



MAKING THE MOST OF THE TIME | A TIME FOR COURAGE AND LOVE

March 15, 2020

I am sending this message out to the Central Church family and to all our many friends in different locations who love our church. I pray that my words will provide encouragement and strength—and empower you to live confidently in the hope that we have in Jesus.

These are unusual times. I did not expect to be communicating with you in this way at the beginning of the week. But this is where we are—so we will make the best of it. So let's have a little fireside chat.

We at Central are closely monitoring the evolving situation related to the novel coronavirus (Covid-19). We trust that this issue will soon subside—but until then we will continue to follow the guidelines put forth by health and city officials to ensure the safety and well-being of all.

As you know, we have decided to cancel in-person worship services for the time being due to concerns about public gatherings. That was a hard decision to make, but after much deliberation and prayer, it seems like the most prudent thing to do in light of the circumstances in order to protect the health of others.

Hebrews chapter 10 urges us not to neglect meeting together. So this decision (in some ways) goes against who we are as a church and what we are all about. But we are also a church that seeks to love people well, and this may be the best way to love people right now.

In the coming days, we will continue to roll out some creative ways that we can encourage one another and spur one another on to love and good deeds – even if we cannot come together for large public gatherings. Please keep an eye on the website.

We are facing a unique set of challenges which we must take seriously, but with new challenges come new opportunities.

I would like you to see this is an opportunity to turn to God and deepen your trust in him.

This is an opportunity to pray boldly that God will work powerfully in New York City.

This is an opportunity to serve your friends, neighbors, and colleagues in tangible ways.

This is an opportunity to care for the vulnerable, the elderly, and the sick.

This is an opportunity to provide financial assistance to those experiencing economic troubles.

This is an opportunity to share your faith with people who suddenly find themselves grappling with isolation, loneliness, anxiety or fear and do not know where to turn.

The light of the gospel shines brightest against the dark backdrop of human struggle.

This is an opportunity for Christians to shine and to show the people in our lives what Jesus has to offer.

Today I would like to take a moment to share a few thoughts with you to put the current health crisis in perspective.

Christians have a long history of caring for the sick and dying rather than ignoring the needs of others, and there is no reason to stop now. Christianity provides both perspective and practices that are ideally suited for the challenges that lie before us. Rather than succumbing to anxiety or fear, this health threat provides us all with an opportunity to display courage and love.

Historical Perspective

During this moment of uncertainty, it is worth recalling that this is not the first time that Christians have confronted epidemics. In fact, the selfless courage with which many of the early Christians faced epidemics of an even more terrifying nature won Christians unprecedented respect when previously they had been maligned. The social historian Rodney Stark has written extensively on the way the early Christians addressed the health crises of their times, and their example is instructive for us today. For a more detailed description of these accounts, see Stark's *The Rise of Christianity* (1996) and the *Triumph of Christianity* (2011).

A ravaging plague struck the Roman Empire in 165 AD during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, who eventually succumbed to the disease years later in Vienna. Some medical historians suspect that this was the first appearance of smallpox in the West, but whatever the actual disease, it had a devastating effect on the Roman world. By some estimates, a quarter to a third of the population probably died from this plague during its 15-year duration.

The first epidemic was referred to as the "Plague of Galen," named after the most famous physician at the time, but even he did not know how to treat the ill. Rather than remaining in Rome to care for the sick, he fled to a country estate in Asia Minor in order to ride out the disaster.

The empire was hit with another plague less than a century later. In this case, the epidemic might have been attributable to measles.

The pagan response to these epidemics was predictable, but terrible. Most people tried to avoid contact with the afflicted in order to escape the contagion. When the first symptoms appeared, the suffering were often thrown into the streets and left to die alone. Dionysius, the Bishop of Alexandria, tragically described events in his city in 251 AD:

"At the first onset of the disease, they [pagans] pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease; but do what they might, they found it difficult to escape."

In the face of such horrific circumstances, many understandably asked searching questions regarding why the disaster had struck and what could be done in response. Pagan religion, however, offered very little consolation or guidance because the gods of classical antiquity showed no interest in human affairs.

The gods could sometimes be "bribed" to grant favors, but there was no concept of the gods loving or caring for human beings. Prayer to the gods was considered an act of futility, and many quickly abandoned the practice. The once bustling temples were empty because the pagan priests fled the cities together with their wealthy friends. The philosophers were no help either. The best they could do was blame it all on fate.

The Christian Response

The Christians, however, claimed not only to have a unique perspective on the disaster, but they also took appropriate action, which may have saved countless lives. Early Christian leaders reminded their people of the hope of the resurrection and helped them make sense of death. The Christians believed that Jesus Christ had conquered the grave. For that reason, they tenaciously held to the conviction that death was not the end of life, and therefore there was no place for fear.

Bishop Cyprian of Carthage, for example, addressed his people during the second great plague and encouraged them to see how they were "learning not to fear death" through this pestilence. He recast the death of

loved ones in a new light with these words:

“[Our] brothers and sisters who have been freed from this earth by the summons of the Lord should not be mourned, since we know that they are not lost but sent before; that in departing they lead the way...No occasion should be given to pagans to censure us deservedly and justly, on the ground that we grieve for those we say are living.”

