welcome here.

Before we go on, I want to let you know we have adjusted our pattern of community life to accommodate the need to prevent the spread of illness and protect those who are most vulnerable, as Jesus has taught us. To that end, we have

made some adjustments to our normal flow of life together.

- Our services will be cancelled on site in Birmingham for the next two weeks, March 22 and 29th. Catch us at Facebook Live at 10:30 am Eastern Time on Sunday mornings and by conference call. Dial-in Number: 712-775-8968 and Conference Code: 561421.
- The B'Jazz Vespers concert we had scheduled for this evening is cancelled. We'll be talking with the band about coming back this Fall.
- The three-week class on "Sharing Your Faith Story" that was going to start today after worship is postponed to a later date. We'll let you know when that is scheduled.
- Our teams and group meetings are encouraged to conduct their business by teleconference or video conference.
- Without meeting in person, we want to prevent against a financial hit to the church. Please consider continuing to donate to the church online using the "Donate" button on the top of the church's website www.FirstBaptistBirmingham.org. You can also find updates on that site.

I have to admit that this platform is new for me. It is a bit awkward and not ideal. I want to be with you in person, able to give you a hug, shake your hand, look you in the eyes, and share about our lives together. Typically, I would be looking into your faces during the service and drawing encouragement from your expressions, and gaining a sense for whether or not what I am saying is landing for you.

That being said, this Facebook Live technology is pretty cool in that you can interact in different ways in this online forum. You can type comments either to the right or below the video and others who are logged in can see them.

So, right now, I want to invite you to type in any prayer requests that you have and in a few moments we will together pray for those people and situations. A bit later I will ask you to type in things for which you are grateful.

PRAYER

God, we acknowledge your presence among us this morning as we sit in our homes or in other places desiring to connect with other people and with you. Meet us right here where we are and help us to feel the presence of the

community who are scattered in all directions. Also, meet us in the middle of our distress, our worry, our fear, and our concern. Meet us in the middle of our expectations and plans and as we stand for hope and life. Be with us now as we consider the ways that you are working in our lives and think about those things for which we are thankful. In your name, Amen!

Now, my daughter Qwynn is going to read two scripture passages that can speak to us and encourage us in the middle of this current crisis.

READING: Matthew 11:28-30 (NRSV)

Jesus said "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

READING: Philippians 4:4-7 (NRSV)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the

peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

This week we are all making adjustments. Life is not clipping along anything near the status quo. For most, this has brought increased anxiety, and for some, fear and panic. People are worried about their life savings and retirement funds. They are concerned about having enough supplies like toilet paper and food at home if they have to be self quarantined. Parents are concerned about their kids being exposed and now what to do with them for three weeks off school. And those who are in or near retirement have a heightened concern for their own health because the demographic that includes them has been announced as most at risk.

I know that some of you have self quarantined yourselves due to compromised immune systems or created social distance from others due to the unknown.

I am sure you have, like I have, been inundated with emails and notices from restaurants, banks, businesses, non-profit organizations and others with

notices about how they are managing the crisis and sanitizing everything to keep people safe. This is responsible and important.

I sent two emails in the past several days to the congregation to let you all know what we were doing and how we are planning in order to maintain good health and slow the spread of the CoVid-19 Coronavirus to provide time for our health workers to get ahead of this thing.

The impact to our lives is significant. Life is not “business as usual” and won’t be for a while.

As we acknowledging the change we are experiencing and the burden that we carry, when we look inside we also find that we desire God’s presence, so let us pray together with our minds focused on God. At the end of this prayer I want to invite you to say the Lord’s Prayer wherever you are either silently or aloud. Consider the words — perhaps this morning, this prayer means something different for you. I will use the words that our congregation uses. I encourage you to use whatever words are familiar to you, in whatever language you choose.

PRAYER

LORD’S PRAYER

Our Father, who is in Heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us today our daily bread and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into a time of trial but deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen!

During the past week or so, how many of you have been checking your own temperature more than typical? How many of you have been thinking about with whom you have been in contact and what you have touched that might have been infected? How many of you have limited your trips to the grocery store or planned one big trip to stock up? How many of you have suspended trips to the gym or the bank, and even canceled your own family vacation or travel plans because of the the Coronavirus?

We simply must acknowledge that we have common human emotions. As people of faith we are not exempt from having the range of emotions that human beings experience.

We simply must create space for our response to how this virus has disrupted our lives.

And then, after we have had that first and second and perhaps third wave of fear run through us, we also must ask: What is our response as people of faith? What does our faith have to say about this? What would our faith have us do in light of the current situation?

Surely our faith calls us to think and live a certain way in the world. What does that look like?

