

ASBURY CIRCUIT RIDER

The faces behind the metaphors (Widows, Orphans and Immigrants)

Volume 20 Issue 10

May 10, 2020

The Bible is full of metaphors, words that we use as a stand-in to help us better understand complicated ideas. For example, we think of a widow as a person who lost their partner to death. They suffered the loss of someone dear to them. In scripture, a widow is any person that finds themselves thrown into circumstances where they need protection. Perhaps they counted on their spouse for more than companionship. They are vulnerable, and their livelihood is at risk.

In either case, the label widow does not mean incapable. A widow can be quite capable of taking care of themselves and leading others. However, widows are vulnerable because of the failure of the people and the systems



An ambulance driver outside a hospital in New York...Credit... Spencer Platt/Getty

surrounding them. In scripture, God takes a firm stance alongside widows. In the first chapter of Isaiah, God reprimands the people. Calling for justice, God says, "See that justice is done— help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights, and defend widows" (Isaiah 1:17).

The Book of Isaiah is a story of prophecy. As the

book begins, God's people are struggling and feeling overwhelmed by calamity. As I read this chapter, I think about what we're going through and what we're leaning. It was never about the merit or capabilities of widows and orphans. God condemned oppressive systems, whether political, economic, or religious, that resulted in the suffering of people. And God directs the call to correction squarely at anyone in a position to take action.

In our current series, *Risen*, we examine inequities highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, I can't ignore the political posturing, deflection and blatant untruths we hear in the daily

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Special points of interest:

- *** All meetings have been cancelled until further notice.
- *** A prayer of cooperation on page 3 ...
- *** A note from Connie on page 10 ...

Jubilee (Rejected and exalted)

The news articles are sprinkled here and there, amid all the other news about the pandemic. Just below the coverage that counts the number of new cases, the number of deaths, and job losses. Stories about the more vulnerable among us.

A writer takes notice of how a virus that doesn't check the background of a host before taking up residence is disproportionately attacking persons of color. Another writer covers persons without a home to provide them shelter-in-place, and persons closer to the bottom of the economic scale. And caught up in the middle of systemic inequities, we find the lesser covered stories. The messy stories.

There's a story in scripture about a time when Jesus returned to his hometown. The scene is the church in Nazareth, where Jesus grew up. Nazareth was one of those small, rural towns, located in the hills. It was like one of us who grew up in the northern peninsula of Michigan, returning home after spending years traveling through the cities of the lower peninsula. Everyone knew everyone.

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Jubilee (Rejected and Exalted) ...cont from page 1

Jesus grew up in Nazareth as the son of Joseph, the carpenter. While Mary was His biological mother, Joseph adopted Jesus after Mary got pregnant and gave birth while the couple was engaged. Likely a not-so-well-kept secret among the hometown folks.

Jesus had the honor of reading from scripture during the church service. All eyes were on Him as the townsfolk listened to find out if this homeboy's reading ability matched the rumors about His popularity as a healer and teacher. The crowd was impressed. His diction and pronunciation of the ancient text was flawless. "I heard he graduated from some Ivy-league school," one lady whispered to her husband.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed. Luke 4:18-19

Things couldn't be going better for the local hero until it didn't. The text that Jesus read was from a book of ancient prophecy that we now call Isaiah, after the name of the main characters. The

The faces behind the metaphorscont. from page 1

news from our political leaders. Rather than focus on what our leaders fail to do, our emphasis is what we are called to do. First, we each have a vote. Demand and exercise your right to vote.

See that justice is done-help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights and defend widows.

Isaiah 1:17

The stories that grab our attention cover real people rather than metaphors.

prophet Isaiah was famous among the ancestors of Jesus. It is said that God spoke directly through Isaiah to all people.

Part of the text that Jesus read said something about a time when prisoners are set free, the blind gain sight, and debts are forgiven. This prophecy connects to ancient laws dating back to a time when the ancestors fled from slavery in Egypt. The name we give this particular set of laws is *Jubilee*.

