



faith

DURING CRISIS

DAY ONE



“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding; in all your ways know him, and he will make your paths straight.” – Proverbs 3:5-6

“For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Philippians 1:21

“He is before all things, and by him all things hold together.”
Colossians 1:17

“Thy purpose fulfill, nothing can be too severe for me.” A portion of the final verse of Huldrych Zwingli’s Pestlied

In the history of the Church, widespread anxiety and fear connected to pandemics have caused many believers to doubt their faith in Christ and struggle with unbelief. Several times, disease decimated the world population. Most recently, Covid-19 caused significant global stoppages and the effects of that are still being born out. In the early twentieth century, there was another outbreak of disease as a pandemic shook the world after the Great War (WWI).

However, the Church must respond to such crises with faith and trust. And for those believers alive today, when such circumstances return, there are examples of Christian leaders and pastors from the past on how to serve and show the love of Christ in an unknown and scary climate.

In the 16th century, the terrible outbreak of the “Black Death” plague took the lives of an estimated one third of the population in some places. Nobody was immune to its effects.



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Let's turn to one of the great reformers to see how the church responded to that plague. Anyone who could afford to flee the cities, chose to do just that. However, Huldrych Zwingli, a Swiss minister living in Zurich during this time, stayed to minister to the diseased. The dedication to his calling during the plague is admirable as it posed great risk to his own life. He wrote his "Plague Song" (Pestlied) during his 1st year of ministering at Zürich:

Help, Lord God, help in this trouble! I think death is at the door.
Stand before me, Christ, for you have overcome him.
To you I cry: If it is your will, take out the dart that wounds me,
nor lets me have an hour's rest or repose.

Will you, however, that death take me
in the midst of my days, so let it be.
Do what you will, nothing shall be too much for me.
Your vessel am I, to make or break altogether.

Theologischer Verlag Zürich, Vol. 1, (Zurich: Zwingliverein, 1995), p.69-70.

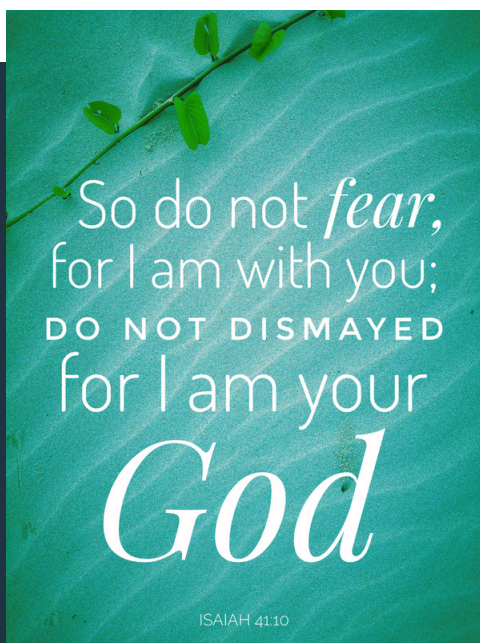
As with the other clergy, Zwingli's care of the infected put his own life at grave risk. There was no online option, no Facebook Live to view together. Inevitably, Zwingli took ill. For months, the preacher who had previously stood as a picture of strength in the Zürich pulpit was now reduced to a feeble man, bed-ridden and clinging to life. Hours of struggle stretched into days, days into weeks and weeks into months.

Finally, the spring's warmth brought restoration to the Swiss lands and its people, with Zwingli's health also being miraculously restored. As he had faced his own mortality, Zwingli had learned that God's providence meant that he could be trusted, no matter the outcome. And trust is exactly what Huldrych Zwingli did.

DAY ONE (CONTINUED)

Let's remember that Zwingli could not save himself from the plague any more than we could have saved ourselves from Covid-19. But the comforting truth is that we don't have to save ourselves. At the opening of the "Plague Song" Zwingli declared, "Stand before me, Christ, for you have overcome him." It was and is that simple. The hope we have in this world is in the One who created us and is sovereign in everything, including death.

