

VISUABLES

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COUNTER CULTURE

By John S. McCranie IV January 11, 2020

It has never been easy to remain faithful to the Lord. There have always been influences and forces both internal and external seeking to undo our relationship with God. Deciding to be saved is critical but remaining in His grace is crucial as well. Peter warns, "For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first." (2 Peter 2:20).

Being a true disciple of Jesus doesn't just happen. It is not built solely on emotion or sentiment . . . it is built on determination. If we have the goal to be acceptable to God when we face Him then we have a fighting chance of being with Him forever. And a fight it will be, because Satan and his demonic minions will tempt us to revert until they are cast into hell. In the Scriptures, we find multiple passages admonishing the Christian to resist culture and remain true to God. The primary one that comes to mind is in Romans 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." In other words, never allow the world to squeeze us into its mold. The most dreaded thing we could ever hear is Jesus declare, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness." (Matt 7:23).

How do we then insure that when we do see Christ He will say to us, "Well done good and faithful servant . . . come and enter into the joy of your master" (Matt 25:21)? What attitudes and actions must we take to make certain we do not give into the culture and its godless philosophies and values? What verses in Scripture reveal the powerful principles that anchor our soul in heaven? How do we actually resist the temptation to return to the world? In Paul's final words he grieved that, "Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone . . ." (2 Tim 4:10).

Think for a moment: how many people come to mind that have deserted the faith and are gone? Gone from the church, gone back to the world and gone back to their sin? Think of all those lambs that were once in the Shepherd's protective care but left His pen and have become entangled or devoured? It's depressing to realize how many faces cross my mind right now; people who came up from the watery grave cleansed by the blood of the Lamb but now wallow in the mud once again.

But let us also celebrate those who have remained in Christ. They've hungered and thirsted for righteousness and so attend Bible classes on Sundays and Wednesday nights. They have said goodbye to their godless friendships. They have averted their eyes from wickedness in order to remain devoted to Christ. Think of those souls who have suffered terrible temptation to give up their climb to the mountaintop and yet now stand in the glory of God's summit. They shine don't they? Like a city on a hill at

night, they shine. Few things are so beautiful.

The Turlock Church's 2020 theme will be COUNTER CULTURE. Will we follow God's will even if it means being counter cultural? Yes! For His glory we will go against the flow. Even more than that we will grow against the flow! No matter the pressure to rescind our commitment to God! No matter how subtle and devious the Tempter is on getting us to compromise our allegiance to Christ! We will not be conformed but continue to be transformed into the image of God's dear Son.

Father, following you is the thing we want to do. Forgive us for being so distracted and so weak. Perhaps we are weak because we are distracted. Urge us to pray... compel us to read Your Bible. Energize us so we have a drive to engage with those drowning in the mania of our culture. Keep our eyes on Jesus and help shake off the sin that clings tightly to us. Pour a full measure of your Spirit into our soul so that we can face anything this world throws our way. Amen.

Blessings,
John McCranie

I imagine several of you are thinking "Well that's a flash from the past!" and you are absolutely right,

I haven't emailed out a VISUABLES in a very very long time. Many years ago I was fatigued and stopped writing for quite a while. During that sabbatical I wondered if emailing my articles was worth the time. A few on my list emailed and mentioned they missed them but nearly all on my distribution list said nothing. When I began to write again I chose to make them blogs. My Visuables became a regular column in a small newspaper while in Montana, so that was fun. After moving to the Turlock Church I got back in the groove again and now I write one article per month which is uploaded as a blog on our [website](#) and printed in our monthly newsletter. Then last year, I quit FaceBook. I just couldn't justify having my personal data compromised for the benefits of connecting with my "friends" there. No regrets but a downside of bailing on FaceBook is its pretty quiet and I miss communicating with those from my past.

Well, call this a New Year's *Exploration*...I'm going to send out my articles for a couple months and see if I get enough feedback to continue. **It would be wonderful to hear from you** if I haven't in a while. I promise to reply if you do. I still don't need any cutesy forwards, sensational or unsubstantiated emails but personal correspondence is always welcome!