Pastor Jeremy of Court Street Church, says this about this idea of *Jubilee*:

Every fiftieth year, God said, you shall blow a ram's horn and announce the beginning of a year of Jubilee. In that year you shall rest. Don't plant your fields. Don't even plow. Don't buy and sell stocks. If your neighbor went into foreclosure and you bought his house, give him his house back. If you loaned somebody money and they've never managed to pay it back, cancel the debt. If somebody has fallen so low, they had to sell themselves into slavery, set them free. Release prisoners from prison.

Chapter 56 of Isaiah begins by answering the question of who is included when it comes to God's favor. Again we find metaphors that confirm that God's favor is intended for all persons, all of creation, at all times. We uncover more metaphors, including eunuchs and immigrants. All people, whether they have children or don't have children, whether we know them or don't know them. All people, whether they are born in our hometown or immigrated here from another country. All means all in God's view of creation.

Spend the year with your family. Forgive and show kindness and rest. This was God's commandment: every fifty years, push a giant reset button and let everybody start over. It's hard to imagine what that would look like. It was even hard for the Israelites.

The rabbis tell us that this commandment was so difficult that it was probably never obeyed. The teachers of the law talked about this as an aspirational commandment, not one that God actually intended for people to carry out.

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So God includes all of us. None of us are excluded from the love of God. And none of us are excluded from God's expectations. All of us, including widows, eunuchs, orphans, immigrants, friends, strangers, family, and people we don't like very much. And each of us chooses. Either we accept God's grace by responding with love towards others, or we choose to oppose God and suffer the consequences.

In a conversation with Sylvia Pittman, I asked her to share her views on the inequities we know to exist and are highlighted by the pandemic. Sylvia is an artist, humanitarian, professional musician, and person of faith. And Sylvia is connected with people throughout the country. People from different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

One thing that gives Sylvia hope for all of us is the sense of coming together that she hears in people's voices. And the many examples of people paying it forward through their generosity and action. On the other hand, she is speaking to

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In our Prayers

Curtis Young	Austin & Mary Suffle
Rachel Bastine	Miriam Watson
Norma Buzzard	Shirley Craig
Mary Lyons	Christopher Lewis
Barbara McIvor	Sarah Tanner

FRIENDS AND LOVED ONES WHO ARE HOMEBOUND OR IN NURSING CARE

Elaine Lamoreaux Mary Nations



A prayer for cooperation

Free us, Lord, from our obsession with ourselves long enough to care for others; to be so concerned about the well-being of the human community that we don't have to worry about our place, our church, our class, our values, our vested interests. Help us to know the joy and freedom of putting all our trust in you. Amen. ¹

¹ Walter Brueggemann. Five Talents' Response to the Coronavirus. © March 26, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://fivetalents.org/blog/2020/3/26/five-talents-response-to-the-coronavirus>

Coming up this week

May 11	Mon	
May 12	Tues	10am-2pm Water / Food Distribution
May 13	Wed	No Pastor Book Club Until further notice
May 14	Thu	
May 15	Fri	
May 16	Sat	
May 17	Sun	



JOIN WORSHIP ONLINE

SUNDAY, MAY 10TH, 10:30 AM

FACEBOOK LIVE (FLINT ASBURY)

OR

WEBINAR



JOIN BY PHONE

+1 929 436 2866

MEETING ID: 324 841 204

JOIN ONLINE

[HTTPS://ZOOM.US/J/324841204](https://zoom.us/j/324841204)

Asbury Worship Series Risen

Easter is over. I can usually tell by the clearance sales on Easter candy the Monday after. Was there Easter candy on the shelves this year? My avoidance of shopping during the pandemic kept me from impulse buying Easter candy. A small blessing in the midst of so much bad news.

Book Club News

We decided to suspend our study of our latest book, *God and the Gay Christian*, by Matthew Vines. This book is too important to exclude members of our group that have been unable to join our online discussion.



Meanwhile, with so much talk going around about the virus as a sign of the

end-times, our group chose to study the Book of Revelations. Last week, several of us got online using Zoom to begin our discussions. This coming Wednesday, and until further notice, we will



Governor Whitmer announced in an online town hall meeting, the formation of a task force that will guide emergency response and influence future policy. The justifi-

continue our discussions, a few chapters at a time.

