

Once Upon a Pandemic
The Grand Illusion
March 22, 2020

Pre-service video

Welcome – Shannon (2)

**Worship Music – Every Beat / God So Loved /
This Is Amazing Grace (12)**

Behind the Scenes – Shannon (2)

Video Intro – Before and After (1)

Thank you all for tuning in today.

I know that for some of you this might be the first time you've ever participated with us and I want to say thank you for giving us some of your time. And, if someone from North Heartland invited you to do so, I want to say "way to go" to them for doing that.

So “way to go” ...

... because this, as we all know, is a critical moment in our history; and not only as a nation but as a human race.

In my lifetime – and I’ll be 63 this summer ... in my lifetime, I cannot remember anything – good or bad – that has grabbed the attention of (literally) *the entire world* at the same time in the same way as this coronavirus has.

- I remember when John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. were assassinated.
- I remember Neil Armstrong’s first steps on the moon
- And I remember the first Iraq war and then 9/11

- And then the war starting in Afghanistan and again in Iraq.

And I know that people in other parts of the world were aware of those events, but their impact was felt primarily in the United States.

In the same way, things that happened in other parts of the world such as ...

- The Rwandan genocide in which a half-million to a million people were murdered in 1994.
- The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami which killed a quarter of a million people in one day
- The "Arab Spring" of 2011.

... we knew about here, but they didn't really affect us personally.

Not so with COVID-19.

- All eyes worldwide are watching.
- All ears are listening.
- All minds are wondering.
- All hearts are unsettled and apprehensive ...

... whether that apprehension has to do with the medical impact of the virus itself or what "social distancing" and, in all likelihood, *lockdown* is going to do to individual jobs and entire industries and the global economy.

This moment in time will become a story that many of us tell our kids and grandkids.

"Once upon a time," we'll say, "there was a

pandemic. A highly contagious and deadly virus spread all over the world. And *then* ...”

Well, you and I don't yet know that part of the story, do we?

... which is why earlier this week I decided that we need to take at least the next four weeks – from now through Easter Sunday – to talk not only about how we're going to get through this but, also (and perhaps more importantly), *who will we be on the other side of it.*

Every cultural expert I've read (and maybe you've seen this, too) ... every expert says that ...

[SPACE] Things are going to be very different *after* this *because* of this.

They say we're going to think differently about health and healthcare.

We're going to think differently about how we connect with one another, how we treat one another, how we learn, how we work ... and the list goes on and on.ⁱ

And I'm sure some of what "they say" is going to be spot on.

But my question is much more personal. My question is ...

[SPACE] How are *you* going to be different? How am *I* going to be different?

And there's no doubt you and I *will* be different.

Just look back at "the greatest generation" – they were molded and shaped by living through The Great Depression and then World War II. It changed them.

And even though there is no war (thankfully), what we are going through (and will continue to go through) with the coronavirus and its aftermath is of that same magnitude emotionally, psychologically, financially and even spiritually.

We will be changed by it.

The only question is *how*; *how* we will be changed?

The answer is we'll be different based on how we think and how we act in these next weeks and months. And not just towards one another (which is obviously very important).

▣ We will be different based on how we interact with God.

And that's what I am going to focus on in this series.

And in case you're wondering (and maybe even a little worried about it), I am not planning to talk about what politicians or medical officials should and should not do to "fix" things. Other people smarter than I (and dumber, too) will handle that kind of commentary.

Instead, this is a series designed to point us to God and, for some of us, maybe in a way we haven't experienced in a long time, if ever.

That's the goal. So, let's get into it.

Disoriented & Disturbed

So, can you remember what you were doing two weekends ago?

For me, personally, since Shannon was speaking, I had all day Saturday and then Sunday afternoon to work on my yard. It was

sunny and warm and the perfect opportunity to clean up the grunge of winter and get things ready for the impending awakening of spring. It was just a great weekend.

And, like most everyone else, I was beginning to grow a bit more concerned about this “coronavirus thing.” I was watching the news and checking the feed on my smartphone but, honestly, it still seemed far, far away. It was something “over there” that *might* become a problem here but there were other more pressing issues at the time, so it was easy to look away.

And then, on Monday, the stock market crashed.

