

How to Handle COVID-19 Pandemic With Spiritual Authority

I'm writing this a couple of weeks into what promises to be one of the most bizarre seasons of our lives. Here in Illinois, the governor's stay-at-home order went active, and since then, the majority of us have been acclimating to new rhythms of working from home.

For those of us who spent our days at work in the church, suddenly our lives have become full of Zoom meetings and wrestling with what ministry looks like when you cannot be with people in person.

This time has been interesting to me. It's been fascinating to watch churches all over scramble and avalanche my newsfeed with invitations to live teachings or worship sets and the flood of Scriptures (and memes) helping us process this strange time (and yes, I'm right there in the mix!). I'm grateful for the creativity I see popping up and that we're learning how to connect in new ways as the body of Christ.

At the same time, I'm already finding myself avoiding the online space even more than before. Maybe you're different than I am, but while I know each individual item comes with an invitation to good things, the flood of all of them together is simply overwhelming! *How do I know which of these things I should pay attention to and which to ignore?* I can't do them all, and rather than being constantly burdened with the choice, I think I'd rather just tune it out.

The Invitation in This Season

Mid-week, I was having a conversation with one of my friends about this bizarre season, and he observed something

interesting. He said something to the extent of, “You know, for all the concern I see about the negative effects of isolation, it seems to me the church has forgotten that solitude and silence are spiritual disciplines.” When he said that, it hit me like a ton of bricks—this was the word of the Lord to me.

I’ve long loved the disciplines of solitude and silence. While they tend to provoke anxiety at first, what I’ve found is that unlike almost anything else, they offer us the chance to discover stillness and find that God is waiting for us there. We set aside every distraction we may use to cover up a level of anxiety that simmers just beneath the surface of our attention, and instead, we embrace our inner world, allowing the Lord to surface and sift what needs work there.

When I was in graduate school, the pattern of my work allowed me great flexibility. I had the freedom to work from home alone if I wanted to, and with some frequency, I would do days of solitude or take silence fasts. I always found the first few hours uncomfortable; I felt fidgety, mentally anxious—looking for something to take up the extra cognitive space I wasn’t used to going unfilled. *This* was the critical point; this was where I could slip off, wasting my time unnecessarily checking my email, googling something irrelevant, scrolling through social media or through some other method of self-distraction to take my attention off the fact that I was uncomfortable not being frantically busy.

On the other hand, I could choose to remain present with a mind that was used to spinning faster than the present activity would require, and allow myself to be OK with that. I could trust that even if I feel anxious, God is with me in the present moment, and He isn’t asking me to keep myself occupied; rather, He is inviting me to allow my attention to be more present with Him in the now.

After three to four hours of solitude and/or silence without

distraction, I would feel myself settle into my soul in a new way. The anxiety would fade away, and I would be able to fully be without feeling conflicted about it. My mind would be clearer, my thoughts sharper and my experience of what I was doing more enjoyable. As I would continue from that point, I could literally feel my soul being replenished and my heart filled with hope. I could almost feel the light of God communing with me spiritually, and my work itself would become the most beautiful act of worship. It would be impossible not to love those times. Ironically, when I began to work at a church, and I could no longer share my work-life with God in the way I had learned to, it took me a while to recover from that loss.

The Temptation Toward Distraction

During these last few weeks as the COVID-19 crisis has begun to disrupt my typical rhythms, I've felt that same moment of choice many times. My typical routines are all shifted around, and I find myself experiencing far less of the stimulation of other people I am constantly interacting with. To fill that gap, I find myself tempted to try and keep myself busier than I need to or to be scrolling and swiping through the digital projections of the lives of others to take up my attention. It's the same anxiety surfacing in a new context, and the same temptation to distract me from being with myself.

