

Times of Pestilence: April 1, 2020
“You Are Important”

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

On this last Wednesday before Holy Week, we are taking a break from our Lenten theme. We will pick up our Lenten Theme of the Days of Creation and the Days of Holy Week on Palm Sunday. Tonight we hear texts that are important to reflect upon in times of pestilence. Our Gospel reading from Luke 4 is a short one. While it is only four short verses, it contains an important reminder of God during these times of uncertainty. After teaching in the synagogue and exorcising a demon in a man in the middle of teaching, Jesus enters the home of Peter’s mother-in-law. Just as Jesus rebuked the demon, so also He rebukes the fever. Then He rebukes and lays His hands on many who were suffering sickness or afflicted with demons.

What do we learn here? God cares for the entirety of you; both your body and your soul are important to Him. It is what makes you—well, you. You have one body and one soul, and these are your gifts from God given through your parents for eternity. Your unique body and soul are one-of-a-kind in that there is only one you; at the same time, they are the same as everyone else—all humans are descended from Adam and Eve; created from the dust, and to the dust they will return. Body and soul are created, redeemed, sanctified and kept by God. Jesus illustrates to us that He makes no distinction between the body and soul. What afflicts one, inherently affects the other. Jesus’ response to each of these afflictions prove it.

Whether it is spiritual affliction of demons or physical affliction of sickness or death, Jesus operates the same towards both. He frees those in bondage by rebuking that which binds them. He speaks to the demons and He speaks to the fever; both of them have no choice but to listen to the command of His Word. When God speaks, creation has no choice but to obey.

Why does Jesus treat these afflictions all the same? Because they really are all the same. They hold people in bondage and make for a miserable life. When you are physically sick, how easy is it to despair, or fear, or become despondent, hopeless, and gloomy? Likewise, when you suffer with depression, anxiety, or any host of mental and spiritual afflictions, do you not also suffer physically.

Our bodies are affected by our moods, both good and bad; and our moods are affected by our bodies—it is a vicious cycle. Jesus has come to break that vicious cycle, which He has done on the cross.

Today sickness is on the forefront of many minds. It is all the news can talk about; and all social media is attempting to cope by either panic, fear, or joking. Social distancing has led many to cope by emotional distancing. The truth is, every one of us will experience sickness of some kind at some point in our lives. I am not saying everyone is going to get the latest strain of COVID19; but it could be the common cold, or allergies, or another strain of the flu, or cancer, or diabetes, or asthma, or twisting an ankle, or spraining a wrist, or something like arthritis. There are many parts of the human body, and all of them are affected by the fall into sin. There are many things that can go wrong!

I realize that by now I probably sound like an alarmist or a pessimist, but I want you think about how many things in your body are working correctly. Even when you are sick, your body is sustained by God. He desires your eternal life, and He has provided for it. We've all been sick, and you may remember how your parents worried and cared for you. You may be a parent yourself, and you have worried and fretted, caring and providing for your children. You may have provided care for another loved one—spouse, grandparent, friend, neighbor—and you have prayed, and worried, and sought to give all the love and peace you could give them; even if it meant giving up much from yourself. From where did that come? Where did you learn how to do that? It came from your parents, which came from theirs, which came from theirs, which traces all the way back to Adam and Eve; whom learned it from God Himself.

From the very first act of rebellion, the very first sickness and pestilence of mankind brought on through the fall of man—God has nurtured, tended, fretted and cared for you. He not only cares for the body; He also cares for the soul.

I remember learning in school that the theory of evolution believes sickness is good—it is something that causes life to change, or refine itself. I have yet to hear how this latest pestilence fits into that particular theory. I have yet to hear someone from the evolutionary camp stand bold on their theory and say, “Well, only the strong survive and this is a good thing for the strength and continuance of the human race.” In the face of this kind of pestilence, their theory is being tested and is failing.

The reality is sickness is not a good thing. Death and illness are results of the fall into sin. We have heard several times over the last few weeks about the sources of suffering. Just because someone is sick, it does not necessarily mean that have done something to anger God more than a person who is healthy. You cannot always equate a particular illness with God's judgment against you. Remember, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?...Neither, but this was so the work of God may be manifested."¹ When you encounter sickness, you should see it for what it is—a reminder of man's rebellion against God; a reminder that sin, our sin, changed the world. Sin effects our relationship with God, our relationship with each other, and our relationship with the world.

Sin affected all of God's creation. Man was set as stewards of God's creation, and every decision he made affected it; just like every decision I make affects my household. My wife and children are affected by every decision I make. For some, they don't have a say in it, and they still are affected. How I pray, teaches them how to pray. What I read affects what they read. How I handle times of sickness, or crises, affects the way they handle and understand times of sickness and crises.