It had been down and then up before then but “Black Monday 2020” was, at the time, the Dow’s worst one-day *point loss* in U.S. history. It went down almost 8%.ⁱⁱ

That got my attention because, as many of you know, my wife is retiring from teaching at the end of this school year. And a big part of the financial plan is what we've been putting into our retirement accounts.

Three days later, it dropped another 10%.

Four days later (last Monday), the decline exceeded the *original* October 1929 Black Monday slide of 12.8%. It was the worst one-day *percentage loss* in U.S. history.

When the work week ended this past Friday, the market had experienced its worst weekly performance since the financial crisis of October 2008. The Dow dropped over 17% in just those five days.ⁱⁱⁱ

And for me, personally, that was the easy part.

As the ever-present “coronavirus ticker” on every news channel continued to go rise, so did the restrictions on travel and on group gatherings. Last Sunday, we were able to have services in this room because we fell under our Mayor’s guideline of “no events over 1,000.”

That evening, the number was lowered to 50, so our pastors gathered Monday morning to develop a plan within those constraints.

We finished our work at 2:00 pm and then, at 2:30 pm, the Mayor lowered the number to 10, which made everything we had decided moot because it effectively eliminated any and all church gatherings and required most of our staff to begin working from home.

Then we began to hear of ...

- People in our congregation having to cancel events and trips and vacations
- People in our congregation losing their jobs
- Parents in our congregation trying to figure out what to do with kids who would be out of school until April 3rd (which has now been extended until April 24th).
- Business owners having to lay off workers and, in some cases, having to shut down completely.

And then, yesterday, the order came down that none of us are supposed to go anywhere beginning 12am Tuesday and continuing for who knows how long.

Add to that ...

- The concern I have for my 86-year-old father and my sisters and their health
- The concern I have for my own health and Jetta's health. We're in that target range of "when it's bad it's really bad."
- The responsibility I feel for this church and especially the people who work here
- The lack of sleep I've had this past week with all of this going on
- The constant urge to check my news feed to see what crazy thing is happening now ...

Bottom line, the drastic nature of so many major changes in such a short amount of time has left me feeling *disoriented*. It's very *disturbing* internally.

And I know that many of you are feeling the same way – and if you aren't, you will be very soon.

Control Issues

Now, I'm telling you all of this not because my story is any more interesting or important than anyone else's.

I'm telling you this because, after wrestling with this most of last week and just feeling "off" ...

... two days ago, on Friday, I felt like the Holy Spirit was tapping me on the shoulder and saying, "hey Rick, what you're feeling right now is a reminder of something that you so easily forget."

"And not just you. Everyone else forgets it, too.

So, you should talk about this on Sunday.”

And that’s a pretty big deal because, as most of you know, we plan our message series many weeks in advance. And *today’s* message, for the most part, was already in the can.

But, feeling like I really was sensing something from the Lord, I decided to change the whole series.

So, what is it that we *so easily forget* that this current situation reminds us of?

Actually, for some of us, this isn’t something we *forget*. This is something we’ve never *thought of* or something we’ve never *heard of*.

Ok, so here it is.

▣ **Control is an illusion. <repeat>**

... meaning “we may *think* we are in control of our lives, but we’re really not.”

... meaning “there are times when it may *appear* that we are in control of our lives, but appearances are deceiving.”

Control is an illusion.

Now, just to be clear, I’m not talking about *self-control*. I’m not saying that we don’t have the ability to be responsible and take care of ourselves and follow through on our commitments. We do and we should.

▣ When I say “control” I’m talking about the kind of thinking that says ...

I can arrange things – people, finances, career, relationships, even God – so that everything works out just like I want it to.

- “If I can get my retirement allocations right, I can control my financial future.”
- “If I can get my diet and medicine right, I won’t get cancer.”
- “If I can get him or her to fall in love with me, my life will be complete.”
- “If I can figure out the right child-raising techniques, I can guarantee how my kids turn out.”^{iv}

Ever think like that? I have and I do.

Now, part of the reason we think that way is because of the modern world in which we live.

Whereas previous generations were constantly reminded of their vulnerabilities to the various forces of nature, we’ve made

remarkable medical, scientific, and technological breakthroughs that have allowed us to be less the *victims of nature* than societies in the past.^v

As a result, we've come to *expect* endless economic growth, freedom, happiness, travel, insurance against risk, comfort, health, low infant mortality and long-life.^{vi}

We now regulate so much of the natural world that we forget ...

