

A COVID-19 Spiritual First Aid Kit

by Rev. John Van Nuys

During this crisis, as we live with faith and act with wisdom, God will see us through. God always has and always will. As you practice good, physical disciplines (social distancing, hand washing, etc.), you also need to practice good spiritual hygiene to keep your soul healthy. Here are some tools for your spiritual tool kit. Not all of these are equally effective for everyone. Give each a try and practice the ones that work for you.

Morning prayer: This is an ancient Jewish prayer which I say aloud while kneeling every morning after I awake: *Blessed are thou, Lord God of the Universe, that thou has brought us alive to see another day. Amen.* Thank God for the day as you enter it. Ask the Lord to accompany and protect you. God certainly will.

In a quiet morning time read a daily devotion. I read the Episcopal meditation *Forward Day by Day*. It is online and free: https://prayer.forwardmovement.org/forward_day_by_day.php?d=19&m=3&y=2020 Read the accompanying scripture on which the meditation is based. Don't have a Bible? Here is a free online Bible. Just type in the passage: <http://bible.oremus.org/> Find a daily devotional that you like and get God's Word into your day and life. You will be sustained by grace and surprised by joy.

As you get dressed for your day, sing a hymn or two. The old saying is true: "The person who sings prays twice." Singing involves a different portion of your neural network, which allows the Gospel truth in hymns to sink into your consciousness in a deeper way. What is your favorite hymn? Sing it. Go to You Tube where there are videos of choirs singing almost every favorite hymn. Every morning I like to sing *In the Bulb There Is a Flower* and *My Shepherd Shall Supply My Need*. Singing hymns will alter your consciousness in a good way.

As you go into your day and begin your work, ask God to help you. A pastor who suffered a nervous breakdown was given this assignment to do daily by his psychiatrist: After arriving at church and getting into his study, he closed the door; opened his Day-Timer and laid it on the floor; and then prostrated himself in the form of the cross, surrendering his coming day and work to God's shaping, blessing, and care. When I have been really stressed, I have done this. It is a powerful way to synchronize yourself, your upcoming labor, and your day with God's will, purposes, and blessing. Another way to enter your day is to pray as those in recovery do, asking God to help you *stay in conscious contact* with God. It is a powerful prayer and practice.

During the day, when you have a free minute, recite aloud a favorite, memorized scripture. My mother often recited Romans 8:28. Don't know any scriptures by heart? Now is a great time to memorize one or more. Start with Psalm 23. Other great passages: Psalm 27:1, Isaiah 40:31, Isaiah 43:1-2, Jeremiah 29:11, Job 19:25, 2nd Corinthians 12:9a, Philippians 1:6. For more, see the document: *Scriptures of Hope*. Another way to get God's Word in your heart and life is to read those scriptures aloud daily – and more often as needed.

When you are really stressed, try this ancient Christian practice called breath prayer. Breath prayer focuses on one word (like *Peace, Trust, or Love*) or a simple phrase that you recite silently as you breathe in and out. A breath prayer that was shared with me by Rev. Marcia Smith-Wood which has been a special blessing is this: On the inhaled breath: *Do not fear...* On the exhaled breath: *... I am with you.* Pray your word or phrase silently and repeatedly as you breathe slowly and deeply. God will bless you.

Action absorbs anxiety: That was the mantra of one of the psychiatrists at the psychiatric hospital at which I worked. Physical activity decreases worry. You can walk outside under the porch at the South Boulevard Mall from Dunham's to the bank. Or you can walk inside at Wal-Mart using the square walkway within the store that goes all the way around the store. Or do housework. Physical activity will decrease your stress.

Get outside – Conquer cabin fever by taking a walk, which will increase your natural endorphin (feel good chemical) production. Or, go for a drive. Or simply sit outside on your porch or patio. Release yourself from your confines by physically moving into a larger, different space. Then let God speak to you through nature.

Practice lavish self-care -- which is not a sinful indulgence, but a spiritual necessary during this crisis. At the end of my daily shower, I like to turn the water up to super hot and luxuriate for a minute. Try that or ask your partner for a massage – and reciprocate. I have made friends with a neighborhood cat Ronnie who always runs up because he knows I will give him scratches. Seeing Ronnie stretch out while I give him some deep back rubs gives me great joy. What is a comedy show you love? *Seinfeld* unfailingly makes me laugh. Many classic comedies are on YouTube and other streaming services. Take time to laugh. Take time to take care of yourself. That is not a sin. It is a spiritual requirement as you help God take care of your soul.

Do something kind for others – Even in this time of social distancing, we can still reach out to others. Call an old friend you haven't spoken to for a long time and catch up. If you need help, let someone know. You do not have to face this time alone. If you feel suicidal, call or text the National Suicide Hotline: 800-273-8255. If someone you know is a threat to themselves, call 911. Reach out; ask for help; God will help you.

When you leave work or end your workday while working remotely from home, mentally review *what went right*. Then give your work to God, asking God to establish the good you have tried to do.

During your evening, establish a cut off time after which you will *not* check your newsfeed or consume any more news. Stop winding yourself up right before bed. Give yourself time to quiet down before retiring.

During your evening prayers, a good practice is to start by praying for your enemies, if you have any. Then pray for others. Finally, pray for yourself. Review the blessings of the day and what you enjoyed today. Naming blessings regularly helps you recognize, participate, enjoy, and share them more fully.

Right before you go to sleep – ask God to watch over you. The last thing I do before I shut off the light is this: I kneel, praying: *Thank you, Lord God of the Universe, that thou hast brought me alive to live this day.* Then I again pray for Sam, and I end my prayers with these three, single sentence petitions: *Fill me with your Spirit. Help me to serve you faithfully and well. Help me to love as you love.*

Developing a spiritual rhythm for your day that you do each day is called a rule of life. It is a regimen that you do to keep your spirit strong. None of us observes a rule of life perfectly, but trying to do it faithfully will boost your spiritual immune system.

I have shared practices that help me, but everyone is different. See what works for you. See how the Holy Spirit leads you. There is no one right way. God will show you the way(s) that are right and best for you.

Two final tools:

When in doubt, sing the Doxology: *Praise God, from whom all blessings flow; Praise him, all creatures here below; Praise him above, ye heavenly host; Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.* I cannot remember which pastor taught me this, but it is powerful. As you sing this, it is liberating. It is a declaration that I will not be ultimately defined by the facts as they are now. I praise God from whom all blessings flow. I command creatures here below and in heaven above to praise the Triune God. Expressing praise while under pressure is a freeing expression of holy defiance against present circumstances in light of God's ultimate goodness and grace, which shall prevail.

Have a scripture or spiritual affirmation ready to go when things get rough. I love this affirmation from the Heidelberg Catechism, which presents the faith in a question and answer format: *Q: What is your only comfort in life and death? A: That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself, but to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.* Translation: I, you, we belong to God and nothing is going to change that. Ever.