Knowing how to live in sickness is important for your body and your soul. The beginning of this sermon touched on the interaction between the body and soul in illness, and for some it may have caused fear. There is much fear today, but the fear of death and illness is always around; always knocking on the door, because death is not a natural thing. Many fear death, because we were not created to die. We were created to live and serve God. Death is not a natural end; it is not a natural course of the end of the road of this thing we call life; it is consequence of rebellion, "***For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.***"²

It is into this fallen world of illness, panic, fear, and death that God Himself entered in the flesh; body and soul. In this flesh of humanity, Jesus confronts these bondages to body and soul head-on.

Peter's mother-in-law was ill with a fever, and Jesus was asked for help. God already knew of her suffering, but this gave Peter and the disciples the opportunity to pray; it gave them an occasion to lovingly bring their petitions before the throne of God, and here was the very kingdom of God—Jesus.

¹ Cf. John 9:2-3

² Romans 6:23

This same pattern we follow today. We pray for strength and healing for the sick. We appeal to God for those who suffer. We plead for God to alleviate the ailing, bind the broken-hearted, and console the dying. As your pastor, I spend much time in prayer for you, both your body and soul. I bring before God your cares and concerns. I plead for your healing, your comfort, your endurance, your patience, your faith to be strengthened as you walk through this valley of the shadow of death.

For those of you who hear this, who are not members of Immanuel, know that your pastor's pray for you. If you have specific prayers, specific concerns, specific needs, let your pastor know. He has been ordained and consecrated for special service in the church. He is to stand in the place of Christ for you—interceding for you and administering God's gifts to you. You and your congregation has called him and set his time aside to do these very things for you.

Notice what Jesus does for Peter's mother-in-law, and for those who are brought to Him suffering with illness, or demons; He speaks and touches. He rebukes the fever and it leaves. He touches her and lifts her not only physically, but also spiritually. In these days of social isolation, physical touch is not advised by our leaders. While this can be important for not transmitting disease, it is important to note that touch is important to the very fabric of a human being. How much joy can be brought by a simple hug from your child, a touch on the arm, even an elbow-bump with a smile!

There are many who misunderstand physical health and God's grace. They believe that if they are healthy—God loves them; but if they are sick—God no longer cares, or doesn't care as much. Jesus spoke to and touched many during His three years of earthly ministry. He healed many, and not one of them are still alive on this earth today. We don't find in the Scriptures that they didn't eventually suffer another illness, or injury, or never have another concern. We never hear of any of them not eventually suffering the effect of the fall and dying, at least a physical death.

What does this mean? It means that their earthly miracles of healing were great, but were only temporary. The same is true for us today. We pray for relief, and God may grant it. A loved one may recover from an illness; you have the dark clouds removed. There are many cases where doctors see the sick get well in ways that they cannot explain. There are times when things seem to change suddenly for the better for you one day, and there seems like no logical explanation.

Then there are other times when we pray, and beg and plead for a loved one, and they do not get better. With tears, we pour our petitions before God, and things do not change. There are times when we painfully wrestle with faith, and prayer, and regardless of our many heart-rending requests, death still comes. What are we to do?

Jesus came and healed people and cast out the demons for one reason—it was to show that He had the power to forgive sins. The earthly displays of release from bondage bore witness to the heavenly reality that this man was the Son of God. He is the way, the truth, and the life and no one can get to the Father, except through Him.³ Jesus is the only permeant relief mankind has to any ailment for eternity. He is the defeater of death and the conqueror the devil. He is the One whom crushed the serpents head and even death itself has lost its sting. The Lord of Life, body and soul, flesh and blood, Jesus was crucified and died on the cross for you.

His body was given to death and His blood was poured out for you. He gave His body and suffered the agony of hell for you. He was in bondage upon the cross. He could have left at any time; yet, for you He stayed.

He suffered the evil of this fallen world, and payed your wage for sin, to free you from death's dark prison. Whatever ailment you may suffer in this world, body or soul or both, Jesus knows. He alone can give that peace which the world cannot give. That doesn't mean that we hasten death. We don't bring death upon ourselves. Instead, He gives hope and peace to live in this world of sickness and death.

The forgiveness of sins, the restoration of man to God, Jesus brought through His suffering and death—and He gives it to you in the same way He did for Peter's mother-in-law. Both your body and your soul are created, redeemed, and cared for by God. He has set you apart. He keeps you. He upholds you by speaking and touching. He speaks forgiveness and lays His hands upon you in the waters of Holy Baptism. Through touch, the laying on of hands, by His called and ordained servants, He blesses you in absolution, and blesses non-communicants at the altar rail. Through His Holy Supper, the Sacrament of the Altar, His body and blood shed on the cross touches you.

³ John 14:6

You may become ill, and that illness may cause your death. You may suffer in body and soul, but take heart, be of good courage. You are blessed. You are redeemed. You are forgiven. You are sanctified. You have been baptized into Christ Jesus, ***“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”***⁴ Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

⁴ Romans 6:3-11