[SPACE] ... as Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal noted, that

"Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature ... There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapor ... is enough to kill him."^{vii}

In other words, just inhale the wrong stuff – or touch the wrong viral matter on a countertop

– and you might be dead in a week or two.

And this coronavirus is a brutal reminder of just how fragile we are. It's a direct and uncomfortable challenge to our collective illusion of control. As it spreads, not only are our individual lives threatened; the intricate web of global connections that are the fuel of national and international economies are also at risk.^{viii}

Even when they develop a drug or vaccine that puts an end to COVID-19 and its worst-case 2% fatality rate, that won't change the fact that life itself still has a fatality rate of 100%.

▣ **That's why one of the wisest prayers in the Bible is this one:**

Lord, remind me how brief my time on earth will be. Remind me that my days are

*numbered – how fleeting my
life is. Psalm 39:4
(NLT)*

So, again, when things change as suddenly and drastically as they have in the past two weeks, it becomes much clearer than it was before: *control is the grand illusion.*

And when that happens – when it hits us that what we *thought* we had control over *really is* out of our control ... when that truth is revealed ... two things often happen to us.

1. We panic and grasp for *greater control over lesser things.*

This, friends, is why there is no toilet paper anywhere.

No one is thinking it consciously but the idea behind TP hoarding is simple.

“I can’t do anything about that monster virus and what it might do to my health and my livelihood but if it’s the last thing I do, I’m going to be able to poop like a civilized human being.”

The second thing that happens when it hits us that we are not in control because control is an illusion is that ...

SPACE 2. We get very angry at whoever is (supposedly) “in control.”

- “If the CDC and Trump weren’t so incompetent, we would have had enough test kits by now ...”
- “If the mayor and governor hadn’t panicked and shut everything down prematurely, I’d still have a job; my business would still be open ...”

So, I’m curious ... are you hoarding stuff right

now? Are you “pissed at the powers that be” whether it’s Trump or the governor or the purveyors of “Fake News?”

If so, you have control issues which are being tweaked by the sudden realization *that control is an illusion.*

The Problem

Of course, a reasonable question someone might ask is “what’s so bad about thinking that you are in control of your own life?”

“Maybe it’s not a good thing *right now* but, most of the time – like when there’s not a pandemic, it’s probably not hurting anything.”

Well ... beside the fact that control is an illusion and whenever people live according to illusion instead of reality, we typically

consider them mentally unstable ...

Besides that, the bigger problem – and this applies especially to Christians but not exclusively. It's an issue for everyone but it's a huge issue for those of us who believe in Jesus as our savior and follow Him as our leader and guide in life.

The bigger problem is that ...

▣ The illusion of control pulls us away from God and blinds us to our need for Him.

And here's why I say that.

Way back in the first century, one of Jesus' closest friends who we know as "John the Apostle" had a vision.

This was after Jesus had been crucified and resurrected and had crossed back over into the spiritual dimension that we call "Heaven."

And, by the way, for those who are new with us, the only reason we care about John and even Jesus – the only reason we even know about them in the first place – is *because* Jesus was crucified and then resurrected.

If Jesus *hadn't* been raised from the dead, his movement would have died along with him ... which is exactly what happened to so many other would-be Jewish "messiahs" of that era.

Anyway, one day John had a vision of Jesus. And in this vision, Jesus told him to write letters to seven of the churches that had been established in various locations all over the Roman Empire.

One of those churches was in a town called Laodicea which was well known for three things:^{ix}

- A unique type of wool which was glossy and black and was used in making fancy and fashionable clothing.
- It was also known for medicine, including of one of the most renowned medical schools in the ancient world. They produced a world-famous ointment that supposedly could cure certain kinds of eye diseases.
- Finally, it was known for its banking industry. Laodicea became a center of currency exchange and money lending.

Point being, if you lived in Laodicea in the first century, you were living the high life. You were in the center of the latest and greatest of everything: money, medicine, culture, fashion.

In fact, things were so good there that writers

of the ancient world spoke openly of their envy of Laodicean wealth. Record after record attests to the high status of the people living there.

Sound familiar? Sounds a little like our culture, doesn't it?

