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Pastoral response to the coronavirus

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*Larry Hackman*

*by Larry Hackman  
Executive Pastor, Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church  
Gig Harbor, Washington*

In AD 251, a plague struck the Roman Empire. We now believe it was measles, but then it was a devastating, mysterious illness that seemingly struck at random and ravaged the population. No one knew why or how the disease spread, so fear spread thick. It was recorded that five thousand people were dying every day just in the city of Rome.

In the modern age, disease is not so mysterious. But it’s incredible how much the human spirit remains the same. Much like thousands of years ago, the response to the threat of a pandemic is fear and isolation. We heard Sunday of those who did not attend worship for fear of being exposed to a virus, when there’s no reason to believe it’s within the general population. Costco ran out of water and toilet paper. We cannot turn on the news without hearing of the coronavirus. I am chagrined to find that Christians are among those who are falling prey to the rising panic.

But in AD 251, Christians were the one segment of the population who fared much better than any other. The average Roman, believing that the plague was the judgment of the gods, would, as Dionysius recorded, “[push] the sufferer away, and [flee] from their dearest…hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease.” Thucydides reports that many “were afraid to visit one another…they died with no one to look after them; indeed there were many houses in which all the inhabitants perished through lack of any attention.”

Christians responded differently. Trusting in God’s promises of eternal life, they turned to care for the sickest. The ironic result is that the mortality rate of Christians was significantly lower because their care for one another gave a chance for the measles sufferer to recuperate, whereas those who isolated would inevitably perish from neglect even if they survived the ravages of the disease. Because they did not fear death, the Christians lived.

Are Christians responding any differently to the news of coronavirus than the average person? If Costco is any indication, then the Christian fears death as much as anybody else does nowadays. Where is our peace? Where is our selflessness? Have we no assurance in the face of the unknown?

I am not advocating we abandon common sense. Obviously, as you see in our list of ways we are addressing the coronavirus below, we will do what we should to halt the spread of disease. But I am asking you to give yourself a gut check. If you call yourself a follower of Jesus and COVID-19 strikes fear in your heart, ask yourself why? What does that say about your perspective on life and its purpose? What does that say about where you place your hope and assurance?

For the early Christians, Jesus loomed large in their vision. They trusted that Jesus embraced them in love, even as they suffered. They loved others and embraced them in love, even as they suffered. They trusted that Jesus is King and thus no twist and turn of history was a surprise to him. They trusted that death did not have the last word because Jesus had defeated it, and that their destiny was with him eternally. If Jesus, in all his beauty, wisdom, and grace, does not capture our hearts like he did theirs, then our hearts will be captured by fear.

The annals of history show, time and again, that the way of Jesus, of self-giving and sacrifice, is not a pie-in-the-sky philosophy that has no bearing in life. It’s actually the best, most practical way to live. Society functions best when we consider the needs of others above our own; it unravels when we seek first our needs. We only need to look at the example of our early brothers and sisters to see this.

I pray that the coronavirus advances no further, but should it continue its advance will Christians differentiate ourselves from the rest of the world in our response? Will we be the voice of peace in the midst of panic? Will we be the ones who serve one another and share resources, or will we horde and isolate? Will we have hope when others despair? Our response will not only be a matter of the soul, it may very well be what makes a difference in our communities.

***How we’re addressing the coronavirus outbreak***

Some of you have been asking about Chapel Hill’s plans in light of the recent news about coronavirus (or COVID-19). We wanted to share with you that we are taking great care to keep our congregation safe.

We are following guidelines recommended by the State and County Health Departments here at Chapel Hill:

* If you are sick and have experienced symptoms such as a fever, cough, or body aches in the past 48 hours, we ask that you please stay home. Take care of your health (and the health of those around you) by resting and recovering until you are symptom-free.
* Prevention is the best medicine! Practice good personal habits, such as washing hands frequently; avoiding touching your eyes, nose, and mouth; covering coughs and sneezes; and cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces.
* We are taking extra caution and care in keeping our facilities clean and disinfected. Our building surfaces are cleaned daily and we are committed to keeping high-touch surfaces sanitized. Additionally, you will find hand sanitizing stations placed around the facilities for your use.
* We are closely monitoring the CDC, DOH, and Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department sites and will follow their lead should further steps need to be taken. The DOH has not advised taking any special precautions beyond what is normally recommended at this time.

These are a lot of common-sense measures we can take that go a long way toward preventing the spread of disease. As things develop, we’re also considering how we do things like greeting and communion in ways that don’t hinder our worship, but still keep us healthy. We’ll continue to keep you informed if there are any significant changes

*This article was originally posted on March 3 on the blog of Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church at*[*www.chapelhillpc.org/chapel-hill-blog/pastoral-response-to-the-coronavirus*](http://www.chapelhillpc.org/chapel-hill-blog/pastoral-response-to-the-coronavirus)*.*

Guidelines for a Coronavirus Communications Plan for churches is available at [www.epc.org/files/coronaviruscommunicationsplanguidelines](http://www.epc.org/files/coronaviruscommunicationsplanguidelines)