

August, 2020

Dear Friends,

When I wrote in July, I asked you a question: What story are you living in? Is it the story God is telling, or a story given to you by man? Then Stasi shared with me this quote, attributed to A.W. Tozer: “Listen to no man who has not listened to God.” That’s a really good way of putting it.

We need help interpreting our times. We need guidance. As much as God is willing to tell us, we need a sense of what’s coming next, so we can plan and live wisely. In an hour like this—so fraught with emotion, strong opinion, with vulnerabilities on every side—we must be careful that the interpretation we are holding onto is one that comes from God. It’s just too easy to go with our emotions, the storylines shouted by the media, or simply a take on things that compliments our own preferences.

What is God saying?

Are these ordinary times, in the sense that they are merely the latest speed bumps in a broken world we will shortly overcome? Or are these extraordinary times—times that call for real discernment and prayer?

Back in April, when the pandemic was reaching its first peak, I was asking God for mercy on the world. “I will have mercy,” he said. “There will be a lull. But then late summer the pandemic will resurge.”

“And what is coming next, Lord?” I asked. He replied, “Social unrest.” “Social unrest?” I asked. That seemed strange to me because at the time the world was pretty much locked down. No one was on the streets (this was before any protests or riots). “Yes,” he said, “massive social unrest.” Shortly after that our cities blew up. But I had a sense more unrest is on its way.

The pandemic does seem to be resurging. On top of that, so much hatred and animosity in America (and many other nations, too). It doesn’t take a prophet to tell you that this fall’s presidential campaign will provoke even deeper chasms in our country. Everything in me wants to cling to a storyline promising quick resolution and life going back to normal. But I don’t think that’s what we get.

So I’m writing to you to continue to offer counsel for navigating what may be even tougher days ahead. I’m not wishing it upon us; I continue to pray for mercy. But the uncertainty of what schools will look like puts a lot of families in really hard situations this fall, on top of the worsening pandemic, economic distress, and growing social rancor.

Back in the spring, Jesus said there would be a lull. I believe the summer has been that lull. Not for everyone of course. But most places eased the restrictions; folks were able to get out and see family and friends. Many people enjoyed something of the simple joys summer brings, like picnics at the park, time at the beach, or mountains. I asked Jesus, “What now, Lord?” And he said, “Use this time to strengthen your union with me.” Such loving, wise counsel.

We are a hard-pressed people; these months have taken a toll. (Surely you’ve noticed the exhaustion, mental fragmentation, low reserves, irritability, comfort-eating, comfort-drinking?) We don’t want to go into a tough fall with low emotional and spiritual reserves. Let’s make a daily practice of the things that strengthen our actual living union with Jesus Christ—so we can draw upon his strength, comfort, and counsel in the days ahead. Things like worship, prayer, sacrament; practicing stillness, and above all, loving Jesus.

There is nothing that strengthens our union with Jesus like the practice of loving him.

We also need to invoke love into our lives and communities. There are dark spirits of hatred, provocation, and suppression trying to get in. Love is our rescue; love will be our rescue this fall. It isn't a coincidence that when the old apostle John writes about the coming of the antichrist, death and hatred into the world, he urges his readers to love—to let the love of God fill them, and to be vigilant to live only from love. (Have a read of 1 John if it's been a while.)

Just this week Alex asked me, “Have you read the end of Love and War recently? I think Jesus was speaking through you guys towards this moment we are now in.” He handed me this passage:

I [John] Have been reading a book by a young soldier who fought all four years of WWII. He saw the main action in Africa, Italy, Normandy, and Germany. A sensitive and thoughtful young man, he knew what terrible effects war has upon those who have to fight it: “The last weeks have been hard, filled with many bitter, hateful things and only a few short happy interludes. I have come to the extremity of knowing beyond all doubt that...We must love one another or die.”

I thought of Jesus' warning about the end of the age, how as times grow dark and people feel more keenly pressed, love will grow rare. *“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom...Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold”* (Matthew 24:7, 12). These are trying times, for all of us. I venture we will see even more trying times. But the soldier was right...We must love one another, or die. Because love is what we are created for; it is the reason for our existence. Love is our destiny. Love God and love one another—these are the two great commands upon the human race. The secret to life is this—we are here in order to learn how to love.

Stasi and I wrote that twelve years ago. It sure seems a whole lot more urgent now.

So two things I leave with you this month: Make a daily practice of strengthening your union with Christ. Make it a priority. Prayer. Worship. Scripture. Sacrament. Everything and anything that strengthens your soul's actual union with God. Especially loving Jesus.

And, be vigilant in love. Make no room for the hatred and acrimony sweeping the earth (including hatred of God). Let's invoke the love of God into our communities and world. It might be the thing that makes the greatest difference in this hour.

In love,



John

PS. In the August 10th and 17th Wild at Heart podcasts, Morgan and I discuss this topic in more depth, sharing what's helpful to start doing—and stop doing—for greater unity with God. I encourage you to give those a listen.