If you lived in Laodicea – follower of Jesus or not – you lived with the illusion of control.

Now, with that as background, check out what Jesus told John to write to church and Christians in that city.

SPACE **He said ...**

"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!"

Revelation 3:15 (NIV)

In other words, “when I look at you guys and how you live, I see a complacency towards Me. Oh you ‘believe’ in me and you ‘follow’ me, but your heart’s not really in it.

“I’m just not that important to you. You have a take it or leave it attitude towards Me.”

SPACE **“In fact,” Jesus continues ...**

“Because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”

Revelation 3:16 (NIV)

Now, if somewhere along the way you got the idea that God is an angry deity just itching to judge and condemn whoever falls short of his glory, that statement probably sounds to you like *Jesus is mad at them*.

But He’s not. That’s not what’s going on here.

Have you ever had a hot cup of coffee that you started drinking but then forgot about it and came back a couple hours later and it was no longer hot – it had cooled off to room temperature but you took a drink of it anyway?

What was your reaction? Ugghh! You wanted to spit it out, not because you were mad at it but because this isn't what coffee is supposed to be like. It was gross.

That's what Jesus is saying here. "Ugghh! This is not what it's supposed to be like to believe in Me and follow Me. It's gross."

But Jesus doesn't stop there because He wants to help them get back on track.

So, He tells them *why* they are in the condition they're in. He explains what has

pulled them away from Him.

SPACE He says ...

"You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.'"

"You guys look around and everything is good right now.

- The wool market is at an all-time high since the new Caesar rolled back those strict regulations.
- The currency exchange rate is in your favor.
- Your healthcare system is the best in the Empire.

Nothing is rocking your world. You feel like you have it all under control."



“But, that’s just a grand illusion,” Jesus says.

“You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”

Revelation 3:17 (NIV)

And again, Jesus isn’t mad at them.

He’s just saying, “the fact that right now, you’re living such a high life and you seemingly have it all under control ... that has made you complacent. It’s blinding you to your true condition and your need for Me.”

“So,” Jesus says – and this is kind of funny. People don’t think of Jesus as being humorous or ironic. He’s too Jesusy to do that.

But I think what Jesus says next to these folks has some humor to it because He’s going to

give them some investment advice, some fashion advice and some medical advice.

He says, "you guys are all about trying to control those things in your life."

SPACE **"So let me give you some advice."**

*"I counsel you to buy from me
gold refined in the fire, so you
can become rich;*

*... and white clothes to wear,
so you can cover your
shameful nakedness;*

*... and salve to put on your
eyes, so you can see."*

Revelation 3:18 (NIV)

Now, if you want to, you can read commentaries that will tell you what Bible scholars think the spiritual meaning is of the gold and the clothes and the ointment. But I don't think that's where the meat is here.

I think the main point is in the three words
“buy from Me.”

The main point of what Jesus is saying to them
is that *they have settled for less than the best*
individually and collectively as church body.

Instead of pursuing Him and putting Him and
His kingdom priorities first, they have settled
for controlling the world around them; trying
to arrange people, finances, career,
relationships, even God so that everything
works out just like they want it to.

And right now, it's working.

“Hey, Jesus, it's so good to hear from you. I
know we haven't talked for so long. I haven't
been to worship in so long. But honestly, I'm
doing pretty good. I feel *blessed* ... blessed in
my soul, blessed in my bank account, blessed

in my belly.”

“Honestly, I really don’t need anything right now. You can go on and help somebody else who needs it more than I do. I’d feel bad if you spent too much time on me.”

That’s how they’ve been seeing things. But, Jesus says, it’s an illusion that masks their true condition.

And all it will take is a wool-market crash or a plague from a new virus to make that painfully obvious.

So, Jesus is actually doing them a favor.

He’s saying, “I don’t want you to go through that, so I’m telling you *now* what I’m seeing in you. And I’m inviting you to turn back to Me because I love you and want the best for you.”

In fact, that's what he tells John to write next.

SPACE **“John,” Jesus says, “I want you to write ...**

*“Those whom I love I rebuke
and discipline.”*

And the word rebuke means to give a strong warning of “hey, you’re way off base here. This is not how it’s supposed to be.”

*“So be earnest and repent.”
Revelation 3:19 (NIV)*

And “repent” ... that’s a word that a lot of us misunderstand because we think it means “get your act together or else.”