Happy New Year,
John

LOAD CARRIERS

Don McCullough writes in Waking from the American Dream that during World War II, England needed to increase its production of coal. Winston Churchill called together labor leaders to enlist their support. At the end of his presentation he asked them to picture in their minds a parade which he knew would be held in Picadilly Circus after the war. "First," he said, "would come the sailors who had kept the vital sea lanes open. Then would come the soldiers who had come home from Dunkirk and then gone on to defeat Rommel in Africa. Then would come the pilots who had driven the Luftwaffe from the sky." "Last of all," he said, "would come a long line of sweat-stained, soot-streaked



men in miners' caps. Someone would cry from the crowd, 'And where were you during the critical days of our struggle?' And from ten thousand throats would come the answer, 'We were deep in the earth with our faces to the coal.'"

Not all the ministries in a church are prominent and glamorous. The people with

their "faces to the coal" make it possible for the church to accomplish its mission. In fact, many of our best "miners" are our sisters in the Lord. They are the muscle in the local body of Christ. **Galatians 6:4-5** says, "**Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load.**" Well, these sisters not only carry their own load but, fulfill many other vital responsibilities. Another sweat-stained group is our newcomers. These new members of the church are eager to produce fruit in keeping with righteousness. They want to be busy and thereby make their heavenly Father happy. I am also especially impressed with the level of quality our senior volunteers offer.

Every act done correctly in the name of Christ is appreciated by our Lord. The load we each carry is important to the entire congregation. Even quiet tasks that go unnoticed by others are seen by our omnipresent God (**Matthew 6:1**). All parts of the body are important. The stronger members help the weaker.

A few years ago, at the 1976 Seattle Special Olympics, nine contestants, all physically or mentally disabled, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard

dash. At the gun, they all started out, with a relish to run the race to the finish and win. All, that is, except one boy who stumbled on the track, tumbled over a couple of times, and began to cry. Two others heard the boy cry. They slowed down and looked back. Then those two turned around and went back. One girl with Down's Syndrome bent down and kissed him and said: "This will make it better." Then the three of them linked arms and walked together to the finish line. Everyone in the stadium stood, and the cheering went on for several minutes. Didn't Jesus say the least shall become great?

Against all odds, the early church changed the world. They worked together to bring lost sheep into the fold. Through faith, courage and prayer they flavored a tasteless world. But the most notable quality of the early church was their love. They loved God, totally. They loved each other. They even loved their enemies. This is still the power today. The love of Christ compels us. His love makes it possible to bear others' burdens as well as ours. In a culture that is self-absorbed we counter that with being load carriers.

Father, deep down we know this one thing: what matters in this life is being empowered by You so that we may truly be effective. We do as Christ did and teach what He taught. We dig down deep and help win the war. As your Spirit fills and leads us, we carry one another until they can walk on their own and eventually carry someone else's load. All for Jesus. Amen.

Blessings,
John

A FATHER TO THE NEEDY

On St. Patrick's Day I often think of Clinton Storm, an elder friend of mine, who was a minister in Ojai, California twenty years ago. His shepherding heart and wisdom is shown in the story below of how he dealt with a frustrating situation and how God was glorified in it.

A homeless man came to the church office for assistance. After being given food, he discovered the building had a breeze-way that provided a nice sleeping spot to which he returned that night. The next morning, Clinton encouraged this indigent to tell him his story of how he ended up begging for sustenance and sleeping on church property. The man was Irish. He left his parents, brothers and sisters in Ireland and had come to America. His experience in the U.S. had been plagued with tragedy. He concluded with the news that the man's mother back home was experiencing failing health. This elder told me he had never met anyone so unwilling to do anything about his awful condition. The Irishman evidently decided to just suffer in the despair he had created.

Well, it didn't take long for neighbors and church members to complain about the homeless man sleeping on the church property. The weather was getting bad so my colleague allowed the man to sleep in an unused classroom which angered some members even more. This went on for weeks as the man went from church to church soliciting food and money. Due to increasing pressure, this brother had to find a way to get this man off of the premises. Then the idea came to him.

