

The Coronavirus Chronicle

San Jose, California

15 March 2020

These Are Times That Try Our Souls

Rev. Sammie Evans of Stone Church of Willow Glen speaks to a church with only the people necessary for today's service inside and to an iPhone from which the service was live streamed on Facebook to our congregation.



These Are Times That Try Our Souls

Eleven days ago – Wednesday, March 4 – Santa Clara County, California, where I live, seemed ahead of the curve. Perhaps too far.

Among my 2 million neighbors in the county, 14 were sick from coronavirus, COVID-19. That's just 0.0007 percent of those who live here.

But Dr. Sara Cody, the county's public health officer, put out a recommendation that organizations holding events attended by a thousand or more people should *consider* cancelling.

Five days later, after the National Hockey League's San Jose Sharks had played three home games and Major League Soccer's San Jose Earthquakes had played one before a total of more than 57,000 spectators, the number of local coronavirus cases had tripled to 43.

Cody then made her request a legally enforceable order by the sheriff.

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To have voices singing hymns over the internet, a few members of the choir were in the church – at least six feet apart.

These Are Times That Try Our Souls

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She didn't say the 29 new cases were people who'd gotten sick because they'd been sitting in a stadium. But what those games made clear is that packing people closely together while a deadly infectious disease rapidly spreads is risky for the public. If that rate of increase held, tripling every five days, we would have 387 cases today.

There are now 144 cases confirmed, but that's because the county can't test enough people. The threshold number for banned gatherings is down to 100. It's really 35 unless the organizer can provide enough space for people to stay an arm's length away from anyone else, among other rules.

Emily and I have friends serving a two-week self-imposed sentence of home confinement unless the infected person they were exposed to in New Orleans turns out to have been a false positive. Our friends can't be tested because Washington hasn't sent out enough test kits to meet the demand of everyone with symptoms, much less those who may have been exposed.

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Emily, who was our liturgist this morning, reads a passage from the Bible.

These Are Times That Try People's Souls

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Santa Clara County had tested only 589 people as of last count and hopes to get 1,400 test kits this week.

So here we sit in a nearly empty church – as empty as temples, mosques, synagogues, gurdwaras and auditoriums throughout the county have been all weekend – live-streaming our service over the internet to people for whom it's not safe to attend.

This pandemic – an epidemic spanning multiple continents – is a revealing test of American society.

The disappearance of hand sanitizer and toilet paper, rice and beans from store shelves shows this.

The United States continuously wrestles with the barbaric Titanic model, in which providing fundamentals of food, shelter, health care and education to everyone are matters of debate while our economic peers consider them non-negotiable elements of the social order. At present, the possibility of one person taking advantage of our system justifies denying the many what they need and can't afford.

Those hoarding hand sanitizer seem not to recognize that other people must have clean hands for hoarders to be safe. It's a death wish.

Americans may come to understand this. Or we may not.



Rev. Irene Pak Lee prays the prayer of the people translated into American Sign Language by interpreter Hannah Paul.



Pam Hood plays the piano postlude.