

The scripture (Genesis 41:1-8, 14-32) is at the end of this document.

How do we prepare ourselves for the days to come? The pandemic that some have predicted for decades has arrived. Events are happening very quickly and it is easy to feel overwhelmed.

How do we prepare ourselves for the days to come? Joseph helped Pharaoh interpret his dreams, the first about fat and skinny cows, and the second about plump and shriveled ears of grain. Joseph said to Pharaoh, ‘Pharaoh’s two dreams are really one and the same; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. After them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; the famine will consume the land.

Joseph then led a program of stockpiling grain for seven years, in anticipation of the famine. By doing so, he saved lives, not only in Egypt but in nearby areas as well, including where his father and brothers lived, far to the north. Later in this story, Joseph’s father sends Joseph’s brothers to buy food from the Egyptians, not once but twice. In the process of doing so, Joseph forgives his brothers that had abandoned him to die, in one of the best stories about acknowledging harm, offering forgiveness, and reconciling in the bible.

How do we prepare ourselves for the days to come, to make sure we have today’s equivalent of stores of grain? (And I’m not going to get into the hoarding of toilet paper and hand sanitizer.) From everything I am hearing, both from you directly and from our Deacons and other saints of the church, you have enough food and other provisions to get by. People seem to be able to either get to the store themselves, have friends and families that can do so, or have figured out how to have things delivered. If you or people in the community need food, our food pantry will be available either on the days when I am here (Monday and Thursday) or people can call Jeremy, who lives nearby.

Ben Albern and Kevin Arnold are setting up a volunteer network that will help get items delivered from Summit Store to our mountain neighbors. This is a wonderful service, particularly to those that *can't* or *shouldn't* leave their homes. You can learn more about this on 95033talk, Facebook, or by calling the Summit Store. They are looking for volunteers to help, particularly with deliveries.

These are material ways in which you can and are preparing for the days to come.

How do we prepare ourselves for the days to come, in terms of making sure everyone is okay and has what they need, not only supplies but in terms of connections of the *heart*?

Many of you are making regular calls to family and friends, which is incredibly important. I have also increased the number of calls I am making and am loving doing so. Since I will be working from home most days, please feel free to email me at revkevinomi@skylandchurch.com or call my cell phone, 510-693-9998. I can also set up a one on one or group Zoom call, if you like. Those of you that are calling others are being sure to ask four questions, “not just how are you but how are you *feeling*?”, “do you have what you need?”, “do you have friends or family that are checking in on you?” and “do you know how to reach medical professionals, if you need to do so?”

Making phone calls and ensuring we are ready as we can be are really important, given that a high percentage of Californians are expected to be exposed to the Corona virus or Covid-19. Many of us are also of an age when the consequences of catching the virus are a lot more serious. Please bear in mind that *anyone* with whom you come in contact or even something as innocuous as a gas pump handle or shopping cart handle could have been touched by someone who is unaware that they are infected. There are plenty of good sources for reliable information about how to stay safe, so please read them and follow the guidelines.

But I want to go deeper than issues of ensuring you have enough food and supplies. How do we are we going to stay together as the beloved

community? Here are some of the ways we are going to stay connected, to one another and to God.

For those of you that are able to do so, please plan to join our gatherings on Zoom. You'll have the most enjoyable experience if you can use a computer or tablet, but you can also connect by either a smartphone or a regular phone. Please make sure you prepare ahead of time by downloading the app and following the instructions, which are also on our church's website, www.skylandchurch.com. Like most churches, we are becoming a virtual or online church. In case you haven't read about our new "virtual church" gatherings, here they are:

Sunday morning you can explore a worship service from the church's website. Check it out any time Sunday or later. It doesn't have to be at 10:30; anytime that works for you is good. It will include hymns, prayers, and both written and audio versions of my sermon. Oh, when you follow the links to Youtube to play the hymns, be sure to skip or cancel the ads at the bottom right hand of the window. Skip the ads. You'll be happy you did so.

Monday at 1 p.m.: This is a time for us to gather together for sharing of prayers, followed by a period of silent meditation, for those who enjoy this practice. Feel free to either email me prayer requests in advance or to offer them during our call. This will be a time during which we connect more directly with God and with one another.

Wednesday at 5 p.m.: This will be a community check-in, beginning and ending with prayer. Anyone and everyone is welcome. Each person on the call is invited to share a brief (1-2 minute) update, followed by announcements. Being able to see each other's faces is really important during this time of isolation and social distancing. When we did this on Monday, I could just feel everyone relaxing as we not only heard each other's voices but could actually see people we love.

Thursday at 8:45: Introduction to the Bible. We are currently reading the Book of Exodus together. At 9:45 we will shift our focus to the scripture upon which my Sunday sermon will be based. You are welcome to participate in either or both of these sessions.

The most important part of any Bible study is to ask the questions, “what can I learn from this?” and “how does this apply to my life?”