While we still won't know whether there is a connection between the COVID-19 pandemic and John's dream revelation, we are certain to be a bit more knowledgeable about what is found in this mysterious, apocalyptic book.

Written somewhere near the end of the first century, the Book of Revelations was written during a time of persecution of Christians. The Roman Empire, led by Domitian, incarcerated, exiled, or executed persons unwilling to declare the Roman ruler as god. Jews and Christians living within the boundaries of the empire knew better.

cation for this focus is the recognition that, while COVID-19 does not check credentials before taking residence in a new host, systematic injustice means that some are more at risk than others. The reality is that racial disparities in health care exists in our state and nation.

The headline for an article in the New York Times reads: *As Coronavirus Deepens Inequality, Inequality Worsens Its Spread*¹.

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One of the many things about Revelations that makes it such a mysterious book is that the language uses symbols and codes, instead of naming people, places, and nations directly. As readers, we are left to marvel at the poetry, speculate on the imagery, and hypothesis on the meaning for the present time.

I encourage you to join us online for our Wednesday gatherings. We chose not to go on Facebook live since this is intended to be an interactive discussion. You can call in by phone, be heard, and hear what others are saying by calling (929) 436-2866, and entering the meeting ID, 482458815#.

We are a diverse group and we are delighted when new persons join us. I hope that you will join in on our discussion. We usually meet each Wednesday at Noon, but during the COVID-19 crisis we are meeting online at 12:30 pm.

You can contact our office with questions, by phone or simply type your question on our website's homepage — FlintAsbury.org

Pastor Tommy

Leadership in Worship & Service

Welcome Team	Tony, Mirium
Ushers	Anthony, Jim
Production Team	Jonathon, Terrance
Children	Patrice & Mirium
Worship Leaders	Cyndi
Café	Christine & Norma

Kevin Croom	Dir. Operations
Blair Neifert	Farm Manager
Matt Dee	Farm Operations
Israel Unger	Function to Funding
Kim Sims	Connections
Karl Collyer	Production
Katelin Maylum	Production

Asbury Staff

Rev. Dr. Tommy McDoniel	Pastor
Connie Portillo	Office Secretary
Sylvia Pittman	Empowerment Arts
Jim Craig	Leadership Chair

Asbury Café

Plan to meet outside the sanctuary each Sunday before worship for coffee, tea, snacks, conversation and so on. The music will start when it is time to wrap up and head in for worship.

Risen ...*Cont. from page 4*

The article argued that the spread of the coronavirus brought to light the connection between severity of impact and economic inequity. And the reality is that those of us nearer the bottom of the economic ladder are more likely to catch the disease, and also likelier to die from it.

And those who manage to remain healthy are likelier to suffer loss of income or healthy care as a result of quarantines and other measures. But the bad news spills over economic boundaries. Past research on influenza found that in an epidemic, poverty and inequality can exacerbate rates of transmission and mortality for everyone.

Our reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic certainly sheds light on the diversity of human nature. Our fall back labels, characterizations, presumptions, and the like, shatter under such stress. Instead, those characteristics which determine heroism and effective leadership become clearer. Rhetoric gets exposed for just what it is—thin layers of misrepresentation of facts.

Cowardliness and incompetence also share the spotlight. Along with years of allowing greed to determine policy. The competition for supplies is exposing systemic inequalities all over the world. Families, cities, states, hospitals, and countries are competing for life saving supplies. Money and influence uses power to competitive advantage. We all lose.

In our next series, *Risen*, we dig deeper into the inequalities that the COVID-19 pandemic is uncovering, and challenge ourselves to be among the ordinary, faithful people that keep the truth alive. How do our beliefs translate into actions? What difference can a few, faithful, but ordinary witnesses make?

It appears that most, if not all, of our time on *Risen* will be online. I pray that you will join us each Sunday morning at 10:30am. We plan to be live via [webinar](#), through [Facebook](#) live, or you can call (929) 436-2866 and enter the meeting number—324 841 204. We go live at 10:30am. You can find these links along with more information about us on our website at FlintAsbury.org.

