

Covid-19

The coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic is causing extraordinary disruption to our communities, our nation, and our world. To date, there have been 181,300 reported cases with over 7,000 deaths worldwide. Countries are closing their borders, stock markets are collapsing, public gatherings are banned, and people are fighting in supermarket aisles over toilet paper. This is an unprecedented health emergency. Covid-19 is highly contagious and represents a real danger, especially for the most vulnerable.

A theological response

How, as Christians, might we respond? This is no time for blasé attitudes towards government requests for social hygiene practices. But nor is it time to let fear overwhelm us. As Christians, we worship a God who is sovereign, a God who is present, and a God who is compassionate.

1. God is sovereign

In the book of Revelation the apostle John writes to Christian communities who are facing chaotic and troubling events. Amidst the chaos, his readers are reminded that pestilence, disease and evil do not have their own independent authority apart from God. These forces do not range freely; their authority is subject to divine restraint. In John's vision these plagues are given power over a quarter of the earth, and no more (Rev 6:8). They are allowed to defile a third of the sea, and no more (Rev 8:7-11). They are not permitted to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree (Rev 9:4). John reassures his readers that even though these plagues appear to be chaotic and destructive, and deeply troubling, they are not beyond God's sovereign rule. Covid-19 is a serious pandemic that presents a serious threat to humanity. As people of faith, however, we need not fear because we know that Covid-19 is not the final word. God alone has the final word. He is sovereign. And he is lovingly directing the creation to his intended purposes.

2. God is with us

With increasing restrictions on personal interactions to prevent the spread of Covid-19, many people are feeling isolated and alone. Others wonder where God is in all of this. Whatever unfolds, we can be assured that the God we worship is the God who promises to be with us. The triune God is a covenantal God whose commitment to his creation culminates in Christ's incarnation and refusal to let us go. The God that we worship does not stand aloof from the troubles of the world. Rather, he remains in loving relationship with his world through the Son and by the Spirit. Whatever the effects of viruses, disease, or evil, the incarnation reminds us that humanity and creation are of supreme importance to God. The very heart of the Christian message is that God does not choose to be God without us, no matter what the cost. In love, God draws near to us, shares in our circumstances, suffers with us and gives himself for us and our redemption. We do not face an unpredictable world alone. God is with us in redeeming love.

3. God is merciful

Trusting the promises that God is sovereign, and that God is with us, enables people of faith to care instead of fear. Throughout history, this has marked the church at its best. In his study of *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark highlights the committed love of the early Christians who nursed and cared for their sick neighbours during outbreaks of disease and epidemics. This sacrificial love was an important contributor to the growth of the early church. During the epidemics and their aftermath, Christians outloved, outstayed, and outlived the mainstream of Roman society. In the face of mass disease, the capricious Roman deities could not be roused, and the sick and dying were left to their fate. Where many fled the cities and deserted their ailing loved ones, Christian leaders encouraged their communities to outstay, outpray, outlove, and outcare the wider society. Unlike the pagan deities, Christians believed that God was merciful and caring, and their trust in God amidst disease schooled them in the ways of God's care and mercy. The threat of illness and death did not induce fear, but care. Many of the sick survived and they owed their survival to Christian care which piqued their interest in this God of care and mercy.

Keeping these things in mind – that God is sovereign and close and compassionate – enables us to care for those around us. How might we, I wonder, reflect the mercy and love of God during such a time of national and global crisis?

These are extraordinary times. My prayer is that our response will be marked by deep trust in God and loving care for those who are most vulnerable to infection. At the beginning of this year, we chose Psalm 121 as our theme for Carey's worship life. May it bring you peace and hope as you trust in the One who is sovereign and close and compassionate:

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?
² My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.
³ He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;
⁴ indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
⁵ The Lord watches over you—
the Lord is your shade at your right hand;
⁶ the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.
⁷ The Lord will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;
⁸ the Lord will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.

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