Jesus's victory over death at Calvary was the proof of the apostle Paul's claim that "to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Christians are always in the hands of the Lord through life and death. This should be enough to give us rest during any times of uncertainty.



DAY TWO



“We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” – Romans 8:28

“You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result – the survival of many people.” – Genesis 50:20

Continuing on with our plague theme, the Plague of Galen swept across the Roman Empire in the 2nd century. This pandemic was transported back to Rome by its soldiers returning after military campaigns in the Near East. Not even the most influential and powerful were spared, as Roman Emperor Lucius Verus is believed to have lost his life to this plague.

According to historians of the period such as Dio Cassius, 2,000 people died each day in Rome during the worst of this illness. Estimates of a 25% mortality rate of those infected point to a truly devastating pandemic. Maybe upwards of 5 million people died from this horrible illness. This disease especially decimated the Roman Army. There were also reports from Chinese historians that point to the outbreak in Eastern Han China during that time. This was a definitely a worldwide problem.

However, Christians distinguished themselves during this ancient period of plague. Contemporary historians believe that the terrible Plague of Galen even led to the spread of Christianity. In a time marked by fear and uncertainty, Christians dared to care for the sick and dying when nobody else would. And followers of Jesus also offered hope and truth by teaching that rather than plagues being the work of angry deities, they were actually the result of a broken creation revolting against a loving God.

DAY TWO (CONTINUED)

When we think about the truth of the word, the apostle Paul's challenging words in Romans 8 spring to mind. Either we believe that even the worst worldwide developments can bring good to God's people in some way or we don't. If we do, we can echo the sentiments of Joseph to his brothers: God can use things that seem evil for his good.



**God can use things that
seem evil for his good.**

The church had an opportunity to influence the world around us during the time of Covid-19's uncertainty, fear and darkness. God's plan of redemption for this broken world has already been set in motion and it is always the church's responsibility to share that message of hope, regardless of the circumstances. We have unique means provided to us that generations of believers never had available to them. In just a few keystrokes, we can declare the truth and hope of Jesus Christ for potentially thousands of people.

Did you share the messages of hope and truth in Jesus Christ during the pandemic? Did you display the care and concern of the Lord by being compassionate to others like Jesus was? Did you direct people to the scriptures? Did our church flood social media platforms with the message that hope has a name and His name is Jesus? The message of Christ's victory could have helped the Kingdom expand and the Gospel go forth. Were you obedient in doing the work of the Great Commission?

DAY THREE



“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me...Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”
Matthew 25:35-40

During the Covid-19 pandemic, I wandered through the writings of church leaders who had served during times of mass illness that could be considered pandemics. As I read their words, I found myself reflecting on the Sovereign Lord, Jesus Christ, and I was challenged to lead confidently, swiftly and compassionately.

Jesus compels us to care for the needs and concerns of others—not just our close friends. That Matthew 25 passage insinuates that we won’t necessarily know the people we are called to care for. Christians throughout history did not hide from the needs of the world, even during times of crisis. While we helped out friends in need during the onset of Covid-19, did we neglect the call to care for others who were not in our inner circles, perhaps strangers to us even?

Perhaps the most famous pandemic from the early church was called the Plague of Cyprian. While its name may not be creatively dramatic, the bishop it is named after was quite colorful. Cyprian was a pastor of the Carthage church who gave a colorful accounting of the plague whenever he preached. While this plague swept across the known world in the third century (249–262 AD), it was estimated that 5000 people were dying in Rome alone, decimating its army as well as its food supplies.

But it did something else too: It triggered growth of Christianity. While this pandemic almost led to the end of the Roman Empire, the church exploded. The church, once again, brought care to the sick and dying both inside and outside the church. In their sermons, Cyprian and other

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pastors exhorted Christians not to grieve for plague victims because, after all, they were in heaven. Rather, the church should redouble its efforts to provide compassion and care for the living. In describing the response to this pandemic, a pastor named Dionysius wrote that Christians “Heedless of danger ... took charge of the sick, attending to their every need.”