He made a call to the Irish Consulate and eventually got in touch with the Consulate General. He told him of this Irishman's plight and asked what it would take to be able to send the man home. The representative told him what was needed and the preacher went to work. He raised the \$700 dollars for the airfare, got the man's paperwork from the consulate, drove him to LAX and got him on a plane to Dublin. The Irishman returned to his home, his ailing mother got her son back, the church no longer had a homeless man sleeping in a classroom and my friend solved the problem that pestered his ministry.

This story reminds me of something Job said, "I was a father to the needy; I took up the case of the stranger." (29:16). Don't you admire the compassion of Job? Do you admire the humanity in Clinton's approach to helping a hurting soul? Wisdom coupled with resourcefulness can solve just about anything, right? I don't know if the Irishman ever learned this lesson of God's mercy, but I have.

Heavenly Father, if it were not for You we would all be homeless in the worst imaginable way. You have done for us what was impossible for us to do ourselves. You sent Your people to rescue us, to take us in and feed us the gospel. They

sheltered us with their fellowship and made it clear it was time to go back home. Move us to do the same. Perhaps with Your blessing they will reunite with their heavenly family. In Jesus. Amen.

Blessings,
John

Last Sunday morning I thought I was sure what I was going to preach. I mean by the previous Thursday afternoon I had the sermon done, PowerPoint ready and handout outline printed for those brave enough to attend. But when I woke up Sunday enjoying my coffee I was inspired by an online article on the relevance of Joshua chapter two to our current situation of the Coronavirus scare gripping Americans. The message I actually preached can be viewed in the link below. I point out how Rahab's terror of the God of Israel and His plagues was replaced by her faith in the deliverance of the Lord.

[2020-03-15 sermon in response to the coronavirus threat](#)

As for me and my house...

DARKEST DAY . . . BRIGHTEST MORN . . .

It sounds like the opening of a graphic novel . . . The powerfully corrupt authorities did everything they could to silence this outspoken opposer. He dared calling them what everyone already suspected: hypocrites. They hated Him for it. Soon secret meetings conspired the unthinkable. These leaders in ecclesiastical garbs plotted to murder a rabbi.

This “sinner” had to be silenced, and once they secured a way to do that, egregious smiles curled their way across their mouths. One of His very own disciples accepted their bribe to capture the teacher. Before dawn the plan became action. The arrest. The trials. The flogging. The crown. The cross. The mocking. The darkness. Darkness . . . why darkness? Was God refusing to allow onlookers to gaze upon His naked and crucified Son? The light of the world was going out. In every way this was the darkest day.

Once dead and pulled from the beams, His enemies returned to their homes with smug satisfaction that they won. Or so they thought. Nevertheless as they walked further from Golgotha there were troubling thoughts. Why had that shadow covered the land? Why had the ground trembled immediately after His death? Why did the centurion proclaim Him as the Son of God?

As the sun sets His faithful scramble to prepare Him for burial. With aching souls and breaking hearts they place Him in an Arimathean’s tomb. As they walk away, everyone is filled with dread. He’s gone. Hope has died with Him. Or so they thought.

Days behind locked doors caused the disciples’ depression to sink ever deeper. Peter hardly speaks which is unusual because he’s rarely silent. All in the room were filled with regret. It was young John alone who was at the crucifixion. It was he that was faithful to the end. At least John had the comfort of knowing that his Rabbi loved him deeply. The rest? They fled. They abandoned Him because they were scared. And they’re still afraid trying to figure a way to get out of the city alive. He’s gone. It’s over. Or so they thought.

Mary burst in the room with incredulous news! The tomb is vacant? The angel announced what? John outran Peter to the cemetery. It’s time to see. It’s time to verify. Soon they stared at empty cloths lying on a slab. Confounded they returned and reported. Mary emerged again filled with brilliant joy. She has seen her Rabboni! Before the day is done Peter encounters the Resurrected. No one needed more brightening than him. Then Cleopas arrives telling how the Teacher appeared to him and others while in Emmaus. Then the ultimate miracle

was confirmed. He, He Himself appears in the locked room among His disciples and tells them to not be afraid.