Pastor Tommy

persons on the front line of the pandemic who witness, first hand, conditions that create further vulnerabilities for groups of people as a result of systemic problems. One example she cited involved a Native American community. We will hear more of Sylvia's experiences this coming Sunday.

"In Louisiana, blacks account for 70 percent of the deaths but 33 percent of the population."

Jamelle Bouie

Senator Bernie Sanders gave up his bid for the presidency, but his popularity remains. No other candidate raised money from as many individuals. But it appears that our nation may not be ready for such radical ideas. I'm not taking a side on whether his ideas solve our problems. But I agree with the headline of an opinion article that appeared in the New York Times recently that reads, "The Foundations of American Society Are Failing Us."¹ And so are our current leaders in Washington.

The Senator's article placed the blame for the disparities among us that the pandemic brings to light squarely on our policies and practices. Whether you love or dislike Bernie Sanders, his contemporary articulation serves as a wakeup call. Our policies and practices harm the most vulnerable among us — the widows, orphans, and immigrants. And not because they are less capable or less deserving.

In another article in the same issue of the New York Times, journalist Audra D. S. Burch highlighted a few of the civil rights actions taking place across our nation during the pandemic. These are not large crowds ignoring social distancing to protest policies intended to keep us safe. Instead, these are actions by handfuls of individuals keeping hope

alive for policy reform. Protesting policies that benefit the privileged while discriminating against others.

Ms. Burch writes that "The Covid-19 racial disparity in infections and deaths is viewed as the latest chapter of historical injustices, generational poverty, and a flawed health care system. The epidemic has hit African-Americans and Hispanics especially hard, including in New York, where the virus is twice as deadly for those populations."²

A few days earlier, in an article by Jamelle Bouie, we read that "In Louisiana, blacks account for 70 percent of the deaths but 33 percent of the population." Louisiana is not an anomaly. Similar disparities show across the country. Boule takes a definitive position on this issue, writing, "Black susceptibility to infection and death in the coronavirus pandemic has everything to do with the racial character of inequality in the United States."³

The article cites specific causes for the higher risks experienced by African-Americans. In his article, Boule notes that "Black Americans are more likely to work in service sector jobs, least likely to own a car and least likely to own their homes. They are, therefore, more likely to be in close contact with other people."

And these discrepancies have nothing to do with capability and everything to do with opportunity and historical policies that disenfranchised large groups of people. These are living examples of whom the metaphors found in scripture represent. The cases offered by Boule raise awareness of our obligations to a Creator who takes the side of the oppressed, standing against policies that result in oppression and the people who benefit from them.

I chose the title, *Risen*, for this series because, as Christians, we believe that God lived among people, was convicted,

and then executed. I believe that His conviction came as a result of systems, policies, and people who opposed this idea that privilege is held accountable for the wellbeing of the more vulnerable. But death did not and cannot stop God's judgment and radical redistribution of wealth and power. Executing Jesus did not stop the movement that He pronounced. Jesus has risen, and Jubilee is already underway. The good news is that we are all invited to join God in paying it forward.

For more information our series, *Risen*, see the article, *Coming up in worship* on our [website](#).

Our obligations to a Creator who takes the side of the oppressed, standing against policies that result in oppression and the people who benefit from them.

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Pastor Tommy

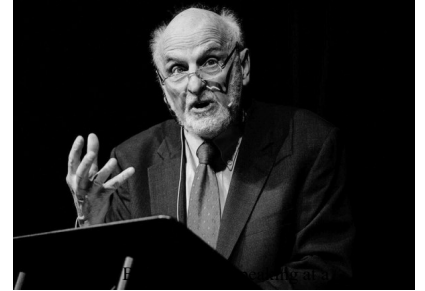
¹ Bernie Sanders. "The Foundations of American Society Are Failing Us." © New York Times, April 19, 2020.

² Audra D. S. Burch. "Why the Virus Is a Civil Rights Issue." © New York Times, April 19, 2020.

³ Jamelle Bouie. "Why Coronavirus Is Killing African-Americans More Than Others." © New York Times, April 14, 2020.

