

A New Monastic community in a time of social distancing

**The idea of this place is incarnation. When someone here gets sick, so does everyone else.**

by [Isaiah Murtaugh](#)

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Nehemiah House, part of a community connected to First Evangelical Free Church of Los Angeles. Photo by Nick Angarita.

It's 5 p.m. on the first Monday after we realized this thing was a pandemic. I'm in a house in Los Angeles with 11 people. This morning the president recommended not gathering in groups of more than ten.

The compound the Emmaus House shares with the next door Nehemiah House is best described as a New Monastic community—think monastery, but replace cloisters with two ramshackle houses and a basketball hoop, and replace the order of brothers with a motley cast of families and 20-somethings who host neighborhood dinners and after-school programs and prayer nights all week. The doors swing on busy hinges. The grocery store has no eggs. Disneyland is closed. The Emmaus House is open.

Eight people live in the Emmaus House permanently; two foster children joined a month ago and will be here as long as anyone can predict. In the Nehemiah House, three men live in the basement, three women in the back room and Marta and her two grown children in the front.

But there are always more people hanging around. In the mornings or the afternoons, Micah from across the street wanders onto the Nehemiah House porch and talks loudly to the neighborhood. Robert is here often—I don't know if he works. He has a violent past and thick knife scars running up one arm, but I've only ever seen gentleness from him. I'm here often, too.

The idea of this place is incarnation: Jesus in human flesh showing love. "Incarnational ministry" reads like it's from a textbook; it sounds like doors swinging on busy hinges.

If one here gets sick, everyone gets sick. I've seen it happen, but usually it's only the flu. The coronavirus, if it comes, will hurt more than the flu. We'll be like one of those cults that became hot spots for the virus in South Korea, those people who spend too much time together and ignored warnings because they thought God would protect them. We'll be like [Patient 31](#), who went to church with a fever.

IT'S 11:23 P.M. ON THE SECOND SUNDAY after we realized this thing was a pandemic. I'm in my bed, and my roommate is asleep in a twin bed next to mine. A friend is crashing on our couch for the night; he's been there all day and is probably awake watching TikToks. Disneyland is still closed. The grocery store had a few eggs today, after the panic buying slowed. The Emmaus House and the Nehemiah House are closed to people who don't live there. I can't go in.

Ten people live in the house now, and the door will be closed as long as anyone can predict. Next door, at the Nehemiah House, one of the women in the back room has body aches, a dry cough, and a fever.

This morning I sat on the porch of the Emmaus House after playing music for the Sunday livestream. The matron of the house handed me a plate with rice, salad, and a tamal through a side door. I finished it and slipped back through to drop the empty plate on the table and wave to the kids, then darted out before I could breathe on anything.

This afternoon my grandmother posted a photo on Facebook of slippered feet next to a church livestream. My grandpa texted to ask how I'm doing in quarantine; he saw a block of spalted maple wood that he and I milled together and he thought of me.

These seven days inside, we are becoming quiet. I cracked open my Bible. The air is stupidly clear for downtown Los Angeles. The city is asleep, but the birds sing—and when the rain comes it drums on the leaves and the tar-shingled roofs.

Over livestreams, the voices of all the preachers seem louder. Pick your prophet, pick your truth. All you need is the link.

IT'S 10:09 A.M. THE THIRD THURSDAY after we realized this was a pandemic. I'm sitting on the roof of my apartment building, two blocks from the 10 Freeway. Clouds are beginning to gather over the spire of the Wilshire Grand building downtown. Disneyland is closed. The grocery store has plenty of eggs. I haven't been to the Emmaus House in weeks, but every few days the matron of the house sends a video of a pillow fort or Styrofoam sword the kids have built.

The people in the Emmaus House have been flyer-ing the neighborhood with invitations to an Easter service and a phone number to call if someone is desperate for food or diapers or child care.

Usually the morning traffic would just now be thinning, the white collar people settling into their office chairs, and the busboys at the breakfast joints sweeping the remnants of the morning breakfasts into their plastic bins. Somewhere a teacher would be calling a class to order, a janitor would be mopping a hallway, and a maid would be starting on her employer's laundry after walking the children to school.

But the city is quiet, asleep, dreaming.

Crisis promises change, and the hope of all the dreamers and saints and neurotics locked in their homes is that when we emerge from this nightmare we will have discovered inner peace. The forced slowness of life will finally teach us how to commune with the divine and love our neighbors.

We will be magnanimous and kind; we will remake our world into a paradise. We will gain the political will to nationalize healthcare and decrease military spending. We will stop watching Netflix and start having game nights because we now know how

much we need human presence. We will realize that we cannot manipulate the earth and will finally start respecting her. We will take up baking. We will care for the poor.

We will be exceptional, like we always dreamed of being, and we will not forget what we dreamt.

And yet, as we dream, we habituate ourselves to life six feet apart. We tell ourselves that faces in a Zoom room are as good as the real thing. We burst into feats of altruism for one week—wiring diaper and rent money to the newly laid off—and then collapse into collective infatuation with a tiger documentary the next. Kindness is only universal when it is part of the zeitgeist.

This morning I stood at a corner waiting for the crosswalk sign to change and watched an old man in a wheelchair roll down the curb cut onto the asphalt below.

The light changed, and the man smashed an empty Budweiser bottle into the gutter. The amber glass splintered with a noise like a wind chime.

He pushed clumsily on the rubber wheels of his chair, struggled against the shallow slope of the street, rocked up and rolled back down into the gutter.

He looked up at me with drink-addled, pleading eyes.

I stepped behind the chair and began to push. He was frail and light and we moved quickly, across one crosswalk and then another, down to a nearby bus stop. I left him there to continue my walk. From the other side of the street I watched him inch his chair down the sidewalk.

Did I leave him because I was busy? Or because I didn't care? Or because I should have been socially distanced to begin with?

I saw him again later, crossing another street. As I approached, he smashed another empty Budweiser bottle into the asphalt. I stepped behind his chair and pushed him up the driveway into the parking lot. He said nothing, apparently incoherent. I said nothing and left. In the sidewalk a block away lay yet another pile of shattered amber glass.

When we wake from this dream, will we be any different? Will Christ fill our flesh? When we see the man we left in the street, will we stop and ask forgiveness?

*Names in this article have been changed to protect people's privacy.*