



Thoughts on COVID-19

- Pastor Caleb Walker -

It's odd to have something other than the latest political development take up the headlines in an election year. Though the exploits of men and women running for office still occupy news space, there is one subject on everyone's mind: COVID-19 – the coronavirus. I wouldn't have the patience to count how many articles have been written about this bug - the science, the sociological impact, the economic/political ramifications, and even the Christian's appropriate response. Further, I can tell you up front that these thoughts of mine aren't original to me.

I owe an intellectual and theological debt to many, specifically Ed Welch's Running Scared and the good folks behind the daily Breakpoint commentary. Why then would I put my energy into writing down my admittedly unoriginal thoughts?

I write them down because I'm your pastor. Yes, you could get this information from other sources and it may even be better written. It won't be written by someone you know and who knows you. It won't be written by someone who has an immediate investment in your spiritual and emotional well-being. It won't be written in a voice you know and (Lord willing and by God's grace) trust to point you to Jesus. Permit me to share some thoughts that I pray will bring God glory and bring you some comfort.

I could offer a great many personal opinions on our culture's response to this disease, but I will try to restrict this offering to a single theme. There are some who are canceling their Sunday morning services to try to avoid the spread of the disease. There are others who are scoffing it away as a political stunt or just a bad flu. There are points on both sides of that argument. Perhaps there's a middle ground rooted in a factor that I don't regularly encounter in what I read or what I hear.

Might not the panic caused by COVID-19 actually be a symptom of something deeper going on in our hearts? Might not even a dismissal of this virus reveal a deficiency in our worldview? I would propose that the coronavirus is so fundamentally offensive to us (whether that offense manifests itself in fear or in cockiness) because it strikes at our illusions of our own immortality. We live in a world where those with whom we come into contact (let's be blunt: those with the internet) generally assume they will live forever. Lest you think I've overstating my case, I'm not arguing that people technically believe this. Rather, they live with this assumption. Death is a distant, foreign, and even forgotten certainty. We know that it comes for

everyone, but most people don't have to deal with it that often.

There are cancers and other terminal diseases, but save for those who are hit by these and those in their immediate circles, we don't live in constant fear of them in the developed world. We live in a world of pharmacies, hospitals, and specialists. If you have a headache, take an ibuprofen. If you've some sort of infection, go to urgent care. If you have something weird going on, go to a specialist. We fall into the supposition that a pill will fix us. If we're willing to care for our bodies or go to the doctor, we control our health. If you're more into Eastern medicine, the same mindset holds sway: take this supplement or do these exercises and your problems will go away. If you eat this or don't eat this, if you get this much sleep or don't get this much sleep, if you take these vaccines or don't take these vaccines, you will extend your life. God gives us medicine and God fearfully and wonderfully made our bodies, don't get me wrong. I'm not looking to naysay these courses of action but rather critique faulty mindsets that often steer us down these roads.

This coronavirus has swept the globe with no cure and very little data. We're not protected by our food, by regulation facemasks, or even by medicine right now (because there isn't any). All of a sudden, we as people are susceptible to something that could kill us. It's not an exaggeration – people have died from this and still are (Lord have mercy). No longer does my avoidance of sugar guarantee that I will live a long and fruitful life. No longer do I have the safety net of going to the doctor and getting a shot to be all better. That dividing line between me and eternity has gotten far less solid with every news report on this scary-looking disease.

Don't read this out of context, but here's my question: might the coronavirus be a gift? The gift isn't in the disease (we brought that upon ourselves when we

sinned in the Garden of Eden). The gift certainly isn't in the death it has brought about (again, a grievous result of our sin). The gift would be the reminder of our mortality.

We don't celebrate Ash Wednesday around these parts. Some of y'all may have some of that in your church background, but we don't tend to recognize any of the Lenten season here at PCC. I'm not pushing for a move in that direction, but I think we can learn something from Ash Wednesday this year (even if we are a few weeks late). I won't get into the specifics, but a key emphasis of this holiday is on our frailty. Each Ash Wednesday, the text emphasized is from the curses under which we live because of Adam and Eve: "For you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3.19).

