

Reflections on Christianity and Contagion

Ash Wednesday was just a month ago, on February 26. It's a day when many Christians gather to think about our mortality, our sins, and the hope we have in Christ. A month ago, what's been called the "novel coronavirus" (technically the virus is SARS-Cov-2, and the disease it causes is COVID-19) was spreading around the world. Wuhan, China, where it started, was on lockdown, the World Health Organization had declared a "global crisis," and the disease had spread to France, South Korea, Iran, the United States, and elsewhere.

I was following all of this closely, and while expert opinion varied, I was alarmed by most of the projections of the likely speed and extent of the spread and of the rate of hospitalization and death. And I was especially grateful that evening that I could gather with our church community at Hollywood Pres, go forward to receive ashes, and hear Pastor Tim's words, the same words we hear each Ash Wednesday: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

This is a truth the church proclaims, not because it's comforting but because it's true — death comes for us all — and because it's important how we respond to this truth. We mourn suffering and death; we seek to relieve suffering and save lives. But we know that even a pandemic doesn't change our basic predicament, and we should respond to a pandemic as we always respond to the certainty suffering and death — with repentance, mercy, and hope.

Death and contagion aren't new to humanity, or to the church. Disease was common in the crowded, dirty cities of the Roman Empire, and outbreaks of plague (perhaps smallpox) in the second and third century led to the deaths of perhaps more than a quarter of the population. Things were much the same, or worse, in the medieval era, with the bubonic plague (the "Black Death") killing about a third of Europeans, or more than 23 million people. Christians have responded to these tragedies, sometimes by acting as God's people, protecting the sick and the vulnerable, while at other times acting in ways that should horrify and grieve us. Either way, we can learn from their examples.

One common response to suffering and death is blame, and as [sociologist Donald Black points out](#), the more extensive the suffering is, the more extensive the blame: "Whereas a single death might be blamed on a single individual (such as a witch or sorcerer), many deaths might be blamed on an entire group (such as another tribe or nation)." In the aftermath of the Black Death in fourteenth-century Europe, in towns throughout Europe, Christians [massacred whole communities of Jews](#), whom they falsely accused of deliberately spreading the disease. Outbreaks of the plague in later centuries led to the blame of Scots by the English, Protestants by Catholics, and socially marginal people such as gravediggers and vagrants by those who with a higher social standing.

Another response, while flawed, was closer to the mark, at least in its recognition of our need for repentance. The [Flagellants](#) believed the plague was divine punishment and that the remedy for it was penance. Penance meant beating themselves publicly as atonement, and tens of thousands joined traveling groups, going from town to town, practicing self-flagellation and recruiting others to do so. This didn't end the plague, but [sociologist Rodney Stark says](#) that the Flagellants "did often have rather pronounced moral effects on communities through which they passed, as locals became stricken with guilt: adulterers made public confessions; thieves returned stolen goods."

Horrifying and flawed reactions abound, but so do selfless acts of mercy. In the plagues of second- and third-century Rome, the pagans, quite rationally worried about contagion, would abandon the ill, often by throwing them into the streets and letting them die. Christians refused to abandon the sick, and though treating them was risky, it enabled many of the sick to recover. "What went on during the epidemics," [Stark says](#), "was only an intensification of what went on every day among Christians. Because theirs were communities of mercy and self-help, Christians did have longer, better lives."

Today we face COVID-19, and we're uncertain what will happen. The death rates won't compare to the plagues of the second, third, or fourteenth centuries, but the scenarios are sobering, and some are catastrophic by modern standards. We should take care in our response, though. This means not being drawn into the anger and blame that have already started and will certainly follow. We may need to hold the people in power responsible for their missteps, but given how easily conspiracies, false accusations, hatred, and violence arise after these situations, we should be skeptical of our ability to get the blame right.

Repentance is a better option. Like the Flagellants, we can use the opportunity to reflect on our own sins, to acknowledge our faults and change our ways. We might practice some kind of self-denial, as we often do during Lent, and particularly at this time when we're asked to deny ourselves so many things for the good of others. Rather than give up something like chocolate or alcohol, we might make [social distancing](#) our Lenten discipline. But we also don't want to repeat the errors of the Flagellants. When we acknowledge our faults, it's not because we hope it will end the pandemic, and when we discipline ourselves, it's not because we're hoping to atone for our own sins.

We also want to respond by practicing mercy, like the Roman Christians did. We can't abandon those who are marginalized, sick, suffering, or dying. This means resisting those who would say it's only the weak, sick, and elderly who die from the virus, and the rest of us shouldn't worry. And for many of us it might mean putting ourselves at risk. What it means for most of us right now, though, is staying inside and interacting much less with others. It can seem counterintuitive, that loving people means staying away from them, but we respond in love based on the circumstances we're in, and based on our knowledge and abilities, and the nature of this virus and the danger of overrunning hospitals means that for now, that's what we do. This is a challenge, and it means we must find other ways of [connecting to one another and serving one another](#).

We're fortunate to live in a world where scientific advances — vaccines, hygiene, antibiotics — have reduced suffering and extended lifespans to an extent our forebears couldn't have imagined. We're fortunate that we're not in a world where the sick are tossed in the streets, and we're fortunate for the knowledge and technology that allow us to address the COVID-19 threat in a way that's never been possible for any other pandemic. Christians should join this effort, and we should be leaders in showing how to do it with love and mercy.

These will be hard times for a lot of people, maybe hard times for us all eventually. We may grieve, but we shouldn't "grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Just as we do on Ash Wednesday, we face the fact of death, but we also look beyond it. We receive ashes to remind us we're dust, but the ashes are in the shape of the cross, reminding us we belong to Christ. Eventually each of us will return to dust, but that's not the final word.

Further Reading

Black, Donald. 2011. *Moral Time*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Stark, Rodney. *The Triumph of Christianity*. New York: HarperCollins.

Stark, Rodney. 2003. *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.