Every Sunday during Lent in this worship series, we have been invited to fast from hurry. I’m wondering how the pace of your life has changed in the midst of a global pandemic.

Maybe it hasn’t changed too much. Maybe it’s changed a lot. Some of us who are retired may be missing weekly social or volunteer connections. Some of us may now be working from home, who have never done that before. Some of us are caring for children or other family members without the benefit of the same outside community resources like schools and social service activities. Some of us are home, navigating distance learning while our colleges and schools are closed for in-person classes. Some of us are separated from our loved ones in an effort to keep each other safe and healthy. Some of us may be experiencing a loss of work hours and income. Some of us, particularly in the healthcare field, first responders, and folks along the home delivery supply chain, may be working even longer hours in situations different from any they have ever faced before. Others still are experiencing their own unique circumstances few of us may know anything about. Wherever we find ourselves, what does the invitation to “fast from hurry” mean in this time?

Fast isn’t a word I hear a lot in my daily life—except when we talk about breakfast, which is literally breaking the fast from overnight eating or drinking while asleep. Different sects of Christianity and different religions have more familiarity with fasts than I do. I think particularly of my Muslim friends who spend a month each year during Ramadan fasting from food and drink during the daylight hours. Many fasting Muslims practice their Ramadan fast with serious devotion, viewing their abstaining from food and drink as a solemn duty as well as a way to connect in holy ways with God and with each other.

What would it mean to give up hurry with that kind of seriousness, devotion, and intention? Could we do it in a crisis? When I was doing advanced training in pastoral care, I had the good fortune to learn about the wisdom of hospital chaplains. The ones I was trained by were called upon to respond to crises on a daily--sometimes hourly--basis. The rush of adrenaline that comes from responding to a crisis can be a helpful short term tool for channeling focus and energy. In the long term though it can lead to a deterioration of both focus and energy, leaving it hard for chaplains to be mentally, emotionally present to the patients before them. To manage that reality, these chaplains counseled new practitioners when they received an urgent summons to “always take the long way to the Emergency Room.” The extra 2-5 minute walk was a way of calming their spirit to be able to arrive not in a rush but with the kind of quiet centeredness that would allow them to do their jobs to the best of their ability.

Today’s scripture passage tells us we don’t have to keep “striving.” The Ten Commandments talk about this thing called Sabbath and keeping it holy. We’re told in Genesis that the Creator
rested for a whole day when making Creation. For all of us who need to be given permission, it’s right here in the Bible. In more than one place--in more than one way--we are told in scripture “It is okay to rest.”

Even if everyone else is hurrying, it’s okay to go slowly. In fact, in these pandemic days, giving yourself a break in whatever way you can and whenever you can could be the most helpful and even the most productive thing you can do. It’s great if you’re going to use your quarantine time to learn a new language. It’s also fine if for your own personal reasons you find yourself eating lasagna in the bathtub one night. It’s okay to fast from hurry. It’s okay if you don’t “rise to the challenge” right away, tomorrow, or in three weeks from now. This situation is unlike anything any of us alive now have ever faced. There is no shame in going to pieces, taking a breather, or deciding to give hurry up for Lent.

I have so looked forward to this worship series because these ideas hit me right in the gut: fast from hurry and fast from worry. I am a chronic worrier. We joke about it being a family heirloom sometimes. I’ve learned--much to my surprise--that not everyone struggles with worry--at least not in the same way. I’m grateful when I meet someone who struggles in a different way because we probably have a lot to learn from each other.

If you don’t know what it’s like to struggle with worry, let me tell you, worry is mean. Worry is a thief and a liar. A moment of fear can sound an alarm about something that needs attention. Appropriate planning and learning about a situation can help us be prepared. But worry can be like a persistent fear and a never ending planning session. And in that state worry steals the joy and life from the present by feeding us the lie that hypervigilance and continual striving is the only way to stay safe. Not only can worrying not add an hour to our lives, there have been study after study that the stress of worrying actually steals hours from our lives by making us more susceptible to chronic disease.

Today’s scripture and so much of scripture reminds us that real safety cannot be found in any of our hurrying or our worrying. Real safety and security can be found only with God. Not with what we sometimes mistake for God like success, or money, or respect, or an adequate amount of toilet paper. No, real safety and security comes from the holy source of all life and love that lives and dwells within us all that no ruler, debtor, jailer, or virus can take away from us.

It is possible to find some respite from worry. It is possible to give it up. Even a couple minutes is a good start, especially in these uncertain pandemic days. We’ll all find that respite in different ways. Some of us will find it helps to turn off social media or get outside or call a friend. Another way of finding freedom from overwhelming feelings like fear, grief, anger, or even joy is through the practice of making art. I’m not talking about art for the sake of achievement. I’m talking about art that speaks to your soul--something that moves you or something that helps you move that pit in the bottom of your stomach. A minister friend asked jokingly online if we were ready yarn-pocalypse that is about to be unleashed on us all in the form of scarves, prayer shawls, and blankets from self-isolating worry knitters.

What makes your heart sing? Are you a music maker? A poem writer? A builder of LEGO cities?
This doesn’t have to be high-brow art! It’s about connecting with whatever you’ve got going on inside right now, because connecting with that, I believe, connects us to the holy, healing power of God.

I believe making art connects us to our unhurried God. Unleashing the creativity we are all born with, I believe, reawakens our connection to the one who created us all. Jesus taught “where your treasure is there your heart will be.” I think that means we ought to carefully examine what we treasure. I think it also means we can connect to the treasured presence of God by connecting with the treasure of our own hearts and with whatever is living there right now. I believe that connection makes room for hope even in the midst of fear and despair.

In Italy neighbors are leaning out their windows and singing together. How will we share our creativity with each other ...from an appropriate distance?

In Luke, Jesus invites his disciples to “consider the lilies.” It is not lost on me that under “shelter in place” getting outside for a properly social distanced walk and “considering the lilies” might be one of the only things left for us to do! But what a perfect time it is in Northern Illinois to get outside and look for signs of flowers on the rise. Last fall my boys and I planted tulip, crocus, and daffodil bulbs. It’s such a hopeful feeling for me putting those little bulbs in the ground and now watching the bright green sprouts rise from the earth.

“Consider the lilies,” Jesus says, “Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin.” The lilies aren’t hurried. The lilies aren’t worried. The lilies know that now is their time to grow and soon it will be their time to bloom. But even though they will die back and sleep in the ground as bulbs, they do not fear, for they know they will rise again. Maybe they even know that even if the chipmunks burrow into the ground and eat the sleeping bulbs their life cycle will start over again in the life of that chipmunk.

Resurrection, or the cycle of death and new birth, is the pattern of all creation. That is the truth that Jesus taught us not only in his death and resurrection but also in his teachings and in the way he lived his life. Resurrection can be a source of eternal hope that feeds us humans in times of doubt and fear too.

Yesterday when Governor Pritzker announced the shelter in place, I was touched by the story of resurrection he told as evidence of our reason to hope that we will endure this virus together. He reminded listeners that 150 years ago Chicago burned to the ground. When they rebuilt they protected themselves from future fires and they went from a Midwestern town to a major US city. On the site of the start of the former fire, they built a fire station.

I don’t know what’s going to happen next week. I don’t know what things will be like after this pandemic is over. I do know that we can fast from hurry. We can fast from worry. I know that we can trust in our unhurried God even in times of trouble. Things may be bleak now, but I know we will rise like the tulips from the ground.