We like to deceive ourselves into thinking that this doesn't apply to us. Particularly for the younger folks in our midst, we have "our whole lives ahead of us." Says who? The coronavirus threatens a future we just assume we're guaranteed. The reminder of the ashes, the reminder of our dust, is that, on our own, we have no control over our destiny. It's right to take care of ourselves and to be good stewards of our bodies (cf. 1 Corinthians 6.12ff.). At the same time, I have known a handful of people who take exceptional care of their physical frames - if this is done well, it is to be commended and it is for the glory of God. These same people suffer from health issues that just don't seem reasonable. Folks who exercise and eat well die young. I know other people who treat their bodies pretty shabbily and who have enjoyed many good years of their lifestyle of Pepsi and Cheetos. We like to boil things down to a formula. The biblical formula is that we are dust and to dust we shall return. COVID-19 is an offensive but perhaps necessary reminder of this.

There's an Old Testament narrative that correlates. If you've been in church for a while (or spent any time in Sunday school), you'll be familiar with manna. I don't think

it's too bold to label this supernatural bread. It appeared all over the ground in the wilderness as the people of Israel were starving. "And Moses said to them, 'It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. This is what the LORD has commanded: "Gather of it, each one of you, as much as he can eat. You shall each take an omer, according to the number of the persons that each of you has in his tent.'" And the people of Israel did so. They gathered, some more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack. Each of them gathered as much as he could eat" (Exodus 16.15b-18). Magic bread. God provided food supernaturally and specifically so that each person had just enough.

The continuation of this account is interesting. Before proceeding in the text, what would you be inclined to do in this scenario? Out in the desert, first good food it feels like you've had in a while, and a God-ordained supply of it all over the ground. What do people do in a "crisis"? They hoard. I'm not sure they made a beeline to the toilet paper back in those days, but we can empathize with some who wanted a little bit of extra, right? It seems like a reasonable thing to do. "I'm not trying to be greedy – I just want to be prepared for the next time things are hard." Keep going in the Text: "And Moses said to them, 'Let no one leave any of it over till the morning'" (Exodus 16.19).

It wasn't just that God recommended they not gather leftovers. It wasn't that He said it would be a bad idea. He prohibited the people from stockpiling. They were not allowed to keep any of the manna until the following day. This instruction may not make much sense to us right off the bat. Apparently it didn't to the Israelites, either: "But they did not listen to Moses. Some left part of it till the morning, and it bred worms and stank. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they gathered it, each as much as he could eat; but when the sun grew hot,

it melted" (Exodus 16.20-21).

Why did God disallow the keeping of leftovers? He wanted the people to trust Him. He wanted to be their Source of comfort, of strength, and of peace every day. We are so adept at idolizing things. The Israelites would have quickly come to see the manna as that which was keeping them alive rather than the Provider of the manna. How can I state that so confidently? Because that's what I do with things! In that period of history, God was gracious enough to cause the hoarded manna to grow worms and stink. Imagine, for a moment, God doing that with all of the things that we are prone to trust. Every buck that we save "for a rainy day" writhing with worms. A computer glitch that removes all of the digital dollars that we have in the bank and we're left with nothing. Our retirement accounts vanish because of a clerical error. I'm not saying that we need to give up the idea of saving. I'm calling us to evaluate where our trust lies. How would I respond if God ordained that I have nothing leftover from day to day and to be forced to trust magic bread falling from heaven with each sunrise?

The manna forced the Israelites to reckon with their understanding of their King. Would they try to trust themselves by sneaking a couple of extra pieces here and there "just in case"? (Hint: they would). Or would they instead recognize that God is in charge of everything? He has the power of life and death and can provide manna (or quail coming out their noses [Numbers 11.20]) whenever He would like. God lovingly ordained that they come face to face with their frailty and mortality each morning.

Could God grant that some researchers find a cure for the coronavirus before I'm done typing this sentence? No question in my mind. Could this coronavirus fade into memory within a couple of months? We've seen that sort of thing happen before. Could you catch COVID-19 by walking around the grocery store or rubbing your face in

Washington state? Yes, you could. Could half of us die by this pandemic continuing to spread? Should we be surprised if we do?

We are dust, and to dust we shall return.

This is not an assertion, just a question, but might not God be intentionally withholding a cure to see if His people will trust that He will provide the manna? I would urge you to not fall into the trap of either despair or derision when it comes to media and personal coverage of the coronavirus. Jesus told us things will get worse as the last days advance. Jesus also told us that if we seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, everything will be fine for us.

“For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments. The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all”
(Psalm 103.14-19).





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