This testimony of care and compassion was noticed by the pagan culture surrounding and persecuting the church. Almost a century later, pagan Emperor Julian would grouse and complain about how “the Galileans” even cared for non-Christian sick people. Almost 100 years after the plague, the testimony of how the church responded still rang out. Church historian Pontianus detailed how believers lived out the Matthew 25 passage by being certain that “good was done to all men, not merely to the household of faith.”

This shows that how the church responds to global crises will last much longer than those moments of living through the crises. A century later, will the global community look back and be overwhelmed by how the church did good and cared for everyone, everywhere during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Although we might not impact the four corners of the earth with our compassion, we can impact our local church and our neighborhood. You might ask how we could have maintained responsible behavior towards neighbors while at the same time caring for them, showing concern for their spiritual well-being? Of course, we could have prayed for them, but we also could have shared scriptures across social media and checked in to see that neighbors were doing okay.

Did you leave a legacy of compassion so that when people look back at those difficult years of Covid-19, it was obvious that the church rose up and made it clear that Jesus loves all people, even during pandemics?

DAY FOUR



“The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock where I seek refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.” Psalm 18:2

“He alone is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I will not be shaken. My salvation and glory depend on God, my strong rock. My refuge is in God.” Psalm 62:6-7

“Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who build his house on the rock. The rain fell, the rivers rose, and the winds blew and pounded that house. Yet it didn’t collapse, because its foundation was on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and doesn’t act on them will be like a foolish man who build his house on the sand. The rain fell, the rivers rose, the winds blew and pounded that house, and it collapsed. It collapsed with a great crash.” Matthew 7:24-27

As we look back to reflect the faith-driven life that we should have had during the time of the Coronavirus, we continue to look at how other believers throughout history responded to similar crises.

In the mid-19th century, London developed into one of the wealthiest and most powerful cities in the world. While the city was bursting at the seams with a swelling population of multiple millions of people, a cholera outbreak would swipe through the city in 1854. This unknown disease and the inability to treat it effectively meant the most powerful and wealthiest city in the world was suddenly gripped with fear. Leaders could not legislate the disease away, nor could they purchase a magic cure for the general population. There was a general feeling of helplessness.

The prince of preachers, Charles Spurgeon, had recently moved to London to begin a pastorate at the New Park Street Chapel. Even though he was only 20 years of age at the time, Spurgeon would recall how formative this pastorate would be for

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him, especially ministering during a time of illness. Spurgeon would also draw upon this time in the city's history as something the entire community could learn from as well.

In times of reflection, Spurgeon once wrote, "If there ever be a time when the mind is sensitive, it is when death is abroad. I recollect, when first I came to London, how anxiously people listened to the gospel, for the cholera was raging terribly. There was little scoffing then."

Despite the savaging illness, the sickness, and stench of death, people saw their hearts open to the message of the Gospel. When push comes to shove, when the rivers rise, winds blow, and the rains fall, things either endure or crash loudly. And when things crash loudly, there will always be opportunities to share the Gospel to people and in places that were previously closed.

Spurgeon also realized this. He would remember the example of a man who in times of good health had opposed Spurgeon and his ministry. However, as he was now dying of cholera, he had a different tune.

"That man, in his lifetime, had been wont to jeer at me. In strong language, he had often denounced me as a hypocrite. Yet he was no sooner smitten by the darts of death than he sought my presence and counsel, no doubt feeling in his heart that I was a servant of God, though he did not care to own it with his lips."

And when things crash loudly, there will always be opportunities to share the Gospel to people and in places that were previously closed.

DAY FOUR (CONTINUED)

Face to face with the rain, wind, and storms, as things crash, people turn their faces and attention towards something permanent, something solid – a firm foundation upon which to build their lives. We needed to make sure that believers were not joining in with the unsteadiness and the fear and anxiety. Rather, followers of Christ should have remembered the promise of scripture. The Lord is our rock. He is our fortress. He is our firm foundation. In those dark times and seasons like what we endured, I hope you were encouraged that you had built your spiritual home on the firm foundation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

**The Lord is our rock.
He is our fortress.
He is our firm foundation.**

Spurgeon ministered and sat and cared for people who were sick and dying. He would breathe the same air, go to their sickbeds and deathbeds and express to them the hope that could still be found in Christ. He saw the outbreak of cholera as the storm that could open the door for the Gospel. It is my prayer that I would find ways to be as bold for the Gospel during any challenging times as Christians like Spurgeon were doing during the challenging seasons of their lives as well.

