

An Epistle to the Church, The Bible and Epidemiology

— A Homily —

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As bishop of the Eleventh Episcopal District, and now Senior Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, I have been asked to add my thoughts to the mix of voices being heard relative to the impact of COVID-19, the coronavirus outbreak, on the Church at large, and our church community in particular.

Governments and health agencies have issued mandates about hygiene and healthy personal habits, like the following:

- Washing your hands regularly for 20 seconds, with soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a disposable tissue or flexed elbow when you cough or sneeze.
- Avoid close contact (3 feet) with people who are unwell.
- Stay home and self-isolate from others in the household if you feel unwell.

These government and health agencies have also advised us about the number of people who can safely and legally congregate in public spaces. Such spaces have included restaurants, bars, theaters and gymnasiums. In Florida, the new mandated number is ten (10). Some pastors have asked for exemptions for their churches, citing both spiritual and financial reasons for remaining open. They argue, "If there was ever a time churches should remain open it would be in a crisis that registers as a pandemic." The self-serving argument continues, "If the people grow accustomed to not attending services, we may never get them back!"

It is my thinking that every crisis, even one of this magnitude, provides an opportunity for something creative, an opportunity for reinvention. This just may be the time for the Church to be the Church, not merely to save itself as an institution but a novel way to recreate community as the Church. The church has been famous for saying, "Trouble don't last always." As painful and disruptive as it may be, this season shall also pass. We will come forth stronger, wiser, and technologically more savvy and prepared for the next big challenge to shake the cultural foundations.

The pandemic is real. As of this morning, 340,408 people have been infected. People are dying; 14,611 people worldwide. Families are lined up in steady procession behind funeral biers en route to burial grounds on several continents. Try convincing these grieving family members that COVID-19 is a hoax, as some are wont to believe (including some pastors). The virus cares nothing about the need for having a passport at the border. It will not respect the protocol for obtaining a visa. It leaps oceans and skips from continent to continent. It is indiscriminate about who it attacks: The virus cares nothing about our titles. It claims among its victims persons with celebrity bona fides: movie stars, NBA players, an NFL head coach, rank and file citizens, children, members of the House of Representatives, at least one United States senator.

Irony of ironies, it is the Bible that begs to be heard in this modern discussion about public health. I continue to be blessed and inspired in my reading of the Bible — even in these very fluid and uncertain times. The Bible refuses to be left in the dusty basement of a university library, or in the attic of grandparents' home in the country. For a book to be as old as it is, it can be surprisingly modern, even scientific, in its own ancient way of speaking.

Consider, for example, the precautions Moses took to prevent the spread of infection in his day without any formal understanding of microorganisms, viruses, or elementary epidemiology. And what is epidemiology? It is that branch of medicine which deals with the incidence, the spread, and possible control of diseases. Yet, in leading the people of Israel on their 40-year Liberation March to the Promised Land, it was Moses who called for “social distancing,” “quarantines,” and “isolating” members of the community in order to protect and preserve public health — a verse or two that could have been composed by senior members of the CDC.

In recent days, I have preached about an apparatus constructed in the wilderness that is still in use as a symbol after all of these centuries: the Caduceus or the Rod of Asclepius. These symbols are still worn by certain medical personnel. Though disputed and ignored by some academics, the symbol (a serpent on a pole) had its beginning in the Torah. You will see a version of these symbols somewhere mounted in the office of your physician or in your local hospital. One day while preaching, Jesus recited a text from Numbers 21:4-9, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness....” (John 3:14). Those who looked upon the symbol (the serpent coiled on the brass pole) were immunized. I think it is a wink at the introduction to vaccinations and immunization, as science and humankind progressed together. I am not suggesting that this scientific; I am suggesting that it is an evolutionary concept that had its genesis in Theology.

So, here we are at this critical juncture in not only the history of the Church, but the history of the world. Richard Allen, the revered founder of the AME Church, came to terms with the Yellow Fever epidemic in Philadelphia that claimed the lives of 5000 people. Bishop Allen and the congregants of Bethel Church ministered to the city with the protocols for public health available to them in 1793.

Today, in the spirit of our great faith — the best of modern science and the power of fervent prayer — we would do well to observe every precaution to preserve the health of the community. “Love your neighbor” is what Jesus commanded. It’s reasonable and intelligent for days when we might personally have the ability to contribute to flattening the curve of new infections. The response of some has been to go out and purchase a gun. (Not so surprisingly, gun sales have gone up since the pandemic was announced).

As the Church, however, we will do the right thing, not by coercion of a marshal mandate enforced by an officer of the government, but by moral suasion; for the good of the order. We are motivated by the unfathomable grace of God, our love for humanity, and believing that it is right to do right. It is reasonable and intelligent.

As it was for Israel in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, the reasons for the stringent and inconvenient precautions were always about the greater good: preserving the health of the nation, that the nation of people might always be sustained at its optimal best.

When we have come through this (and we will), our prayer life ought be enhanced. Our vision for the Church ought be enlarged. Our definition of neighbor ought be expanded. And we will know a whole lot more about epidemiology and theology — that is, a whole lot more about our God.