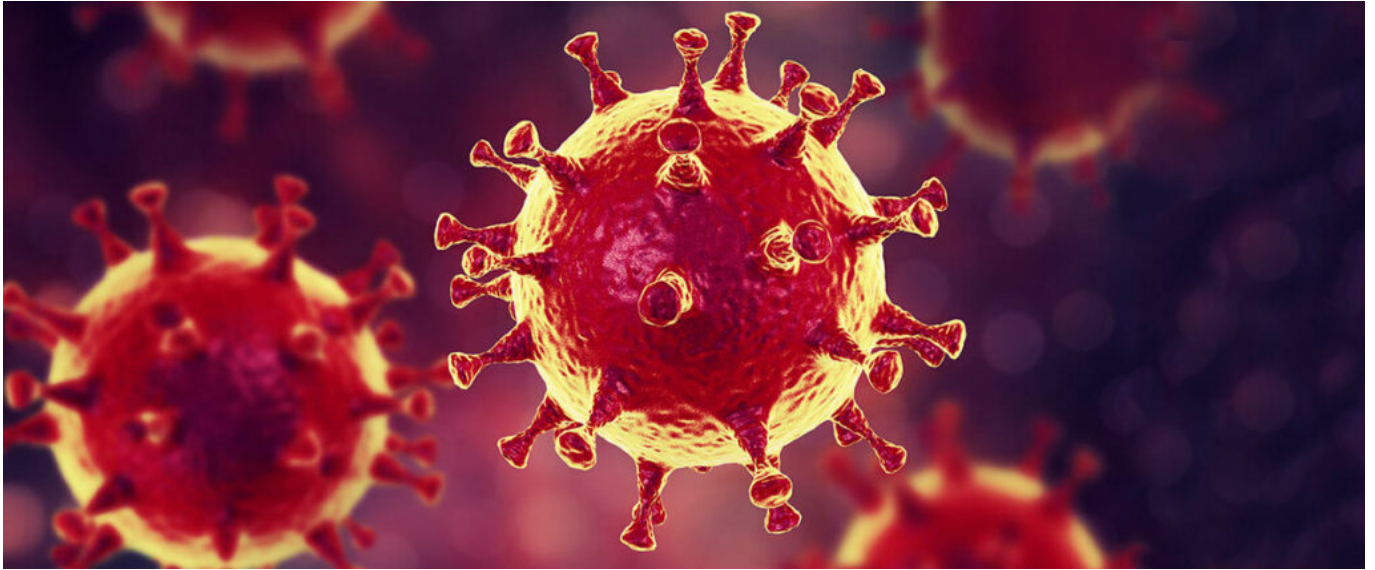


Going Viral

12 March 2020



Father Damien, a Belgian priest, arrived on the island of Hawaii as a missionary in 1864. Less than ten years later, he volunteered to serve at Kalaupapa, an isolated settlement where more than 800 lepers had been quarantined and a place very few people wanted to go. There, among the lepers, he built a church building, served as priest, dressed residents' ulcers, built a reservoir, built homes and furniture, made coffins and dug graves.

"My fellow believers," he would say every Sunday as he began his sermon, naming the thing they all had in common. He worked among them, lived among them, embraced them. He did this for more than a decade, and one day realized he'd burned his foot with scalding water but hadn't felt it. It could only mean one thing. That Sunday morning he stood up in the meeting and took his place behind the pulpit.

"My fellow lepers," he began.

Pandemic Panic

The prospect of getting sick is a scary one. Open a news site today and more than half of the top trending stories are dedicated to the spread of the coronavirus around the globe. People are being quarantined, while huge sporting events are being played in closed stadiums or outright cancelled.

We're nervously listening to accounts of people traveling back into our home countries from abroad – people who seem to be displaying signs of this potentially deadly virus. One person showed symptoms, report the news outlets, but they're being treated in isolation. Not to worry, it's contained. Hang on, they were traveling with others who are now showing signs of carrying the virus as well. Two people. Three. Six. Seven. Suddenly a cough is not just a cough, a high temperature is not just a high temperature. Panicked people are buying items like safety masks in bulk.

What are the people of God supposed to be thinking, saying and doing during all of this?

Contagion, a 2011 Gwyneth Paltrow movie about a mysterious virus that originates in Asia and spreads around the globe killing millions, has seen a massive surge in online views, rentals and downloads. Don't touch your face, experts are telling the public, even though thinking about not touching your face makes you want to touch it more than ever. It's all quite alarming really. And many people are living with anxiety at the thought that, despite all our medical advances and arrogant proclamations about living forever, a deadly virus can be passed from person to person without anyone being able to stop it.