Light returned. Life celebrated. Hope endured. It was the brightest day.

Family, the Easter story contains the greatest drama in history. Jealousy, hatred, injustice and murder followed by abject hopelessness. Then the inconceivable occurred. Jesus has resurrected. He conquered death and defeated the devil. His appearances to his followers was so life-changing and profound they witnessed to the ends of the known world.

Won't you invite a friend to worship with us on Easter----online? In compliance with the mayor's coronavirus mandates we will be gathering in our homes logged on to our YouTube channel

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXmIOSqYRLQxlvLqz-PXbfA>. This way anyone can join in and don't have to have Facebook to participate. Let your people hear singing in celebration. Let them hear the greatest news ever uttered. Perhaps they will be profoundly changed. It could be the brightest morn they have witnessed in a long time.

Blessings,
John

[Thanks to my son John for helping me craft this special Visuable

HOLEY QUILT

Turlock Church has some wonderful kingdom quilters. They are busy little bees in their homes and in the fellowship hall (when allowed). Perhaps we should call them “Q-Bees?” They make quilts for people who really need them. I donated some to Julien Elementary to help impoverished students stay warm. Our sisters also give quilts out of their love. The following story, of unknown authorship, causes me to appreciate my “sewing sisters” even more. Enjoy.

As I faced my Maker at the last judgment, I knelt before the Lord along with all the other souls. Before each of us, laid our lives like the squares of a quilt in many piles; an assigned angel sat before each of us sewing our quilt squares together into a tapestry that is our life.

But as my angel took each piece of cloth off the pile, I noticed how ragged and empty each of my squares was. They were filled with giant holes. Each square was labeled with a part of my life that had been difficult, the challenges and temptations I faced in everyday life. I saw hardships that I endured, which were the largest holes of all.

I glanced around me. Nobody else had such squares. Other than a tiny hole here and there, the other tapestries were filled with rich color and the bright hues of worldly fortune. I gazed upon my own life and was disheartened. My angel was sewing the ragged pieces of cloth together, threadbare and empty, like binding air.

Finally the time came when each life was to be displayed, held up to the light, the scrutiny of truth. The others rose; each in turn, holding up their tapestries. So filled their lives had been. My angel looked upon me, and nodded for me to rise. My gaze dropped to the ground in shame. I

hadn't had all the earthly fortunes. I had love in my life, and laughter. But there had also been trials of illness, and wealth, and false accusations that took from me my world, as I knew it. I had to start over many times. I often struggled with the temptation to quit, only to somehow muster the strength to pick up and begin again. I spent many nights on my knees in prayer, asking for help and guidance in my life. I had often been held up to ridicule, which I endured painfully, each time offering it up to the Father in hopes that I would not melt within my skin beneath the judgmental gaze of those who unfairly judged me.

And now, I had to face the truth. My life was what it was, and I had to accept it for what it was. I rose and slowly lifted the combined squares of my life to the light. An awe-filled gasp filled the air. I gazed around at the others who stared at me with wide eyes.

Then, I looked upon the tapestry before me. Light flooded the many holes, creating

an image, the face of Christ. Then our Lord stood before me, with warmth and love in His eyes. He said, 'Every time you gave over your life to Me, it became My life, My hardships, and My struggles. Each point of light in your life is when you stepped aside and let Me shine through, until there was more of Me than there was of you.

May all our quilts be threadbare and worn, allowing Christ to shine through . . .

Blessings,
John

POSITIVE

Negative. If there is a word that captures our current quandary, that's the one. I know the news media thinks good news is boring news. It's obvious the reason "human interest" stories featuring selflessly, kind acts are inserted into the final moments of the televised news hour are there to silence those who complain that everything reported is negative. Well, to news hounds everything important is negative. This is how it works: conflict, violence, injustice, scandal and disaster are sensational. Sensationalism draws big audiences. Big advertisers pay big bucks to have big audiences be swayed to buy their products or service. The motives for news service agencies? Profit margins. That's why editors have barked for decades, "If it bleeds, it leads!" but I guess in our present time it's, "If it fights, it writes!"