Humans perfected the art of war until it became possible to annihilate staggering numbers of enemies. And now we spend energy and resources trying to keep these destructive tools out of the hands of people who might be willing to use them indiscriminately. These weapons are designed to destroy and capable of destroying all of humankind.

Warfare divides people into warring factions driven by fear, fueling hatred. We look for the differences that divide us and use them to further fuel our anxiety and disdain. I suspect that without either hate or fear, it may be impossible to take another person's life. But the human brains are amazingly creative at justifying our self-serving interests.



Dr. Walter Brueggemann speaking at a conference

But there is another threat that doesn't differentiate between national borders or ancestral background. Over the past several months, one strand of this common enemy, COVID-19, has killed more people than major wars. And the largest toll within the nation with the most powerful military of all. Our missiles are ineffective, along with most weapons utilized to wage war on other humans.

So what is our best offense against this invisible enemy that defies all the rules of traditional warfare? Cooperation. Our health experts are at their best when they cooperate with health experts from around the world. Unfortunately, our political leaders were elected because they claim to be tougher on human enemies. And their credentials offer evidence that they win fights against other humans. But virus-slaying is not listed on the resumes of our leaders. And they are just as vulnerable as the rest of us if the virus finds a home within them.

One of my favorite writers, particularly when it comes to the topics of warfare, the domination of enemies, and other subjects that touch on the machinery of war, is Walter Brueggemann. In a recent appeal from a nonprofit, Brueggemann shared these thoughts about cooperation:

The usual way of being in the world is anxiety, of being pressed and harried and worried, and that in turn leads to a stance of defensiveness and fear and a determination to keep what we have. Anxiety that believes that we best get what we can and keep what we got. Characteristically, Jesus asks a question which does not require an answer because it's so obvious: which of you, by being anxious, has ever added an inch to your lives? (Matthew 6:33).¹

I suspect that it may be anxiety, and a few other pressures, that motivated a group of people carrying weapons to enter our State Capital building. Their supposed reason was a show of disagreement with policies put in place to save lives. I also support the right for each of us to have a voice, and for us to collectively express our views when we feel that policies are harmful. But the irony can't be ignored.

I discovered more insights from this man who dedicated his life to faithfully interpreting what scripture has to say to help us the rest of us be faithful. In this transcript, we read about prophets who imagined a new economy, "organized around a love of neighbor and that is committed to the viability of widows, orphans, and immigrants. Widows, orphans, and immigrants are people who in the ancient world did not have advocates who were empowered by the totalize in a patriarchal society. So it becomes a test case for the economy."²

Brueggemann calls on the faithful to understand and teach that the church was never intended to be in the charity business. Instead, the church is in the justice business.

In the meanwhile, we realize that there are a lot of people in need. Our inability to cooperate against this invisible enemy is creating demand beyond our ability to respond in the short term. So, as the church, we answer the best we can. But we also look for opportunities to advocate for justice.

If you haven't completed our survey go to [RisenSurvey](#) now and take our survey. This will really help us figure out which topics are important to our participants and who is willing to do and share their research.

For more information this series, *Risen*, see the article, [Coming up in worship](#).

I invite you to join us this Sunday. We plan to be live via [webinar](#), through [Facebook](#) live, or you can call (929) 436-2866 and enter the meeting number — 324 841 204. We go live at 10:30 am. You can find these links along with more information about us on our website at [FlintAsbury.org](#).

Life Group Questions & Notes

Stop all this evil that I see you doing. Yes, stop doing evil and learn to do right. See that justice is done—help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights, and defend widows

Isaiah 1:1-17 (GNT)

NOTES FROM WORSHIP

QUESTIONS FOR LIFE GROUPS

1. Read Isaiah 1:1-17. What do you take away from this story? Widows, orphans, and foreigners occur throughout scripture as metaphors for persons who are susceptible to mistreatment. Who are the widows and orphans today? What is our role in protecting them?
2. Read the article in this week's Circuit Rider, *The faces behind the metaphors*. Do the ideas presented in this article change how you read the scripture for this week? Do you have personal experience with systems that seem to put you at risk during this pandemic? Do you know others who seem to be at greater risk? What is causing this, in your opinion? How can we help?
3. How can the members of your group help you this week and on-going to help you to be more receptive to hearing and understanding the Word of God? Pray for each other to have the Holy Spirit bless you with more courage.