And in the middle of the hysteria, the question again arises: What are the people of God supposed to be thinking, saying and doing during all of this?

Christians and Sickness

Christians have an interesting relationship with bodily sickness.

Fatalism

Some will adopt a stiff upper lip, suffering through affliction and feeling that we shouldn't bother God with such things, especially since He no longer heals people like He did through the apostles and Paul. It's more fatalism than faith, and allows a person to avoid the disappointment of asking God to intervene and seeing nothing happen.

Kingdom Now

Others, in an opposite but equally problematic approach, will declare that we should positively confess healing and wellness, and it will happen. They will invoke the line, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," from the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13, asserting that there is no sickness in heaven and so there should be none on this earth – even though there is also evidently no marriage in heaven, but we're hardly advocating for that here below. Surely this is a misreading of Jesus' prayer, which instructed us to pray for God's will to be carried out as it is in heaven, not for the end results of His paradise to be forcibly manifest in every way right now. It's an imbalanced approach, and will lead to disillusionment when it fails to work.

Faith and Trust

As with most things about God, the answer lies in the middle. He can and does heal, but not always. When He heals, it's because He has healed. When He doesn't heal, it's because He hasn't healed. But of one thing we can be sure: It is always God's plan to heal us of the anxiety, fear and panic that persistently accompanies health threats. Viruses may war against our bodies, but anxious fear wars against our souls.

Promised Perfect Peace

The people of God have never, ever been promised perfect health, but we have been promised perfect peace. *'You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast,'* wrote the Old Testament prophet in Isaiah 26:3, *'because he trusts in you.'* Earlier in the same body of writing, he stated that one of the names the Son of God would be known by would be *"Prince of Peace"* (Isaiah

9:6). Knowing that Prince of Peace was the reason Paul could list his floggings, sufferings, near-death experiences, lashings, beatings, stoning, shipwrecks, dangers, toils, pressures and concerns in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29, and yet still begin the letter with the words, *"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."* Peter invoked the same greeting of grace and peace in both of his letters, despite being told definitively by Jesus that he would be martyred as an old man. Imagine knowing without a doubt that you will die a violent death in your twilight years, and still carrying grace and peace with you. That's not normal.

Death has Lost its Sting

Even death – that final, most formidable enemy – has lost something of its power. *"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"* cried Paul to the saints in Corinth, quoting the prophet Hosea. *"Therefore, my brothers, stand firm,"* he went on in 1 Corinthians 15:58. *"Let nothing move you."* At his father's funeral in 1928, the Welsh revivalist Evan Roberts interrupted the somber eulogy. *"This is not a death but a resurrection,"* he said. *"Let us bear witness to this truth."* Paul urged the church in Thessalonica not to *"grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope"* (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Indeed, the people of God have a different perspective on sickness and death. This is not because we live in denial of reality, but because our eyes have been opened to the highest reality.

We've got to find the balance of trusting God while taking precautions.

Washing our Hands

And so we're currently being told to wash our hands, which is something we've been told to do since we were children, and should have been doing anyway. To the delight of the manufacturers of hygiene products, we're being told to take soap and water and wash our hands regularly, for twenty seconds. This is good advice, and we should follow it. It would be foolish to simply live unwisely and expect to remain healthy. We've got to find the balance of trusting God while taking precautions.

Washing with The Word

But I think we should also be washing ourselves spiritually to take precaution against a far more dangerous virus. For those feeling the understandable panic that comes with an unseen pandemic causing pandemonium around the world, we should wash ourselves with the Word of God more than the Word of the Internet, calling on Him for what He has promised to give us: Peace amidst the chaos. Our lives are in His hands, not the hands of our government's border controls.

And so every trial is not only a tragedy but also an opportunity.

We should wash ourselves with the promises of God, but not promises of an affliction-free, healthy life, because that is unbiblical. No, we should wash ourselves with the promise that He will be our God, not fear or anxiety. Last time I checked, He was still in charge, still sovereign, still working on this earth and still delivering people – not only from physical sickness, but also from every fear that tries to make itself a god in His place.

Anchored by the God of the Unseen

And so every trial is not only a tragedy but also an opportunity. The coronavirus is scary, no doubt, and every measure possible should be taken to prevent it from spreading further. But it's also an opportunity. It's an opportunity to let it be known that the people of God are not blown back and forth, this way and that, by the fear of what is seen. Rather, we are anchored by the God of what is unseen.