

Leaning In

Acts 1:6–14, I Peter 5:6–11

Center Church, Hartford

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If your experience is anything like mine this week, you probably feel a bit like a yoyo. Let the string out because now we can go out to eat (sort of) and go to the mall! The President says go worship in buildings. Pull the yoyo back up though because people are still getting sick, we need to wear masks in public and stay six feet away from anyone not in our household, and the experts warn about the consequences of opening too soon. Is it over yet? It seems kind of getting over? But is the other shoe going to drop?

To say that we live in uncertain times is a severe understatement. Are the kids going to school as usual in the Fall? Will we be able to worship together in person safely before Christmas? Are we going to have to wear these darned masks for another year?

Oh, and by the way, other stuff is going on out in the world. If it isn't enough that people of color are suffering more from the virus, they continue to be targets for acts of violent racism across the country. An election campaign is underway and voter suppression efforts are in full swing. Tomorrow is Memorial Day, and we need to

remember that we still have soldiers at war in Afghanistan and Iraq, and refugees seeking asylum in this country languish in unsafe camps at our border, children still separated from their parents.

Friends, this is normal. Normal doesn't mean "good." "Normal" means "typical" or "expected." We live in a normal which can be unstable, uncertain, and unsettling.

As Christians, we might remember that this kind of normal has been, well, normal for thousands of years. Wars, plagues, schisms, crusades, racism, all the isms, have been experienced by our ancestors. Thomas Hooker died of an "epidemical sickness" at the age of 61, during a time in Connecticut that also featured witch trials and wars with the native peoples.

How did our ancestors make it through those times? How did they not succumb to despair or anger, or lose their faith in God?

Well, sometimes they did succumb. They were human, too. But those who held onto their faith did so, I believe, because they took the example of Jesus' followers after his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension to heart. They were confused, frightened and unsure about their future, facing persecution and feeling a bit abandoned by Jesus. In the midst of that, what did they do? **They prayed together.** After Jesus left them, we are told, the 11 disciples, Jesus' mother and other

women followers and Jesus brothers “were constantly devoting themselves to prayer.” They were, as the song Hannah will share in a few minutes puts it, “leaning on the everlasting arms.”

What did they say in those prayers? How did they pray? What did they ask for? Probably a lot of the same things we ask for in uncertain times: clarity, safety, hope for the future. Remember that Jesus had given them a sample prayer to use, what we call The Lord’s Prayer, and I assume they used it. That prayer includes praise of God, request for food, for forgiveness, to be delivered from evil. It includes a promise to forgive and a yearning for the world as God desires it to be made real. Because the words were still new to them, they had not gotten as lazy about paying attention to them as I sometimes am. Pay attention; this prayer encompasses the fullness of how we might talk with God, which is what prayer is.

I also imagine they spent time in silence, letting their hearts speak to God and opening themselves to receiving from God. Listening, not just monologuing, just being present with God.

In uncertain times, that listening can be critical for us to receive assurance, direction, hope and spiritual energy, which we, and those for whom we pray, need as much as anything on our usual list.

My model for that kind of prayer comes from artistic images based on a little note at the end of John’s gospel, describing the

disciple John as “the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the” last supper. Artists have picked this up, from ancient art to more modern pieces, showing John leaning into Jesus, near his heart or on his shoulder. Prayer in uncertain times means we are invited to lean in.

Several years ago, the writer Sheryl Sandberg wrote a book called *Lean In* about how women need to work harder and be more assertive about asking for raises and getting promotions and achieving success, especially in the corporate world. For her, leaning in meant working your tail off.

For us, leaning in means something altogether different. It means coming to God and letting yourself be loved. It means sharing your concerns and cares, certainly, but also it means just being in the presence of one who loves you. Prayer in uncertain times is as much about being in relationship as it is about getting something specific. And it doesn't always require words.

As I seek to adapt my own prayer life in these times, it's that last thing I am trying to do more: leaning on those everlasting arms and dwelling in that love without asking for anything. Letting my prayer be time spent intentionally focused on God as one with whom I am in a relationship, a long and full relationship, not always an easy or strife free one, but one I trust. We can do that sort of thing when we are

physically together, but, in many ways, it is easier to do it each of us on our own, and maybe that's a gift of this time.

Here's my invitation to you this week, when we are still mostly staying safe at home. Create a space in your day, away from work or kids, away from Netflix or your next book, away from baking or gardening or knitting or working out, or all the wonderfully creative activities I know some of you are doing with this time. Create a space, even if it is only a few minutes, and envision yourself in the place of the disciple John. Lean in to Jesus. Be fully present with God. If it helps, repeat to yourself the words of the writer of the first letter of Peter we heard today: "Cast all your anxiety on God, who cares for you. Remain steadfast in your faith, knowing your family in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace...will restore, support, strengthen and establish you." If that's too long, just hold onto the first line: "Cast all your anxiety on God, who cares for you." Visualize what that might look like.

The New Century Hymnal changes words to many hymns to update them and make them inclusive. Sometimes I really dislike what the editors did, but sometimes the changes help me see something in a new way. The original first line of this old chestnut of a hymn, Leaning on the Everlasting Arms, is "What a fellowship, what a joy divine...." The NCH version sings like this: "What a **covenant**, what a joy

divine....” Fellowship implies people getting together. Covenant, on the other hand, defines a relationship of love and commitment. That’s what we have with God, Jesus said, over and over again. Lean in to leaning on God this week. Start right now while Hannah sings. And may that time be full of blessings for you. Amen.