

“REFLECTIONS ON PLAGUE AND PESTILENCE.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: II Samuel 24

Prayer: Holy Father, we are coming to your holy Word this morning, inspired by your Holy Spirit, preserved through the ages to the sake of our souls. This is your revelation, what you want to say to us, what you want us to know. Help us hear, help us understand, help us apply it for our eternal benefit. Glorify yourself and your Word for the sake of your church.

Introduction.

History shows us nearly every generation has its defining tragedy, some event that defines and exposes and shapes a nation's character and conduct.

Just the last century reveals several.

The 9/11 Twin Towers terrorist attack, Sept. 11, 2001.

The Vietnam War, 60s-70s.

The assassination of JFK, November 1963.

WWII

The Stock Market crash and Great Depression, 1929.

The sinking of the Titanic April 14, 1912.

Along with events like those, there have also been countless plagues and epidemics. Again, just in the last century there has been the swine flu, the bird flu, Ebola, and the great Spanish flu pandemic of 1918, to which news reports have made many references.

As I said last week epidemics and pandemics are not unprecedented. There have been countless plagues and pestilences all through human history. In fact, I dare say there has never been a hundred-year span of time without at least one.

Biblical history bears this out. In the Bible the words plague, and pestilence occur over 130 times. The first time is in Genesis 12 when God afflicted Pharaoh's house with great plagues because he had taken Sarai, Abram's wife, into his palace, not knowing she was married.

Then of course there were the ten great plagues that were visited on another Pharaoh many years later in Egypt, by Moses (Exodus 7-11). The tenth one killed a member of every Egyptian household.

Because God has recorded these things in His Word, they are written for our instruction, for our benefit and even for our encouragement and blessing. Let's reflect on one such event in the last chapter of II Samuel near the end of King David's life. We will consider the text in two parts.

II Samuel 24:15-17

The chapter begins with a very difficult to understand verse

II Samuel 24:1 Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go, number Israel and Judah."

What kind of God is angry for reasons we aren't told? What kind of God incites the king of Israel to sin? What kind of God spreads a virus across the whole planet killing tens of thousands of people?

From the beginning of this story and actually often in Scripture we are confronted with a God who isn't like us, doesn't think like us or act like us. God doesn't answer to us. God doesn't fit into our boxes. God has no inclination to measure up to or meet our expectations.

When Job demanded answers from God for what happened to him, God said:

Job 38:2, 4 "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
4 Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?"

Romans 11:33-34 How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!
34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?"

This is a God before whom we should tremble. A God who acts in sovereign mystery.

From Scripture what we can conclude is that when God is angry it is with sin, and David's actions however they came about are sinful and punishable. He took a senseless census. We are not told in Scripture why it was wrong, only that it was wrong. It was disobedience and lack of faith or trust in God or something selfishly or foolishly motivated.

David was not practicing what he preached in Psalm 20:7:

Psalm 20:7 Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

We do the same when we trust in numbers, statistics, bank accounts, stock market, government.

Here is what we do know from this pestilence. God is in it, behind it and it is for a reason and the reason has to do with sin and lack of faith and lack of trust in the living God.

The plagues and pestilence in the Bible come as a natural consequence of sin, of rebellion against God, of disobedience, of idolatry. They are a manifestation of God's righteous and just wrath. They are both a present punishment and a sign of a coming future great judgment, of His eternal wrath against all sin. In the NT Jesus says they are a sign of the end times, the last days, which we are in now. Jesus mentions them specifically in Luke 21, and they are spoken of several times in Revelation (6:7-8; 9:21-22 and 15:15).

Is Covid-19 a sign from God? Of course, it is, but so is everything, everything is from God, a sign of grace or a sign of discipline. Is God up to something? God is always up to something. This is God's universe, He created it and He runs it, everything has purpose and meaning.

God has a purpose in this current crisis, in fact He has millions, no billions of purposes. At least one for every person on this planet. I can think of three or four just in my life, so do that math.

And not just for individuals, but companies, businesses, churches, governments, nations. And you can be sure of this. Covid-19 is just a dress rehearsal, a trial run, there will be a next time, and there will be a grand finale, the great judgment.

This pandemic is a sign from God that says, "Unless you repent, you will perish" (cf. Luke 13:1-5; Romans 1:18-32; 2:4).

This is meant to humble us, all of us. This is meant to get our attention, all of us. This is a great shot across the bow. There is a far greater judgment coming and if we don't truly repent and turn to the one true living God in the name of Jesus, we too will perish.

One more thing, before I move on.

I have found myself grumbling more over the shutdown than the virus itself. I have chafed at the cure more than the disease. And then I have to pause and remind myself that they are both in the hand of God and from the hand of God. What is happening to our economy is just as much part of what God is doing as the virus is.

The impact on my retirement, the impact on my future, the impact on my sons and their livelihoods, the impact on our church family and our community and nation are all part of God's purposes, His humbling, His rebuking, His just judgment, His call to repentance.

I have been mulling over and meditating on something I read in a prayer that will be in this coming Wednesday's devotional. The purposeful providence of God should sweeten every event, every fear, every circumstance and situation. Its another way of thinking about the phrase, if it pleases God, it pleases me. That is a level of trust and faith and spiritual maturity I want to get to. God is up to something and for Christians it can only be good in the long run.

Notice how many died.