DAY FIVE



“Let us hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, since he who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works, not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching.” Hebrews 10:23-25

I would like to say that the disruption of worship services that was brought on because of the pandemic was an unprecedented time of the church’s history. I would like to say that we’ve never known what it is like to not gather in worship in the same space. Sadly, that is not the case.

Many of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world have intermittent worship gathering experiences. As so many churches are secret and underground, they can’t always meet with scheduled regularity or even consistently in the same space. I hope as we experienced a disruption to our services, we were mindful that this is closer to the experience many in the global church experience regularly. So many churches can only meet occasionally, and the gathering together is such a blessing that it so often lasts for hours and hours rather than the “one-hour-and-done rush” to beat the Methodists to McGillicutty’s Cafeteria and Smorgasbord.

While that is the story for many of our Christian brothers and sisters, for many more of us, sadly, we are familiar with the experience of not gathering. Many Christians have, at some point, experienced an extended “break” from worship. Maybe it was in college. Maybe there was some difficult interpersonal relationship that caused the break. Regardless, many Christians have had a break from worshipping together.

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Hebrews tells us to abstain from that sort of break in worship. When circumstances are out of your control, you are to participate in the way that presents itself. In our case, because of the Coronavirus, we met online because we couldn't meet in person. Not optimal, but it's also better than nothing at all. I don't think that is what Hebrews 10 refers to - a break during which you were quarantined, socially distant out of concern for our neighbors.

Hebrews 10 refers to the abandoning of corporate worship for reasons that you can control. Tired? Busy? Hurt feelings? Disagreements with others? Not a fan of the ukulele band's invocation? Well, those reasons for skipping worship don't pass the Hebrews 10 muster. When we don't have the option to worship at all, it should make us grieve and mourn the times and seasons of our lives when we chose to simply skip out on church.

While he did not endure a forced quarantine or stay inside order, German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer experienced a different type of forced isolation from his church family. The Nazi's who led Germany during Bonhoeffer's life, specifically the SS leadership, imprisoned Pastor Bonhoeffer because they suspected he was involved in plots to antagonize Nazi leadership.

Bonhoeffer wrote of gathering together, "It is true, of course, that what is an unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded and trodden under foot by those who have the gift every day. It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed."

Gathering in worship is, according to Bonhoeffer, "a gift of grace... of the Kingdom of God." He also acknowledges how fragile and temporary this gift can be.

DAY FIVE (CONTINUED)

Bonhoeffer continues: “(It is) grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.” Have you treasured, valued this gift of grace? Do we consider gathering together in worship to be a treasure? Do we experience the presence of God and each other as blessing? Or do we spend too much time evaluating through the selfish lenses of our preferences and popularity? When the option for corporate worship together in the same space has been taken from us, when we are enduring what Bonhoeffer described as the “scattered loneliness” of the church, does it deepen and strengthen our longing just to be together, regardless of the formats, styles and spaces? It should. While gathering online together was not ideal, in my opinion, it was a better option than not gathering at all. Hebrews makes it clear that we are to continue to meet, to gather together. Technology made that possible via online platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Zoom, Google hangout, group text messages and group emails just to name a few.

That is why we worked to create and provide for the First Baptist Church family of Martinsburg so many options to connect and engage in spiritual growth and development together through RightNow Media, prayer@fbcmartinsburg.com, supporting online by giving via text or through the church website. It is why we provided and challenged groups of people to connect through YouVersion, the Bible reading app and to participate in some of the same Bible studies on RightNow.

Did you take advantage of these options when you were given the opportunities? Did you follow up and call one or two of your church friends daily to encourage them? Did you “consider one another in order to provoke love and good works, not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching” when we could fellowship in person once again?