Our culture obsesses over the negative. To criticize is to be chic. Critics are viewed as cosmopolitan. Witty comedians draw audiences to their profanity laced tirades about what's wrong . . . with everything. I don't know how you feel, but I weary of Hollywood and Madison Avenue types wearing dark clothing giving dark commentaries on a world that actually contains brightly colored stories of hope and virtue. Don't misunderstand me, thinking critically is paramount to knowing truth but, according to God, constantly complaining is dangerous.

There were several periods in Israel's history when the Lord told them to stop being negative. Moses had perhaps the toughest flock to shepherd. God was repeatedly angry with the muttering murmurs of the Israelites during the wilderness wandering. He actually punished with poisonous snakes those who had been spewing poisonous speech. Instead of expressing thankfulness the Jews protested (Numbers 21:4-5). The Major Prophets continually warned the people of God that He would deal harshly with their lack of gratitude. It's quite sad when reading later that the Lord backed up His warnings with harsh action.

I am no longer sold on being negative in a negative world. I want to be free from the negativity that saturates our consciousness. Why? Mainly due to the teachings of an Apostle. He wrote, "**See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.**" (Col. 2:8). According to this holy admonition, humanism and secularism is a *spiritual* thing and not a good spiritual thing either. My goal is to resist the sensational, the critical and the divisive. It's a struggle, but I choose to be positive rising above this negative world. Guess what? By choosing positivity I find myself seeing positive things more than negative things.

Ever heard the 1980's acronym G.I.G.O.? It was a computer term that stood for "garbage in, garbage out." Meaning? Flawed or inaccurate input produces unreliable output. In time, it was used to describe failures in human decision-making due to faulty, incomplete, or biased data. Lesson? Be very careful what you allow to be your news source. Choose your persuaders with wisdom.

Again, I choose an apostle's voice to hear above the rest, "**Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you**" (Phil. 4:8-9). That is some pretty

positive stuff, wouldn't you say? G.I.G.O can also mean "good in, good out." In other words, be positive to be at peace.

Blessings,
John

MOUNTAIN

In 1989 I was preaching for a little congregation called the Fresno Church of Christ. My go to song leader was Chris, who was about twenty-six-years-old. Having a lot in common, we became good friends. We loved rock music, ping-pong and the great Sierra Nevada. Chris asked if I had ever done any backpacking. I replied that I loved to go camping but he insisted I hadn't really camped until I backpacked way up in the high country. I told him I didn't have the gear and he said it would be no problem to borrow a backpack and essentials. I mentioned this to Becca. She wasn't keen on the idea since our firstborn, Johnny, was only about a year old and was worried something might happen to me. Eventually she saw how much I really wanted to do it and mustering her trust in God, she gave the green light.

Soon afterwards Chris and I were in my 1966 Chevy pickup heading to Mineral King. We parked the truck at 7,800 feet and headed up the trail to Monarch Lakes. We soon hit fog and I told Chris I was surprised to see fog this high up. He snickered and informed me, "John, we are hiking in a cloud." I thought to myself this is going to be a really cool trip. It was. We made it to Monarch Lakes (elevation 10,200') and set up camp before sunset. We ate a surprisingly good freeze-dried dinner. At this elevation I felt we were on another planet. Huge granite slabs and little vegetation except ancient bristlecone pines. It made for amazing stargazing.

The next morning we decided to hike to Sawtooth Pass another thousand feet higher. After reaching it I was surprised at how strong I felt and asked Chris if he thought we could scale to the summit of Sawtooth Peak. He said it would depend on me. I had no doubt Chris could climb it. He was like a mountain goat - lean, strong and surefooted. I said, let's try and we began our ascent. To say this was grueling is an understatement. Steep, rough, very thin air and the trail disappeared for the final section. The reason? The top was all rock. Boulders stacked on boulders. I had to stop and catch my breath every hundred feet. I was never so exhausted in my life. Chris' patience and my resolve paid off. Sawtooth Peak was the first mountain I ever summited.