As time has gone on, I've been talking with the Lord about what this time is about. Is this an opportunity to be more productive? I'm fairly good at the whole online ministry thing; maybe I should jump in and take advantage of the time when everyone has more time on their hands! For me at least, the Lord has been saying the opposite—this isn't a time for busyness, this is a time to withdraw and to meet with Him ... to trust that what people need in this time or reduced in-person social interaction is not more of myself, it's more of Jesus, and the best way I can lead anyone towards that is to embrace that road myself.

To that end, here is what I've been leaning into this week (in addition to plenty of work time, don't worry):

–I read more than I'm usually able to.

–I caught up on some very much-needed sleep.

–I was able to do more reflection that I'm usually able to allocate.

–I listened to some teaching that seems like a “word in season” for me.

–I talked with some friends I'm not always able to catch up with.

–I was more intentional to ration my social media engagement and not let it become a distraction for me.

–I played Legos with my kids more than I usually can.

–I drank a cup of coffee while enjoying looking at the sunshine and not rushing to the next thing.

–When my wife and I both had a bit of a cold (don't worry, just a cold, no COVID symptoms overlap), I was able to take care of her, myself and the family in a way that felt honoring and not like I was competing with my busy schedule to do it.

–I took my time writing this blog post.

The whole time, I've been able to feel myself slowing internally. The rapid pace, wound tight with the tensions of the problems all leaders have to solve and the complexities of local plus translocal ministry have begun to wind down.

Rather than my mind racing by default, I feel myself more present in the moment, and I sense the presence of God more readily. I've had to press through many moments of temptation towards distraction, but as I have, I've settled. I love my family better, I love my life more and I love myself more

fully. *I haven't done everything that is urgent, but I have done everything that is important.*

Activity and Authority

I think it is so easy for me to overplay the importance of activity and underplay the importance of authority. When presented with something, I'm tempted to roll my sleeves up and jump in, thinking that activity is the solution to most things. Match the size of the problem with the size of my activity, and I can handle this thing!

Sometimes that is the appropriate solution, but other times when we're presented with a challenge, God isn't looking for us to engage with it, He's offering us the chance to rise above it. Jesus didn't have to do a storm-sized amount of work to calm the wind and waves, He simply had to speak, because He was addressing it from a place of authority.

Activity is how you solve a problem in the same realm as you, but from a higher realm, authority will resolve it much faster. It can be much faster to rest your way into authority and then speak to the issue from a higher place than it is to get yourself busy and immerse yourself in activity. Want to calm the storm? Get busy snoozing.

During my journey with God, I have had the fortune to carry spiritual authority in some areas. I have seen God do some stuff I never expected I would see, and that authority has never come from anywhere other than meeting God in times and places no one knows about.

It's never come because I heard a teaching (as important as those are), or because I joined others in worship or fellowship (again, those are important, too). What we find in our journey with God really is the *only* thing that gives us the tools for the challenges around us.

No one knows what all this crazy COVID-19 situation has for us

in times ahead. No one can predict the way it will directly impact our communities, maybe even ourselves. Add to that the questions about economics, government, international relations and more, and we are looking at a very unclear future ahead.

One thing I have a strong suspicion of is that we'll need all the spiritual authority we can get for the times ahead. I have no interest in wasting this time with activity. I'm going after authority.

God has a different road ahead for each of us, and I'm not saying this should be yours. But if it is, I want to encourage you to join me.

I'm going to embrace the silence, receive the solitude, allow them to do their work in bringing me before the Lord, fully transparent to Him, allowing Him to purge what He wants to purge and affirm who I am underneath those insecurities and anxieties.

Having met Him once again, we will rise again to this great kingdom task He calls us to in a world with more need than ever for our risen king. {eoa}

Putty Putman is on the senior leadership team of the Vineyard Church of Central Illinois and co-leads the preaching team as well as oversees the School of Kingdom Ministry, a supernatural training and discipleship school hosted by local churches across the country and around the world. As a gifted communicator and passionate equipper, Putty loves to see people grow in the conviction of who they are in Christ and be released to live a naturally supernatural lifestyle empowered by the Holy Spirit.