But in the original Greek language, the word translated “repent” simply means to “change your mind.”

- It means to change your way of thinking.
- It means to adopt a new and right

perspective.

- It means to see and embrace the truth

And then let that new thinking, perspective and truth so permeate your heart and mind that you begin to change from the inside out.

“Repent” is a much more relational word that most of us ever imagined ... which is why, I think ...

SPACE **Jesus tells John to start wrapping things up with these words:**

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.”

Revelation 3:20 (NIV)

We’ll hang out, we’ll be buds. We’ll get to know each other.

And as we do that, your thinking will change. Your perspective will change. And your life will change.

The Good News

Now, we don't know how the Laodicean Christians responded to this letter. And it really doesn't matter.

What matters is where we are today. We've had the market crash and we're having the plague and it's become abundantly clear that control is an illusion.

And now that we're panicking and/or angry, it's pretty clear – and I'm speaking to those of us who are Christians (if you're not this doesn't apply to you – and I'll say something to you in just a minute) ...

Now that we're panicking and/or angry, it's

clear that living for so long under the illusion of control has pulled us away from God and blinded us to our need to have a strong relationship with Him and with His church.

So, we've drifted away from him.

▣ But the good news is that the loss of control we're experiencing right now provides an excellent opportunity to re-engage.

This is the perfect time to lean into God, not to lean away from Him.

And we can do that because Jesus isn't mad at us. In fact, He's offering us the same invitation he gave the Laodiceans.

"Be earnest and repent."

Stop thinking of your relationship with Jesus and his Kingdom as a take it or leave it thing

depending on how “controlled” your life is. Stop settling for less than the best. Be earnest about Jesus. Go all in with him.

If you’re a Christian – <define> ... if you’re a Christian, this coronavirus crisis is Jesus knocking on the door of your heart saying, “I want more from you and I want more for you. I want more than your token acknowledgement once every couple of weeks. Ugggh. That’s not how it’s supposed to be when you believe in me and follow me.

“This is supposed to be want a relationship – a friendship – between us. That’s what I want from you and what I want for you. So, open the door, will ya, and let’s start working on that.”

Now, if you’re not a Christian, guess what? It’s the same invitation except it would be incorrect to talk about re-engaging with God.

If you're panicking and you're angry over the loss of control in your life right now, that's a perfect opportunity to *begin* a relationship with God.

<explain>

Let's pray together.

Lord, remind us how brief our time on earth will be. Remind us that our days are numbered – how fleeting our lives are.

- Some are in panic – hoarding
- Some are angry at people “in control” (and people who are their supporters)

Help us to see those for what they are – signs that control is an illusion and that you want something better for us. You want us to lean

into you and build the relationship to which you've called us.

CLOSING COMMENTS (2)

1. If you prayed to receive Jesus, please let us know through the contact form on our website or app.

2. Will say more about this control issue next week in the message "Flying Blind" ... How much do we really know about what's happening right now? More importantly, how much does it matter?

3. Normally receive offering at this point, obviously can't do that.
 - Some of you can't give and that's OK.

 - But for those who can, I'm going to ask you to watch two short vides (2 mins each) of how contribute electronically

through our app or website.

- So, you watch that, and stay tuned to FB and website and email this week and I will see you next Sunday.

Videos of how to give (4)

RUN THEM BACK TO BACK WITH NO PAUSE. I WILL NOT BE BACK UP AFTER THEY RUN.

Endnotes

ⁱ For one example see

<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/19/coronavirus-effect-economy-life-society-analysis-covid-135579>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.thebalance.com/fundamentals-of-the-2020-market-crash-4799950>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.cnn.com/business/live-news/stock-market-news-today-032020/index.html>

^{iv} From David Powlison, *Worry*, Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2004, pg. 12.

^v <https://www.breakpoint.org/how-dare-the-vice-president-pray/>

^{vi} <https://www.christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2020/march/coronavirus-and-christian-theology.html>

^{vii} <https://breakpoint.org/the-coronavirus-god-and-a-world-out-of-our-control/>

^{viii} <https://www.breakpoint.org/how-dare-the-vice-president-pray/>

^{ix}

<https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Topical.show/RTD/cgg/ID/248/Laodicea.htm>