



*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters rage and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. (Psalm 46:1-3, 11)*

Ever since my back surgery, a year and nine months ago, I committed to spending 30-40 minutes every day stretching. I do it first thing in the morning and I have not missed a single day. I also use that time to listen to music or a podcast. While I have my favorites I try to listen to new things, and those of you who know my musical tastes would be surprised at some of my choices. Since December 1st, however, I've been listening to Christmas music. (I'm especially partial to Pentatonix and For King and Country.)

This may not seem odd to you since we're now less than two weeks away from Christmas Day, but it's really strange for me. I usually don't start listening to Christmas music until the week of Christmas. There are two reasons for that: (1) I really like Advent music and the message of hope and anticipation it proclaims and; (2) I get inundated with Christmas music in the stores and in television commercials, which drives me nuts.

So, I've been asking myself why my pattern has changed. Why was I actually seeking out Christmas music a full three weeks before the holiday? Well, I wonder if I might be compensating for what I think I'm going to miss this year because of the coronavirus. I'm filling an anticipated void that will be left by not caroling to our homebound members or sharing Communion with them. Since we won't be together in person on Christmas Eve when sacred carols would normally fill the sanctuary with the good news of Jesus' birth, I'll just try to make up for it by listening as much as I can now. And maybe that early morning half hour will improve my mindset and put me in the Christmas spirit, at least a little bit.

This small amount of self-reflection caused me to wonder if others are compensating too. This is a rough time for everyone, and the holidays simply compound matters. For many, this time of year is accompanied by increased stress and anxiety, and for some there is an association with sorrow, grief, or depression. Stack on top of that all of the limitations imposed upon us by the coronavirus and it's easy to understand how and why we might look for ways to fill that anticipated (or already present) void I mentioned earlier.

Listen, we are not alone. The psalmist reminds us that *"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble... The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge."* Let's remember that God is always with us to help fill the emptiness we feel. Paul wrote in his letter to the church at Rome that *"Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* Nothing means nothing. Especially in this season we remember that God sent his Son to fill our hearts with love and grace. That baby born in a manger would grow up to become acquainted with the full range of human emotions and experiences. If he could fill the empty spaces in the lives of lepers, lame people, blind folks, misfits, overly righteous religious leaders, love seeking prostitutes, beggars, deaf people, grieving widows, a hungry crowd, and a repentant thief, then surely he can fill us up with love as well. Do not despair people of God! Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, is with us.

Pastor Chuck

Let us pray. God, you are indeed our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. During this season of hope that has been caught up within a very challenging year, fill us with your love and mercy, to the point where we are overflowing with joy and thanksgiving for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.