

Standing in long lines is not something that is foreign to Americans. We have stood in long lines to see the openings of well-hyped movies. Some of the longest lines that I have stood in were to get into Scott Stadium in Charlottesville, or Lane Stadium in Blacksburg to watch the Cavaliers and Hokies play their annual college football game. But, the nature of our lines has changed radically in recent months. Now the lines are not connected with entertainment and pleasure, but with worry and despair as people line up to get food at food pantries and emergency distribution centers, or to receive badly needed funds due to involuntary unemployment, or to try to receive testing in the hopes that they have not contracted the dreaded coronavirus. In each case, they are hoping to receive what is at the end of each line.

And many look upon the faces of pain and despair of the people standing in those lines and ask how a loving God could allow something like this to happen to a *Christian nation*. But, the problem with that line of questioning is that it makes a rather dubious assumption. It assumes that we are still worthy of being called a "*Christian nation*" when the reality is that our societal values and legal mores have become so degraded that our country now is among the world-wide leaders in abortion (ranking 7th in the world in promoting the slaughter of the helpless tiny human beings)¹. And, the U. S. has further displayed its moral decay by condoning the marriages of approximately 646,500 gay couples.² We have become a nation in which mass shootings are a common occurrence, and in which pornography is a thriving industry. And Sundays in America—even when we could go to church—attendance has dropped year after year. And we certainly have no hope in changing any of this by depending upon our political leaders—where in our nation's capital we see hate-filled politicians from both sides of the isle who take more pleasure in sniping at each other than to attending to the dire needs of the people. None of these distinctions can be considered the marks of a *Christian nation*.

So, is this pandemic and the awful lines that it has spawned a sign of God's judgment upon us? Perhaps it is. And yet, it is also a sign of God's patience and mercy as He tries to regain our attention and make us realize just how far as a nation we have strayed. You see, it is not that God doesn't care for us or love us anymore. Rather, God's heart is saddened by the fact that such terrible crises as the one we are now dealing with are even necessary to get our attention. So while these lines for food are necessary to meet our physical needs, is there an even more important necessity that we need to be standing in line for? How do we ever get back into the right line that God intends for his people? How do we, as a nation, ever get back on track? Well, let's consider what Jesus tells us about some spiritual food that we need to partake of, and then move on to what He tells us about standing in lines.

Jesus was once left alone while His disciples went into town to find some food to eat, and when they returned to Jesus, they knew that He had gone many hours without eating. John 4 tells us this:

³¹ Meanwhile, the disciples were urging Jesus to eat. ³² "No," He said, "*I have some food you don't know about.*"

³³ "Who brought it to Him?" the disciples asked each other. ³⁴ Then Jesus explained: "My nourishment comes from doing the will of God who sent me, and from finishing his work. ³⁵ Do you think the work of harvesting will not begin until the summer ends four months from now? Look around you! Vast fields of human souls are ripening all around us, and are ready now for reaping. ³⁶ The reapers will be paid good wages and will be

gathering eternal souls into the granaries of heaven! What joys await the sower and the reaper, both together!”

John 4:31-36 (TLB)

Jesus is making two points here. First, He told His disciples that He already had *food* that they were unaware of—only this wasn't *physical* food, but *spiritual* food in the form of the Word of God. This first point is closely akin to something Jesus said during His trial in the Wilderness when He told Satan: *“Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”* Matthew 4:4 (NIV) In other words, Jesus is telling us that we must develop a craving for a different kind of food that satisfies the hunger of the soul, and not just the stomach. What kind of food is that? Well, it's a special kind of bread, actually. But, it's not sliced and it doesn't come in a plastic wrapper with a twist tie at the end. You won't find this kind of bread on a grocery store shelf. Rather, it is the Bread of Life, who *is Jesus Christ*.³ Jesus is the Bread of Life that comes from God, who sent His Son to suffer and die on the Cross for your sins and mine. People are getting into bread lines today only to eat of physical food that never lasts. They need to flock to a different Bread line—and feast upon the Good News of Jesus Christ. What is that Good News?