All of these ways of worshiping God together, sharing our prayers, and learning lessons from the bible are important.

They will be helpful, but they alone, aren't enough. Even with the “shelter in place” guidelines, Governor Gavin Newsom is expecting a high percentage of people to become infected. That's why we are taking “shelter in place” so seriously; it will save lives and bring the number of sick people down, closer to the number of hospital beds, health care professionals, and supplies we need.

How can our faith help us to prepare for widespread infection, even if we manage to significantly “flatten the curve”?

First, despite some of the stories in the Old Testament, notably the nine plagues that affected the people of Egypt, the corona virus is not a punishment from God. I think everyone understand this but it bears repeating, especially when people are frightened. This virus is *really* smart at finding people that can help spread it widely. It hides out in seemingly well people who can innocently pass it along to others.

The virus will affect good and bad people alike. As in many areas of life, bad things can and will happen to good people. As Jesus says in Matthew's gospel, the sun rises on the evil and the good, and rain falls on both on the righteous and the unrighteous. The virus is more likely to spread to people who either have no choice but to be in contact with others or who don't protect themselves by maintaining social distances or who touch surfaces on which the virus can live for days. In words from Hillstreet Blues, “hey, be careful out there.” Most of all, wash your hands! Assume anything you touch in public places may carry the virus, so please, wash your hands for 20 seconds.

Our faith tells us that prayer helps. Prayer alone may not change the course of the infection or prevent people we love from getting very sick. But prayer changes *our* hearts. I believe God *hears* our prayers, even if things happen that are out of our or God's control.

We are free to bring to God our *fears*, our *concerns*, our *anger*, AND, our gratitude. We are grateful that God surrounds and fills us and that Jesus walks besides us. The Holy Spirit will help us find creative ways to get through this time together. So please, take all of your emotions to God, throw them on God's altar. Pray, weep, or, if it comes to it, grieve, in the holy and healing presence of God. God *cares*, God *loves*, and most of all, God *listens*!

The more deeply anchored in God you and I are, the more useful we will be to one another and ourselves. Hear these words from Psalm 27:

Psalm 27

A Triumphant Song of Confidence, traditionally attributed to David

The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom or what shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

When the corona virus assails my community,
it shall, eventually, stumble and fall.

Though I read about sudden increases in illnesses,
my heart shall not fear;
though the death count rises,
yet I will be confident.

One thing I asked of God,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of God's presence,
and to inquire in God's holy temple, both within and around me.

For God will *hide* me in shelter
in the day of trouble;
God will *conceal* me under the cover of God's tent;
God will set me *high* on a rock.

Now, and even *now*, my head is lifted up
above the fear all around me,
and I will offer in God's tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the Lord.

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!
'Come,' my heart says, 'seek God's face!'
Your face, Holy One, do I seek.
Do not hide your face from me.

Teach me your way, Holy Wisdom,
and lead me on a level path
because of my fears.

I believe that I shall see the goodness of God
in the land of the *living*.
Wait for the Lord;
be *strong*, and let your heart take courage;
wait for God!

Dear ones: May the roots of our faith be as deep as the strong taproots of walnut and red oaks. May our faith be as resistant to the fires of anxiety and fear as are the mighty redwoods. And may we extend our faith out to those in our community who will need strength, reassurance, and hope – all of which come from a God who loves, cares, and listens.

We were born for times such as these, my friends. Spend time each day in prayer and open your hearts to the everlasting water of faith within you.
Amen.

(scripture on following pages)

Genesis 41:1-8, 14-32

After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, and there came up out of the Nile seven sleek and fat cows, and they grazed in the reed grass. Then seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. The ugly and thin cows ate up the seven sleek and fat cows. And Pharaoh awoke. Then he fell asleep and dreamed a second time; seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. Then seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind, sprouted after them. The thin ears swallowed up the seven plump and full ears. Pharaoh awoke, and it was a dream. In the morning his spirit was troubled; so he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them to Pharaoh.

Then Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was hurriedly brought out of the dungeon. When he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.” Joseph answered Pharaoh, “It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.”

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “In my dream I was standing on the banks of the Nile; and seven cows, fat and sleek, came up out of the Nile and fed in the reed grass. Then seven other cows came up after them, poor, very ugly, and thin. Never had I seen such ugly ones in all the land of Egypt. The thin and ugly cows ate up the first seven fat cows, but when they had eaten them no one would have known that they had done so, for they were still as ugly as before.

Then I awoke. I fell asleep a second time and I saw in my dream seven ears of grain, full and good, growing on one stalk, and seven ears, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprouting after them; and the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears. But when I told it to the magicians, there was no one who could explain it to me.” Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “Pharaoh’s dreams are one and the same; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do.

The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, as are the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind. They are seven years of famine. It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. After them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; the famine will consume the land. The plenty will no longer be known in the land because of the famine that will follow, for it will be very grievous. And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about.