It felt like we were on top of the world. The USGS metal stamp said we were 12,343 feet above sea level. The only higher peak was Mt. Whitney which we could clearly see about 8 miles away. We ate lunch and took pictures. Both of us felt fully alive. The word that comes to mind is "exhilarated." I came down from that mountain a changed man.

Did you know there are mountain climbers in the Old Testament? Genesis tells of Abraham and his son, Isaac, scaling Mt Moriah. No doubt both of them returned from that trial changed men. Moses, a man in his eighties, scaled Mt. Sinai more than once! Did he come back changed from his expeditions? So much that people asked him to put a veil over his face. Elijah battled the prophets of Baal and won on Mt. Carmel. He was so exhilarated he ran down the mountain a changed man indeed.

Who are the mountain climbers in the New Testament? None other than Jesus Christ Himself. In Luke 9:28-36 it says Jesus went up a mountain with Peter, James and John to pray. You see it's necessary to get away to really pray. While up there the face of Christ changed and his garments shone like lightning. Guess who showed up at this summit? None other than two other mountain climbers, Moses and Elijah! Peter proclaimed, "It was good that we were here!" John, his brother James and Simon Peter came down that mountain changed, forever.

The pandemic we now face is our mountain. In order to reach the summit we must first set our

determination that we will rise above all this and climb up closer to God. Mountain climbing is so strenuous that if we do not resolve at the bottom to make it to the top NO MATTER WHAT, we will likely fail. When we are exhausted and weary from the climb it is then we call upon the Lord to grant us strength. Ask Him to give you character. Entreat Him to fill your heart with courage.

I promise you this. If you do not give up, if you keep your eyes upon Jesus who stands at the summit, if you dig down and never quit, you will reach the peak. And when you do, you will feel exhilarated! Full of life! You will also feel proud of your accomplishment. God will be proud of you. Your loved ones will be proud of you. And you will be transformed. Changed by the victory. Now when was the last time you felt that?

Blessings,
John

END TIMES

Recently, our church secretary, Dana, sent me the above picture by text. It was taped to the glass doors of the church's foyer. The warning is unmistakable, "CHRIST IS COMING 2021". During these times of plague and disaster it's no surprise believers think this is probable. The fact is that for the past several decades there has been mania fixated on the exact time of Jesus' return. Entire denominations have experienced meteoric growth based on this sensationalism only to be later decimated by their prophet's false predictions on when Christ will come back. Their disillusioned masses leave those churches and, sadly, many of those worshipers leave behind their faith. What is more depressing than false hope?

Church of Christ members have, for the most part, been very level-headed when confronted about eschatology. Our strong, academic faith coupled with wisdom from witnessing the aforementioned mania results in a certain calm disposition. Since it is such figurative literature, we don't believe the Book of Revelation should be taken so literally that an exact date can be pinpointed for the Day of Judgment. Since other scriptures say that Christ's return will be at a time when no one expects, then one should strive to be holy every day so that whenever God sends His Son back to judge the human race, He will find us righteous in Christ and therefore guarantees our entrance to heaven.

Due to our hardly ever speaking of Christ's return we have developed a lamentable disposition of, "That is then -- this is now." Hence, we have lost our urgency, which has drastically affected our movement's mission work. Did you know, the most successful evangelizing churches in Christendom just happen to be premillennial? They sense Christ's return is imminent and therefore feel compelled to bring up Jesus to those unprepared for judgment. Us? We have all the time in the world to share the gospel because whoever is outside of Christ has likely a lifetime to make the decision to be a Christian. The result of our avoidance of the end times topic? Fewer missionaries find the funding to further the kingdom and local congregations go years without converting a single person from the community.

So, should there be a rush? Why the urgency? Why not just relax and enjoy doing church and let all that awkward evangelism be handled by professionals? Well, the reality is that local professional ministers are doing a pretty lousy job of teaching Jesus to those outside their church property. Second, our Lord's teaching about His return was designed to motivate His church members to seek the lost and to fulfill our responsibilities before it's too late.

