

A History of God and Pandemics

Numbers 21:4-9, Mark 1:21-28 by Patty Friesen (Jan. 31/21)

In the *biblical* history of plagues, humans are both the cause and the cure for illness. In the Old Testament, disease is caused by human rebellion and is cured by humans turning towards the ways of deliverance provided by God like the bronze serpent on the pole, which is now the symbol of healing in medical settings. It is a collaborative effort. In the gospels, the cause of disease is more complex often with unknown causes but is always cured by Jesus confronting the illness. In this first healing of Jesus in Mark's gospel, Jesus' authority over illness is established. Christians following Jesus' example of healing in the plague of Alexandria in 249 AD created hospitals to care for the sick and dying. The Bible asserts that God is the source of all healing and works with humanity to give us the wisdom to find healing. God is still at work with us in these ways and has been throughout history.

Plagues and illness have arisen in human history as a result of our desire to live in groups, to have friends, to touch and hug each other and to bury and mourn one another. If we lived like hermits, we would not be victims of contagious disease. But the germs that kill us during times of plagues often spread precisely because of who we are. And so for centuries, our response in a time of plague has been to rediscover the necessity of surrendering these aspects of our nature for awhile. The first recorded quarantine was in Venice in the 1500s when ships carrying illness would dock on an island outside the city for 40 days, *quarane* - Italian for 40 days and nights - quarantine for the biblical 40 days and nights that Jesus was in the wilderness.

God helps humanity figure out how to heal but we have to participate in the healing process. Historically, plagues often led to fear and anger and blaming outsiders and sacrificing outsiders to save oneself. (Nicholas Christakis, *Apollo's Arrows*, p. 83). In the Book of Jonah for example, the storm at sea is blamed on the outsider Jonah who is cast overboard to calm the storm. But while fear and blame like germs themselves spread from person to person, goodwill can also spread from person to person. Even though the pathogen is exploiting our species' natural tendency to gather in groups, there are other parts of our evolved sociability that the pathogen does not change, namely our capacity to make sacrifices for each other, to cooperate and to teach each other. (p. 244)

We see this in 1 Corinthians 8 where the early church made sacrifices, giving up a certain kind of meat because it bothered the conscience of others if the meat had been offered to idols. The early church worked at compromise and self-sacrifice.

“Anarchy and selfishness in pandemics are more often the exception than the rule. In fact, in a phenomenon that Stanford psychologist Jamil Zaki has called “catastrophe compassion,” survivors typically form communities of mutual aid and greater solidarity. This increased sense of shared identity during a catastrophe is a powerful source of cooperative behaviour and goodwill. Everyone becomes part of the group confronting the problem.

This togetherness is reinforced by another common practice we see during pandemics: individuals are more likely to discuss their shared adverse experiences with each other, including their fears, negative feelings and sense of vulnerability. Ordinarily, people do not do this out of concern about imposing on others or out of fear that they

might be judged adversely. But when it is abundantly clear that everyone is in the same boat and facing the same fears, self-disclosure becomes less difficult. This in turn fosters trust and builds solidarity and these upper connections make mutual help easier. (p. 219)

We see this increased sense of social closeness despite physical distancing in our church community with the powerful connections we have on Zoom with our children's Monday School, committee meetings and deacons care groups. We see it when we gather safely in this worship space and visit together outside. We see this catastrophe compassion at work in the huge generosity toward our church, Friendship Inn, and Lina's sponsorship.

Quarantining at home has been tough and early in the pandemic, I finally figured out I was going through a grieving process. It felt somewhat like the grieving stages described by Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross as I initially went through denial - this isn't for real or it won't last until Easter. Then came the short-fused anger, fighting with Patrick and everyone else for no apparent reason. Then came the anxiety, suffocating anxiety that gave me heart palpitations and sleepless nights and the need for medication. Then came the depression last fall when everything felt useless - I wanted to go to half-time or retire early because I had no energy to re-invent church life online. But since Christmas, I feel more acceptance, or resignation at least over what is going on and the fact I can't do a thing about it and I've even been able to find some positive things about the pandemic. For example, Patrick and I spent the first Christmas Eve at home in 30 years - it was wonderful. The Friesen family Zooms every week with my mom - it's been wonderful.

Others say they are enjoying this time at home with their children. After a few initial weeks of homeschooling, a lot of parents seemed to raise the white flag, surrendering control and allowing children independence to eat what they want when they want and sleep when they want. “One father reported that he felt like a criminal investigator every morning: I’ll find the wrappers from some snacks my son had, there will be dishes in the sink from what he ate. Sometimes he’ll leave the TV on to what he was watching. It’s like having a raccoon come through my house at night!” (p. 251)

One of our friends said in our pre-pandemic world, her husband was always working away from home, now he’s around and they are having fun playing games on lunch breaks and going for walks. “The pandemic has brought us closer together,” she said.

The pandemic has had an impact on our faith as well, drawing us closer to God. During historical pandemics, religious fervour often increased as a means to cope. Appeals to deities, whether out of fear or respect, were understandable responses to catastrophe that seemed to lack a worldly explanation. However, especially when the plague involved a very high death toll, religious disillusionment was also common. How could a caring God cause or even allow such a calamity? But in a 2020 religious survey, most people reported that their faith or spirituality had “gotten better” or grown stronger. 20% of non-religious people said they were praying more.

Despite restrictions on attendance in churches, synagogues, mosques and temples and although virtual services were a disappointment to some worshippers, others saw them as an opportunity for spiritual growth. Reverend Guy Collins, at St. Thomas Church in Hanover, New Hampshire described a “theology of technology,”

linking the online worship services adopted in 2020 to the centuries-old tradition of spreading the word of God via new inventions such as the printing press. “Technology can be a barrier to worship,” he noted. “However, it is more frequently a channel of grace. *Visual* technologies have, in particular, been essential to passing down the story of Christian faith throughout history when literacy was low and when few comprehended the official Latin language of medieval worship.” (Christakis, p.261). This is why we want to continue to upgrade our technologies at church as Facebook and Zoom has become church for many of us and has actually been an outreach opportunity to many in our community and beyond.

Regardless of religious belief, many people, whether prompted by thoughts of mortality or by homebound solitude, were introspective about what gave their lives meaning. The opportunity for personal reflection was another factor that played an important role in the massive protests for social justice that took place in June 2020. The pandemic also led people to reevaluate their social interactions, in many cases fostering more empathy and awareness of others. We have gained more empathy for those who were isolated due to health concerns before the pandemic. We have gained more empathy for those around the world who wear masks and veils and who have developed safe social practices of non-touch greeting like bowing or pressing hands together to greet each other.

Disasters bring out both the worst and the best in us and certainly create a heightened sense of our values and how we all want to spend our limited time on earth with our loved ones and in our communities. (Christakis, P. 261-264). Let us continue

to share with each other what we have suffered and what we have gained from this transformative historical event. Let us pray...976 VT

Merciful God of history who watches over pandemics, watch over us and help us as we wait, and watch this historical event unfold. Your love falls on those who wait. Bless each one of us in our grief process. Bless all who are sick and all healthcare workers. Grant strength to people recovering and deep peace to those who die. In you we hope, for healing that comes in collaborative social practices, science and vaccines. We hope for courage in the face of things we cannot control. We hope for a deep sense of your nearness in this time. We are yours. You have called us by name. Amen.