We are told 70,000 men were struck dead in the space of three days. Five percent of the registered fighting men of 1,300,000.

Its just a statistic until it gets personal. Its just a number until you actually know someone like Edie Moorlag or Gina Gates.

The numbers in the Bible can slip past us sometime without reflection. In Egypt every household was doing a funeral. In Numbers 16 during Korah's rebellion, 14,700 died in one day.

In Noah's flood it was everyone except 8 people. And all through history there have been great disasters, floods, earthquakes, fires, volcanic eruptions. A quarter of a million people in the Indian Ocean tsunami. 50 million in the Black plague in the 1300s, 50-100 million in the Spanish flu pandemic.

From our text we see a display of the swiftness of God's judgment and our utter impotence before it. In this super modern world of ours, with the greatest advances and the best medicine, all we can do is tremble before a holy God.

We think we are so invincible and now we are reminded how easy it would be for God to wipe out the whole human race if He wanted to. God has at His command all the forces of nature, all the viruses and diseases, to destroy vast portions of the world population. As I have said several times before, the greatest threat facing our planet is the wrath of a holy God.

God is serious, and He is to be taken seriously. This is not a game. He wants our attention.

Notice who died.

People from Dan to Beersheba, from the very north of Israel to the very south of Israel, from every tribe in Israel. The pestilence was no respecter of persons. Rich and poor, younger and older, every walk of life. But notice it was not everyone, some lived, and some died, some were chosen, and some were passed over.

Why? Why now do some get sick and some don't, and why do some who get sick die, and some recover? Is it just based on who was weak, frail, old, and who was strong and healthy?

Who holds all things in His hands?

Job 12:10 In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind.

Psalms 104:29 When you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust.

Psalm 139:16 Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

Elsewhere we are told, “not a sparrow falls to the ground without his notice,” without his consent or approval. We speak of accidental deaths, but there are no accidents with God. All things are within the scope of his providence. Some did not recover because it was not the will of God that they should. The ultimate explanation is in the sovereign will of God.

The Lord gives, the Lord takes away. Not a single person has died from Covid-19 before the number their days on earth ordained by God. It was their time.

But I want to reflect on another aspect of the nature of the pestilence in David’s time and ours.

From Dan to Beersheba. God has sent a virus that is traveling the globe, infecting people of every race, sex, class, rank, rich and poor, people from every tribe and nation.

For the first time in modern history something is happening that is affecting all of us, the entire global human family. We are experiencing a solidarity of suffering we have not seen in our lifetime. Even the World Wars didn’t touch everyone that way this pandemic is.

The solidarity of the suffering is staggering. In the past we have prayed for people who suffered but they were always far away, in poor or oppressed or persecuted nations. We used to pray for Christians who couldn’t gather, had to stay underground. We used to pray for people who had limited freedoms, facing economic hardship, but it was always with a sort of passive objectivity.

We never imagined our lives would ever be like theirs. We live in America. We believe in American exceptionalism, that we are different and better than all the other countries in the world.

And look at us. We are like everyone else. God is no respecter of people; God show no partiality. We are part of the human race, and in a matter of just a few months God can reduce all to the same level. We are sick and dying just like everyone else. This virus is a great leveler.

It is important that we see what God is doing, how He is humbling us, even that our church is closed just like everyone else.

Keeping Perspective.

We are a global family more connected than we realize, from Dan to Beersheba, and from Lynden to Libya. But we also need to keep perspective, not be proud we are like everyone else.

We are still a first world country with first world kinds of problems.

Listen to this post by person in India:

“Social distancing is a privilege. It means you live in a house large enough to practice it. Hand washing is a privilege too. It means you have access to running water. Hand sanitizers are a privilege. It means you have money buy them. Lockdowns are a privilege. It means you can afford to be at home. Most of the ways to ward the Corona off are accessible only to the affluent.

In essence, a disease that was spread by the rich as they flew around the globe will now kill millions of the poor.”

Overseas matters are far worse. Lockdowns in some countries mean literally not leaving your home even for food except on the days and times someone tells you to. No walks, no leaving your home at all. Business are closed with no hope of government assistance.

As someone has said about this current crisis, we are all in the same storm, but we are not all in the same boat. Even in our own church family, we are in a bunch of very different boats.

For some this is a nice break, for others it is a real crisis. Some have a job to go back to, some won't. Some can homeschool their kids, some aren't able to because they are trying to keep working. There are some who won't get the stimulus check and don't qualify for unemployment. There are those who are in very stressful home situations ever before all this. For some faith and trust are serious struggles.

Yes, we are all in the same storm, but we are not all in the same boat. Remember that as you think about how you will spend your stimulus check. For some it means rent and groceries, but for others its just a nice extra bonus. If you are one of those, remember it is grace, a gift. Remember God, and tithe. And remember the poor, someone for whom a little extra would actually mean the world to them. May the church of Jesus Christ do no less than the government in being generous.

Remember Christ's solidarity with our suffering, that He came into our world, into our storm and into our poor boat. Because of that we know no matter what happens or how bad it gets, Jesus has set in motion the hope of being rescued from the storm, from the effects of the fall. God has solved the problem of suffering by suffering with us and for us.

We will see the mercy of God in all of this more clearly next week, so for now I will push pause and resume with the rest of the text next week. Please read II Samuel 24.