In reading Matthew chapters 24 and 25 the conclusion is "*Get busy with what I told you to do and be warned that slackers will suffer*". Perhaps you recall Christ mentioning virgins without enough lamp oil, servants caught by surprise in an

accountability meeting with their master or lazy goats thinking they are busy sheep. Here is a reminder from Matthew 24:37-42, **“As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.”**

Eating and drinking versus watching and serving: which one are you doing? What if you actually did believe Jesus was returning in the year 2021? What changes would you make in your life? What changes would you compel in others to make in their lives?

Blessings,
John

IT CHANGED *EVERYTHING*

Disaster. When I review the year 2020, that's the one word that rises above all others. The year started with so much promise. Everyone was talking about VISION since it was "2020" and our goals and hopes were high. Then a catastrophe struck. The Coronavirus hit. First it was schools, then businesses, then restaurants, then theaters and then we got news from Governor Newsom that churches were to close. By mid-March our entire state was in full blown look-down. What shocked us about the pandemic was that it was *everywhere* and affected *everybody*. We were stunned at the news reports of how far spread Covid-19 was reaching globally. We had never seen a plague of this magnitude. It changed *everything*.

As a church we had to innovate, quickly. All services, classes and events were suspended. I was preaching from my living room to those logged onto Facebook and YouTube. In time, we were given permission to have drive-in church which pleased most of our families. At least in the parking lot we could see each other again and fellowship a little bit. Some of our more vulnerable members wisely stayed home to avoid exposure and had "house church" with their loved ones. When the weather cooled, the elders courageously decided to reopen our facility to worship services under protective protocols. So here we are today, Stanislaus County suffering from the third highest rate of Covid death per capita in the State. We trust, we worship and we wait for deliverance (Joshua 2:15-21).

Sadly, the year 2020 will also go down in history as the year of natural disaster. Storms of all kinds of unimaginable severity pommelled the USA. Tornadoes devastated Nashville followed by a tornado in Louisiana on Easter Sunday. Then in the summer a nearly unheard-of phenomenon struck Iowa. They called it a "*derecho*" with winds peaking at 140 mph ravaging the plains. Before we could take all that in a second hurricane struck the gulf states with category four destructiveness. Here, in the once Golden State, we witnessed the worst firestorm season in recorded history with more than two million acres scorched by fire. For us valley dwellers, we were glad we were already required to wear masks because the air quality was actually dangerous; for several weeks. Now, we face yet another rainless winter and a season of drought.

2020 has taught us lessons. Perhaps ones God wanted us to learn long ago. Lesson one: the church is far more than a building. It is everywhere its members are. Worship is not anchored to an auditorium, it is in the heart of those who love Christ, wherever they may be -- in cars, in homes or alone. Fellowship is not tethered to a hall. It is found in a LIFE group or in a phone call. It can occur in an email or even a text. Lesson two: Worship and fellowship are far more important than many of us realized. The long-term forced isolation from church is weakening people's spiritual vitality. Lesson three: this world with all its allurements is not our home – at all. As Solomon preached in Ecclesiastes, life "under the sun" is meaningless without God. Lesson four: in an instant, all we take for granted can be gone. Only the kingdom of God is unshakable. **"Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe..." - Heb. 12:28.**

Family, I am convinced of three things. One, God is humbling us and prying our fingers from this corrupted world. Two, Satan is adeptly using this virus to weaken and destroy the children of God. Far too many Christians are abandoning church and discipleship. Three, those here in the Turlock Church that love God more than anyone or anything, who read their Bibles and do what it says, who pray on their

knees and who write notes or make calls of encouragement . . . They will come out of this pestilence even more faithful and will shine like a lighthouse on a stormy shore.

El Shaddai, as we approach 2021 remind us that You are the Almighty. Remind us of what we are called to be: Your light in this darkness. Shine through us for the sake of those lost in complete turbulence and despair. Prompt us to pick up the phone and minister to those needing hope. Prompt us to pray with others that they will be reminded that You are still with us and that You shepherd Your sheep out of the wilderness and will give us rest. Keeping our eyes upon Jesus. Amen.

Blessings,
John