Unlike the pagans who believed in nothing more than a shadowy life beyond the grave in the underworld, the Christians clung to their belief in the bodily resurrection and new physical life in God’s promised future. Stoic philosophers like Marcus Aurelius believed in what one could call an “afterlife,” but as the self-proclaimed atheist philosopher Luc Ferry explains, the Stoic doctrine of salvation was anonymous and impersonal. Death for the Stoic involved a transition from a state of individual consciousness to a state of oneness with the cosmos, but as a consequence, human beings would lose everything that constitutes self-awareness and individuality. Ferry describes why Christianity eventually won over the Greco-Roman world:

“Stoicism tries valiantly to relieve us of the fears linked to death, but at the cost of obliterating our individual identity. What we would like above all is to be reunited with our loved ones, and, if possible, with their voices, their faces – not in the form of undifferentiated cosmic fragments, such as pebbles or vegetables. In this arena, Christianity might be said to have used its big guns. It promises us no less than everything that we would wish for: personal immortality and the salvation of our loved ones.”

Freed from the paralyzing fear of death, the early Christians proactively sought to provide basic care to the sick and dying rather than desert them. As a result, the Christians likely saved innumerable lives. Simply providing food and water for those who were too weak to cope for themselves would have greatly increased survival rates. Moreover, Christians had already developed a regular practice of caring not only for their own people, but for all those in need. It is no wonder that the pagan world was stunned by the compassion and sacrifice of the Christians.

In a moving pastoral letter, Dionysius praised those who tended to the sick, sometimes even at the cost of their own lives:

“Most of our brother and sister Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead.”

Why were the early Christians willing to sacrifice so much? – because of the gospel. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ not only filled them with hope and eliminated the fear of death, but also provided them with a model for how to live a life of sacrifice and service. The early Christians were animated by the power of the cross. On the cross, sin and death were transferred to Jesus so that Jesus died in the place of the believer. The early Christians were thus emboldened to care for the sick, even if that meant that illness and death were transferred to them. They lived out the pattern of the cross in the midst of the epidemic. Many Christians who nursed and cared for others died in the place of those who were sick. How could such costly service not have won the respect and admiration of the Greco-Roman world?

Courage and Love

How then should we respond to the health threat of our own day?

Don't be afraid. We, of course, should take all necessary precautions in order to minimize the risk of exposure to ourselves and others. At the same time, we recognize that Jesus removes the fear of death and makes life meaningful even in the midst of sudden and heartbreaking loss. The command that is repeated in the Scriptures more than any other is: Fear not. We do not need to be afraid, but rather we should cast all of our anxieties upon the Lord. We can use this moment to turn to God and deepen our prayer life. We can pray that God in his sovereign care will protect the health of the vulnerable and comfort those who have lost loved ones as a result of the coronavirus. Now is a time for courage.

Love your neighbor. Christian faith not only provides us with a unique perspective on suffering and death, it motivates us to proactively care for others. In addition to threatening human life, the coronavirus has already disrupted our economy and altered daily routines. We should expect that governments, businesses, schools, and other organizations like churches will have to make significant changes to the way they function as we learn more about the virus and the threat it poses.

We can respond to this challenge by loving rather than withdrawing. If the virus disproportionately affects the elderly and those with underlying health issues, we should tend to the needs of those who are at greatest risk.

The best way to do that is to help reduce the spread of the virus so that hospitals are not overloaded and rendered unable to provide necessary care to those whose conditions are most critical.

In addition, we can check in with the elderly who have sequestered themselves in their apartments to make sure they have all the supplies they need.

We can help those with health issues by ensuring they are able to receive care.

We can run errands, pick up prescriptions, or purchase groceries for those undergoing a major life event at such a time as this.

In order to lower the risk of exposure to those who are most vulnerable, we can call or text them or arrange to speak to them through their door. We can leave medicine, groceries, and other supplies outside their door without having to enter their apartment.

We can also provide financial assistance to those adversely affected by the economy, recognizing that the poor often bear a greater proportion of suffering when tragedy hits. We may see more people out of work or underemployed and we can be on the front lines of meeting their practical needs.

We are already beginning to see schools close and transition to online classes. This will inevitably pose a logistical challenge for working parents as well as students. In response, we can offer to help with childcare or provide homework support.

The place to begin is simply to ask a neighbor, a friend, or a colleague: How can I help? And if you or someone you know needs help of any kind, please reach out to Ed Sirya who will coordinate all our efforts to provide care to those who need it.

We were already planning to take our annual collection for Easter which is a special offering used to meet

the needs of those struggling financially within our community. We would encourage you to consider making a gift in order to support those who may be adversely affected by the disruptions to our economy.

In conclusion...

you could say that “social distancing” runs counter to who we are as a church. We are about “social gathering” rather than “social distancing.”

Yet at the same time, as you have heard me say before – the church has the greatest impact on its society—not when we are gathered together in worship but when we are scattered in mission. So if we have to be scattered for the time being—let’s use it to our advantage. Let’s use it to make a difference in the lives of others.

The early Christians living in the days of those ravaging plagues showed the world around them what true Christianity looks like because—they not only believed the gospel, they lived it—even at the risk of their own lives.

Now is a time for us to live by the gospel, too.

Let us pray.

Father God, our refuge and fortress, we pray that you would help us all to deepen our trust in you. Rather than giving in to anxiety and fear in the midst of this current challenge, fill us with courage and love., Give us such confidence in the finished work of Jesus Christ that we not only believe the gospel but boldly live it out in tangible ways for all the world to see. We entrust ourselves to you. In Jesus’ name. Amen.