This question can draw us back to consider what our purpose as people of faith in the world. From ancient times God has called common people to be light bearers for God to the world around them. God called Abraham and his children to share God's love broadly so that all people from every nation throughout the world might find their place in God's family and know God's love.

The Apostle Paul, in the first century after Jesus' death and resurrection, preached to many who were "outside the family" letting them know that they have as much right to be part of God's family as anyone else.

But it is not only about including people. Jesus' way of life is our example, and he lived as a person of peace amid a very chaotic society that was permeated with fear.

The Apostle Paul encouraged a young man named Timothy for whom he was a mentor to live according to the Spirit that God has breathed into us. Qwynn is going to read a verse for us twice.

READING: 2 Timothy 1:7 (NKJV)

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

There is certainly a fair amount of fear around us right now and we at points have probably been fearful. However, we are called to live beyond that fear and live with a spirit of hope and employ a mind that is sound, responsible, and intentional.

When we live this way, we can offer the space of peace for others.

Certainly we pray for peace and calm, but also we can cultivate it in our lives in other ways. One way that I have found is to practice on a regular basis sharing about those things for which I am grateful. I have been getting on a phone call

with two friends once a week for more than ten years to do exactly that. Brent, Mike and I take turns sharing about the things for which we are grateful. Then we share about what we are committed to create in the world through our deliberate action and intention.

Speaking our gratitude serves to shift our focus from what might be immobilizing fear, toward a more free and open space inside which we can be empowered with deliberate actions.

So, I invite you to consider this morning those things for which you are thankful and to type a few of those in the comment section of the Facebook Live feed. If you are listening on your phone or watching this after the broadcast, I invite you to write several down on a piece of paper.

Here is what I am thankful for today.

- I'm thankful for the technology that makes this live feed possible and connects all of us from different places together.
- I am thankful for advances in medicine and health that allow people who have contracted the coronavirus as well as other illnesses to be treated and healed.
- I am thankful for the amazing people we have in our congregation. I feel so blessed to be among people who are as intelligent, committed and invested in this congregation, which such rich backgrounds and experience as you are. It is my privilege and honor to be among you.
- I am thankful for my dog Skyler, who every morning rolls over on her back for me to rub her belly and looks at me with such wonderful unconditional love.
- I am thankful that my body is healthy and I am able to enjoy running.
- I am thankful Phyllis, Qwynn and I are healthy.
- I am thankful for heat in our house that has allowed us to stay warm in the coldest weather.
- I am thankful for my car that continues to run well and get me wherever I need to be while being very good on gas.
- I am thankful for being close enough to my parents to visit them often.
- I am thankful for the sun shining in my living room window right now.

For the benefit of those who are calling in, I want to read some of the things you have posted that have you thankful...

As we turn our attention to those things for which we are thankful. We will find open space in our heart and in our lives to take some kind of productive, life-giving action.

Due to school closures, cancelled events and reduced work hours, some of you have extra time on your hands. There is a saying about how idle hands get into mischief, and some of us might naturally shift in that direction unless we choose to channel that energy in a different direction.

So, rather than getting into trouble or sitting around watching TV (although watching some TV is not a bad thing) perhaps this is an occasion to be intentional about doing helpful things, and spreading hope and love in a world that can desperately need some right now.

Especially during this time when there is more physical distance between us, we can get creative about connecting in meaningful ways with others.

Maybe you can take some extra time to hand write a card and mail it to someone you haven't spoken to in a while.

Maybe you can use the technology that is now available to make a

video call to someone you love to let them know why they are special to you.

This could also be a great opportunity to jump into a creative mode to start building that business you have always dreamed about.

Maybe this is a time for you to read that good book you bought last year that is collecting dust on your shelf.

Maybe this is a time to begin taking more time to be still and breathe.

Maybe it is a great opportunity to start doing yoga.

What sort of intentional, constructive, life-giving, and helpful action might you take?

Shifting in this direction will not only be a good thing for your life and others, but it will turn what is a tragedy into an opportunity. This is something the Spirit of God is always doing in the world.

May we be a people who bring:

- Hope amid fear.
- Calm amid stress and anxiety
- Love amid despair
- Peace amid turmoil
- Gratitude amid chaos

- May we be a people of light amid the darkness.

Please take a moment for this message to rest on your heart.

PRAYER

God give us wisdom in these uncertain times about what it means to be your people and live as you have called us. Inspire us today around specific actions we might take to bring hope and encouragement where it is needed. Give us purpose today as your family. Amen!

If you are feeling in need of connecting or talking about how this crisis is affecting you, or about other challenges in your life, please know that I am available. Please call.

CLOSING BLESSING

Now, may the God of peace and hope fill you that your life might be an expression of peace and hope for the world. Amen!