It's pretty simple. You don't have to be a rocket scientist or have a string of seminary degrees to understand it. In fact, one of the people who Jesus entrusted with this all important message was just a simple fisherman named Peter. And Peter boils it all down to this: *“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”* Acts 2:38 (NIV) For *“everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.”* Acts 2:21 (NLT) If you will do this—repent and accept Jesus as your Savior and *trust* in Him, then you can have the Christian response to this pandemic. It is a response that relies upon and trusts God to see us through.

Now the world has a different attitude. The world will tell you that *“we will all get through this together”*—but nothing is mentioned about God or relying upon Him. Or, stated differently, the world is saying: *“We are all in the same boat, so don't worry?”* What comfort is that if the boat is sinking? We, as Christians, are *not* in the same boat as the world. No, we sail in a very different boat. If you sail in the world's boat, you'll end up like Peter who took his eyes off Jesus during that raging storm at sea.⁴ And when he did that, he sank. But Jesus is there to lift you from the angry and worrisome waves of any storm, including this pandemic, if you will just lift your hand to Him. We need to be on board with Jesus. Just as there are two boats to get into, there are only two lines to get into today—and I am not talking about bread lines. Now, I will get to that in a minute. But, before doing so, we need to complete what Jesus was telling His disciples to do in that passage we just read in John 4.

There is a second part that we don't want to leave out when we consider Jesus' reference to the *“harvest”* in the fields. Jesus told His disciples: *“Look around you! Vast fields of human souls are ripening all around us, and are ready now for reaping.”* John 4:35 If you truly love that spiritual food found in the Word of God, then you must share it with others. Specifically, we need to spread the word that Jesus Christ is, indeed, the Bread of Life. While the world shines a million other lights to distract people from the Bread Life, we need to be the Light that re-directs their focus. Last week, St. Paul's Baptist Church in Richmond aired a TV sermon that Dr. Lance Watson gave long before this pandemic hit us.

And in that sermon, Dr. Watson said something that made me think about this year's cancellation of the NCAA college basketball tournament due to the coronavirus. As a loyal Wahoo, I had hoped that my Virginia Cavaliers would get a shot at defending their national title that they won in last year's tournament, but that just wasn't possible. Dr. Watson, though, mentioned something that is inspiring that happened in the hours just before UVa took to the court to defeat Texas Tech 85-77 and won the national championship. Just before the game, Virginia's coach, Tony Bennett, received a text message from Dabo Swinney, who is the football coach of the Clemson Tigers. The message simply said this: "*Let the light that shines in you be brighter than the light that shines on you.*"⁵ You see, both Dabo Swinney and Tony Bennett are devout believers who truly trust in the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ shines in both of their lives. And Dabo Swinney reminded Tony Bennett that whatever the outcome of that game might be—win or lose—that we all, as Christians, must shine our lights for Christ—no matter what distracting lights of the world may shine on us.

That is so true for us during this pandemic as well—always look for opportunities to show Christ to others by the way you carry on with hope and love, even in these dire times. Too many times, we fail to do that. Don't let the trials of this COVID-19, dim your light—let it continue to shine brightly for Jesus Christ. A story is told about a man who once attended a Billy Graham revival meeting and he was so moved by what Rev. Graham had to say that he decided to repent of his sins and give his life to Christ. When the next Sunday came around, he went to the local church that he had attended sporadically from time to time. When the service was over, this man went to one of the deacons who he had known for many years in his business dealings with him to let him know about his conversion. So, he walked up to the deacon and said: "*I was at the Billy Graham meeting last week out at the ball park. I went forward and received Christ.*" The deacon replied: "*I heard about that and I am delighted.*" Then the man asked the deacon: "*How long have you and I been associated in business?*" The deacon responded: "*I'd say about 23 years or so.*" So the man asked the deacon: "*Have you known Christ as your Savior all that time?*" "*Yes, I have,*" the deacon answered proudly. Then the man said something that was probably the greatest indictment of one's failure to witness for Jesus that you could imagine. He told the deacon this: "*Well, I don't remember you ever speaking to me about Christ during those 23 years. I have thought highly of you. In fact, I thought so highly of you that I felt if anyone could be as fine a man as you and not be a Christian, then I didn't have to be a Christian either.*"⁶ Wouldn't it be tragic if someone were looking for spiritual food—needing God's Bread of Life—but when they turned and looked at our lives, they were only left starving? We can't let that happen. As tough as times may be, now is the time to live our lives as lights for Jesus Christ.

