I am so tired of Zoom meetings. I think I am not alone in that. During this quarantine time, many of us have been relying on Zoom or other video-chat platforms not only to work, but even to see our families or friends. We have spent so much time on the computer that the shine has worn off. It’s a wonderful technology, but it has its limits.

There have been several articles written about the extra work that Zoom and these other platforms force us to do. In a Zoom meeting, you are always on; we don’t have the natural, comfortable breaks in conversation that happen in physical gatherings; we are pressured to fill them because we are always looking at each other. And yet, in all that time we are never making eye contact—that simple, powerful connection between two people. There are other body language cues that we miss across cyberspace, as well, and our brains end up working overtime trying to read the people on the screen as we naturally would in real life.

From the very beginnings of the stay-at-home orders, I have been curious how this time will shape our interactions in the future, once the danger presented by the virus has been mitigated or eliminated. At first, I wondered if suddenly becoming fluent in this new, virtual way of being would make people more likely to work from home, visit friends from home, even worship from home. After all, why get dressed and go out when you can just pop open the computer ?

But the longer this goes on, the more I think that we will all be so exhausted from the extra work required by telepresence that people may actually be more eager to gather in physical space than we were before. Now I wonder if, when this is all over, we may actually give up some of the virtual interactions we are used to having—shopping on Amazon, ordering delivery, or using the ATM—simply to have another excuse to interact with other people.

Even my own introverted self is starting to suffer from the lack of personal contact. Normally I’m completely happy to spend my days off alone in my office, reading or playing computer games. I have been perfectly happy with this new, socially distanced routine; but I am also beginning to notice that I am more restless, more irritable, more lethargic because I am not getting that chance to be around people—even with all those Zoom meetings and webinars I attend. Virtual interactions have been a lifesaver, but in the end, I think we are finding that they are still a poor substitute for being physically together.

These things are on my mind this week as we have just observed the Feast of the Ascension on Thursday. The Ascension is an odd little holiday in which we celebrate the day Jesus left. That’s a strange thing to celebrate; and as such, it’s never been a very big deal on the Church’s calendar. Ascension Day reminds us that while the first disciples got to know and spend time with Jesus in physical space, our whole lives have been spent Zooming with him, so to speak; the relationship we have with Jesus is a poor substitute for having him physically here with us, but it’s better than nothing. This “virtual” connection with God is all we’ve ever known, and it’s all we ever expect to know. Imagine for a moment that this quarantine was to last for decades, or centuries; imagine never having known shaking a stranger’s hand when you meet, or hugging a friend, or sitting down to lunch with colleagues. In a way, Ascension invites us to reflect on how sad and sorry this all is.

In light of all this, I think that this quarantine has helped see how important physical contact with others and physical gatherings are; but also that, no matter what poor substitutes they may be, virtual gatherings are just as real as physical ones. Yes, we’re all tired of Zoom and Google Hangouts and Facetime, but neither can we imagine trying to do this without them. Instead of being completely cut off from friends and family and coworkers, we at least still have this tenuous, imperfect life line between us. As frustrating and exhausting as it can be, we are still grateful for it.

Throughout John’s gospel account, with every word of the narrative, the evangelist points to intimacy: Father, Son, know, abide, love, one. We are reminded that Jesus’ entire purpose in becoming human and living among us is to reveal God to us, to share God’s love with us so that we might abide with God as he does. After the Ascension, we remember that even now, Jesus is in God’s very presence; and because of our connection to him through his love, so are we. He is the vine, and we are the branches. Granted, it’s kind of a Zoom-like vine at this point, but it’s still a real connection even if Jesus isn’t here in the flesh.

And yet, alongside the grief and pain and frustration of his absence, there is a promise: “This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” Much like all those Zoom meetings and virtual happy hours and Facetime calls with family are getting us through as we look forward to a time when we can be together in person again, Jesus’ prayer today and his message of the abiding love of God also remind us that this painfully virtual connection to God—the only connection we’ve ever known—is not all there is. One day, our “quarantine period” will be over; God’s reign will be fully realized here on earth, just as it is in heaven; but it is not our place to know when or how.

Much like our present situation in quarantine, we all have to find ways of dealing with this reality. Some of us prefer to sit back and wait, paying no attention to what’s going on around us here and now because we think it’s not real, not important. So what if the world is burning up, we say. Who cares if people are oppressing and enslaving and killing one another? God will show up eventually and put everything to rights; so eat, drink and be merry now while you can.

But to live this way denies the love and the passion that God has put into being with us now. It refuses to love the world as God loves it. It’s like refusing to Zoom or even write letters or talk on the phone with someone because you’d rather wait until you can see them in person, even if that time is decades away.

Others of us want to be proactive. We believe that we can bring God’s reign into existence, and we will keep on pushing and shoving until it comes. We begin to imagine ourselves as the saviors of the world. We’re like the people protesting the stay-at-home orders and refusing to wear masks in public: we think we’re fixing the problem, not realizing that we’re only poking at the symptoms.

We fail to see that climate change and racism, war and poverty, hunger and oppression are all the symptoms of a world that is held in the grip of a pandemic of sin. We can no more save the world from sin than a protest can cure the coronavirus. Only God can do that.

Instead of these things, God calls us to patiently and persistently and intentionally live in the time in which we find ourselves. Jesus prays that we might come to know that, through God’s love made flesh, we have already been given real unity with God, and that we might continue to experience that unity by continuing to live in that love. God’s love will not let us sit idly by, doing nothing but drinking and binging Netflix (although that’s not to say that some of that is necessarily a bad way to cope with staying at home!) but neither does that love compel us to accomplish something that is beyond our ability to do.

During this COVID quarantine, lots of people have been taking up new hobbies: gardening, mending clothing, knitting, learning a new language. They’ve been spending extra time with family, or making an effort to reconnect with people with whom they’ve lost contact. They have found ways to use this time as a gift, even when it doesn’t feel like a gift. Those new skills and activities will, hopefully, change their post-COVID lives for the better.

The gospel encourages us to remember that we live in liminal space: a time between what was and what will be. The time between Easter and Pentecost is liminal space; there’s not much written about those 50 days in the Bible, and yet those days were vitally important for what was to come next in the lives and ministries of the apostles and the entire Church. In a similar way, I believe that God is preparing us with this liminal space between Jesus’ ascension and his return for what comes next. God is always preparing us for and transforming us into the people we are becoming, shaping us in love and service to others and the world so that we may be ready for the world that God is already bringing into being.

In this liminal space we are reassured that although Christ is not present with us as fully as we’d like him to be, he is nevertheless with us. He is here in these real, virtual gatherings of the Church. He is here in our altered and sometimes irregular observances of Holy Communion. He is here in relationships we are making, maintaining, and even deepening in the midst of quarantine and social distancing. He is here in the faces of neighbors who come to our aid, and in the faces of our neighbors in need.

It might be a Zoom kind of relationship that we have with him for right now, but it is real, and it holds in it the promise of a fuller, more-life-giving presence to come, one day, when we get “back to normal.”