How would it even work? They said. It's just too much to figure out. For thousands of years, it remained an aspiration. For thousands of years, nobody actually had the audacity to declare a year of Jubilee.¹

But, Jesus said that Jubilee is right here, right now, as sure as He is standing there. And, *Jubilee* is key to understanding the identity of Jesus, who embodied *Jubilee*. But how can this be possible? After all, *Jubilee* never really happened. It was a great idea that God gave to His ancestors. But not one of the ideas that was ever really followed. *Jubilee* was more of a concept. More like an idea that isn't really possible. So how can Jesus and *Jubilee* be one and the same?

The passage of scripture has come true today, as you heard it being read.

Luke 4:21

Perhaps they didn't reject Jesus. After all, wasn't He the adopted son of the carpenter Joseph? Wasn't Mary His mother? Wasn't He the kid that got all A's and went on to college and then seminary? Jesus may think that *Jubilee* is long overdue, but He will soon learn that it's not practical. They didn't reject Jesus, just this idea that just because He arrived, so did *Jubilee*. But they still wanted to throw Jesus off a cliff.

Besides, who hasn't suffered from rejection at one time or another? The sting of rejection can leave a venom within us that may fester for years. But when we are

rejected by the people who should know us best, the poison of rejection is particularly devastating. After all, they know us best, don't they?

And for those who may be a bit more different, rejection can become routine. Which is bad enough, but what happens during a time when we need each other? What if Jesus went into the office of one of the persons making up the angry mob that day to get help? Would they reject Him again?

What if a person who rejects the idea that a person's gender is not the same as their physical body suggests is faced with a living example of the concept they rejected? And what if this person holds onto deeply-seated beliefs that the world created by God simply can't work this way? Will they reject the person in front of them, possibly denying to help at all? Even if their job is to offer their help?

Or does a crisis bring us closer together? Can the COVID-19 pandemic be a time when we can put our own biases and insecurities aside and focus on how to best get through this challenging time together?

One idea behind *Jubilee* is to recognize that the world gets messy. Things go haywire. People find themselves in difficult, if not impossible, circumstances. And what they need least of all is rejection. What they need, most of all is to be free from whatever created their conditions. And to be loved because they are who they are. A child of God.

I invited several persons to respond to a survey on potential topics. A few met already. If you didn't get your invite, please go to RisenSurvey now and take our survey. This will really help us figure out which topics are important to our participants and who is willing to do and share their research. This week, Katelyn and I plan to share what we learned about an easily forgotten group of people amid this pandemic. LGBTQ youth.

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Pastor Tommy

¹ The Reverend Jeremy Peters, Sr. Pastor, Court Street United Methodist Church. © 2020.

Welcome to the Asbury Community

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CircuitRider@FlintAsbury.org

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PERMIT #151

Neighborhood Connection



We envision a community in love with God, each other, and our neighbors evidenced by the transformation of ourselves and our neighborhood. We are a center for worship & spiritual growth, a center for connections and a center for health & wellness.

Our goal is a revitalized community where every resident can use their talents and passions for the common good, where children grow into citizens who contribute to building and maintaining a vibrant neighborhood, and all residents are able to enjoy safety, good health, a culture that fosters life long learning and satisfying lives.

We believe that such an ambitious goal can never be attained without God's grace and abundance and Christ calls each of us to be disciples willing to share our witness through words and acts.

A note from Connie ...

I Hope everyone is staying safe and only going out when absolutely have to. I will be stopping in the office here and there during the week to check messages and emails, but will be in on Fridays, should you need to call me for anything.

We are going into the 7 weeks of our stay at home quarantine, and it looks like our Governor has extended it **through May 28th now**. Please keep wearing your masks/gloves when around the public, and when coming into the building/church office.

If anyone has any questions, please send us an email at FlintAsburyUMC@gmail.com or call the church office 235-0016, and I will follow up with your concerns when in the office.

EVERYONE STAY SAFE!!