Now few minutes ago, I mentioned the fact that when we face the trials of life, we are not all "*in the same boat.*" Rather, there are two boats that you can choose to get into: The *boat of Christ* or the *boat of the world*. Similarly, there are *only two lines* to get into today—and I am not talking about bread lines. Jesus told us about these two very different lines that people queue up in. There are a lot of pastors who avoid mentioning this, but sometimes the difficulties of life with all their tragic consequences are allowed by God for a reason. Yes, God does sometimes allow things—some even as terrible as the coronavirus—to come along. But when God does so—believe it or not—it is usually to meet a crucial need that we have. Now, you might recoil to hear that and say, "*How could something so terrible be*

something that we need?" Pastor and Christian writer, Max Lucado, hints to the answer when he says: *"Sometimes God is so touched by what He sees, He gives us what we need and not simply that for which we ask."*⁷ What everyone has been asking for is that the coronavirus would simply go away right now. I know that I have been praying exactly that. And yet, God in His wisdom, has decided, for the time being, that may not be what we need—particularly as a nation. And what is it that this country needs? *It needs a wake-up call*—and this crisis we now face may well be it. A wake-up call to what?—A wake-up call to the fact that, in the end, there are *only two lines* for you to be in—and every one of us will receive what is at the end of that line. Jesus told us about these two lines in His parable of the Sheep and the Goats. Jesus said:

³¹ When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with Him, He will sit on His throne in heavenly glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on His right and the goats on His left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right [i.e., the sheep], "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world." ⁴¹ Then He will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" . . . ⁴⁶ Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. Matthew 25: 31-34, 41 & 46 (NIV)

The sheep will be formed up into one great line and will follow the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, because they know their Master's voice. And He will lead them to eternal life in God's Heavenly Kingdom.⁸ But the goats, who failed to follow the Shepherd because they were too intent upon making their own paths, they will be put in that other long, long line. And so, there will come a time, at the End of Time, when each and every human being who ever lived, including you and me, will ultimately stand in one of those two lines. Right now, in the present, if you look around and all you see are goats—you know you are standing in the wrong line. Man, it's time to repent and switch lines before the time of line-changing is over. That *is* the wake-up call God has given this nation today. Which line will it be—the sheep or the goats? The choice is all yours, so it's time to wake-up. . . and choose wisely.

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
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Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor
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¹ The United States ranks behind only such towers of morality as Russia, Cuba, Kazakstan, Georgia, Romania and Sweden, with 19.6 abortions per 1,000 women of the U.S. population. <https://worldpopulationreview.com>. The latest statistics indicated 862,000 abortions in the U.S. in 2017. Associated Press, "Number of abortions in U.S. drops to lowest since they became legal nationwide, report finds," <https://www.nbcnews.com> (September 18, 2019).

² UCLA School of Law, Williams Institute, "Same-sex Couple Data & Demographics," <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu>.

³ John 6:47-51 ⁴⁷ I am telling you the truth: he who believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your ancestors ate manna in the desert, but they died. ⁵⁰ But the bread that comes down from heaven is of such a kind that whoever eats it will not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If you eat this bread, you will live forever. The bread that I will give you is my flesh, which I give so that the world may live." (TEV)

⁴ Matthew 14:27-33 ²⁷ But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." ²⁸ "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" ³² And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. ³³ Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (NIV)

⁵ Andrew Holleran, "Dabo Swinney Sent This Text To Tony Bennett Before The Title Game," <https://thespun.com> (April 11, 2019).

⁶ Lorne Sanny, "The Key to World Evangelism," *Discipleship Journal* (Jan/Feb 1982), PreachingToday.com.

⁷ Max Lucado, from the chapter, "The Hardest Thing God Ever Did" in *He Still Moves Stones*, Thomas Nelson Publishers (1999).

⁸ John 10:27-28 ²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. (NIV)