

Saturday, February 20

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2020 began with a beautiful run along the Purple Martin. Breathtaking blue skies, radiant rays from the sun cascading through the trees and reflecting on the babbling creek below as birds serenaded us with heavenly praises. As our feet glided along the trail, Tim and I talked about our new hopes and goals for the year. We expected there to be challenges, but we did not expect the world to be shaken by a global pandemic. It happened so quickly. One minute we were going about our hurried lives and the next minute we were in lockdown in our homes, tucked away from society. Little did we know how long our world would be shaken or the challenges that lie ahead.

In the beginning I found the new pace of life a welcomed change. No more running around constantly, trying to make it from one event to the next, and then collapsing in exhaustion at night. We were able to spend quality family time together, which has always been a rarity. I discovered that the people I live with drive me a little nuts with their lack of tidiness day to day. But despite a few annoyances, I have been grateful for the slower pace of living.

It was as if God intentionally slowed the busyness of the world so we could realize what is truly important in our lives and in his kingdom. He was giving us the opportunity to "...*look out not only to his own interests, but also the interests of others,*" (Philippians 2:4), and to "*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,*" (Luke 6:31). He offered us the perfect platform to put our beliefs into actions and shine before the world in a time of darkness and uncertainty. He brought to the forefront many things we turn a blind eye to, pretending they don't exist because they do not affect us. It has been in these stilled moments that God has reminded me how much he values *every* life. He has reminded me that I can do more for the world around me if I will only open eyes to see what surrounds me.

As the months passed, there have been events that have forced me to acknowledge the ills of this world. In doing so, I examined my personal life to see if I was doing all I could to make a positive difference. I have become more aware of the injustices that plague many of God's children. I have searched for and found ways in which I can make a difference, rather than stand on the sidelines. I have heard the stories of my friends and acquaintances and truly listened with my heart, seeking to understand the path of hurt they have walked. In these almost motionless moments, God has challenged me to be His love in more active ways, not merely in my thoughts and words. To step out of my safe haven and with a gentle spirit to fight for those who are oppressed around me. He has given me a more valiant spirit.

In the midst of this pandemic, one of my beloved students died tragically in a drive by shooting. I grieved. My co-workers grieved. Our students grieved. Our community grieved. It was too heavy a loss for our hearts. Aaliyah's death was a somber reminder that our "*lives are but a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes,*" (James 4:14). We are here one moment, the next we are standing before the throne of God. It was a challenge to love boldly and serve relentlessly while I am but a mist resting on the beauty of the earth God formed.

As the days turned to weeks and the weeks to months, I have watched those I love pass away due to Covid-19 and other diseases that ravaged their bodies. I have witnessed my friends lose spouses, parents, grandparents, and friends. We all have grieved with those who mourn for loved ones gone too soon. With broken hearts and anguished souls, we have given our loved ones back to our Creator. Death itself has been a challenge calling me to be more aware of my mortality. To be more grateful for the days I have been given. To celebrate life with those I love.

It is a challenge to live life to its fullest, to lay aside the hurriedness, and be Christ to the world around me in hopes of bringing his kingdom.

Psalm 46:10 challenges us to “*be still and be aware of God's presence.*” Despite the tragedies I have witnessed and the hardships I have encountered, this pandemic has allowed me the opportunity to *be still*. It has awakened my soul to new whispers from God. I will be forever grateful even in these times of sorrow for the words and challenges he has etched upon my heart.