

**“God and the Pandemic”**  
**Acts 11:27-30; Romans 8:22-28**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells**

This morning I want to take a few minutes to talk about the number one thing that is affecting our lives right now: the COVID-19 pandemic. We’ve been living through this modern-day plague since March when the virus began spreading rapidly and is now in every state and most every county in the nation. I don’t have to say much about how this disease has changed our lives. We know that we are living through the most significant challenge to our way of life since the Second World War.

And we’ve been here before in human history.

- The ancient world suffered from occasional, and occasionally devastating, plagues that killed tens of thousands.
- The bubonic plague in the 14<sup>th</sup> century wiped out an estimated one-third of the population of Europe.
- The Influenza pandemic of 1918-1919 created upheavals and restrictions similar to what we are going through right now. In that pandemic, the United States lost about 670,000 people to the so-called “Spanish Influenza,” which those who have studied that disease’s progression will tell you more likely started in Kansas than Catalonia.

By the time you listen to this message, the United States will be closing in on 218,000 deaths from COVID-19, and about 7.7 million people with confirmed cases. Sadly, there will be many more infections, and more deaths, before it is over, and no one can say when that will be.

What are we to make of all this? What are we to say when people ask where is God in the midst of this tragedy? And, as people of faith, how do we respond to the pandemic?

**First off, let’s deal with explanations for the pandemic. Why is this happening?**

By now, I’m sure you’ve heard some Christians explain the pandemic by attributing it to one of two things: it’s God’s punishment for sin, or it’s a sign of the second coming. These explanations have been offered before for catastrophes such as the HIV/AIDs epidemic in the 1980s, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the earthquake in Haiti in 2011. God does not punish people by earthquake, disease, or fire. These are naturally occurring events that are part of the design of this world we live in.

- Earthquakes result from shifts in the massive plates of land the continents sit on.
- Microbes evolve and become more deadly and more easily transmissible.
- Forest fires happen by lightning strikes or manmade causes—but, take note, human beings can cause and contribute to natural disasters. The current round of fires we are seeing out west are made worse because of climate change caused by human beings...there’s more to say on this, but that’s a topic for another time.

As far as a sign of the Second Coming of Christ—another popular explanation—people have tried again and again to predict when Jesus will return to usher in God’s complete reign. I really don’t give this much thought because Jesus had the best word on the subject: “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matthew 24:36). Our task in life is not to worry about when Jesus will return; our task is to live in such a way, the Jesus way, so that we are ready whenever He returns.

The Coronavirus pandemic is due neither to sin nor is it a sign; it is part of living in a world that God made to be beautiful and life sustaining, but also occasionally dangerous. Pandemics, like other naturally occurring phenomena, are part of the cost of living in a world designed to support life. God does not inflict pandemics, or any of the other natural disaster on us. God allows them and does not intervene, and that is one of the mysteries about God for which we will not have a satisfactory answer this side of heaven. But when bad things happen to good people, like the pandemic, there are some things we can do in response.

**To begin with, we lament.**

All of us have lost something in this pandemic. We may not have lost a loved one, but we are grieving the loss of what was our normal pattern for living. The time of lament we experienced earlier in this service follows the pattern for the human response to tragedy. We need to take time to grieve. Make time to lament the things that were supposed to be, but could not, because of this pandemic. Understand that grief is a natural emotion, and we are right to be saddened by the things we have lost or have not been able to do.

## **And then, look forward with hope.**

There is a time to lament what we lose, but we do not dwell there. We have it on good authority that we are not alone in our grief—God is with us. In fact, it's not too much to say that God grieves with us and God gives us hope for the future, a future where new life emerges from the old.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus arrived at the home of his friend Lazarus four days after Lazarus died. The sisters of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, met Jesus as he approached the grave containing the body of his friend.

“Jesus wept.”

He mourned the death of Lazarus.

And then, Jesus looked ahead in hope.

He prayed to God the Father.

And Lazarus came out of the grave, alive again. (John 11)

“Jesus wept” is the shortest passage in the Bible.

It also helps answer the question, “Where is God when we are grieving?” God is with us. God grieves with us.

And then God does something new. Life emerges out of death. We look forward to the future with hope because God offers us new life out of old. The last part of our response to the pandemic (or any other disaster, for that matter), is this:

### **Don't ask why, ask what next?**

Whether you are a person of faith, no faith, or unsure about it all, the “why” questions is the one that comes most quickly to mind. We want to know cause and effect, why is this happening to us? But “why” may not be the most important question to have answered.

In the reading from Acts 11, the followers of Jesus were moving out from Jerusalem because they were being persecuted by the religious authorities. Antioch, in Syria, was one of the cities they went to, and the church there was growing fast. In fact, Antioch was the place where the followers of Jesus were first referred to as “Christians.”

Prophets from Jerusalem came to Antioch. One of them prophesied there would be a terrible famine, and we are told that took place during the reign of the Emperor Claudius, probably in the mid 40s AD.

N.T. Wright, a prolific writer and New Testament scholar, noted that when the Christians of Antioch learned of the coming famine, they did not call it God's punishment for sin, and they did not claim it was a sign of the Second Coming.

Instead, they asked three questions:

- Who will be at special risk when it happens?
- What can we do to help?
- Who shall we send?<sup>1</sup>

The ones at risk were the Christians living in Judea. The Antioch church could help by collecting money. They sent the elders Barnabas and Saul.

When tragedies occur, the most important question to answer is not why but what next. And this story points up something important about how God works in the world: God works through people. God has always wanted to work through people. That was God's whole point in creating humankind in the first place, so that God would have agents of care (sometimes we call them stewards), agents of hope, agents of healing to help in God's redeeming work in the world.

One of the key passages where we see this is in John 20 where the Resurrected Jesus is with his disciples. They are still trying to overcome their disbelief that it really is Jesus, their Lord and Master, standing before them.

Jesus says to them: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Then he breathed on them (something we would not recommend at the moment) and he said: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20:21-23)

---

<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic, A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 31-33.

Christians are God's sent people. We are sent into the world to help bind up the wounds of the world because God has done the same for us.

The passage from Romans 8 gives us some keys to understanding the Christian response to disasters, this pandemic included.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:22-23)

The world is in pain and suffering, and we suffer along with it.

For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Romans 8:24-25)

Even in the midst of this suffering, we remain a people of hope, for we know in whom we believe—Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who took upon himself the sins and suffering of the world, so that we might have a new hope, in new life.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:26-27)

What are Christians to do in a pandemic?

**We pray.**

Even when our prayer comes out as an inarticulate groaning, we are to pray; because it is at that very point that the Holy Spirit prays with us. N.T. Wright observes that as God's praying children, we are called to be at the point where the world is in pain. Even though we are caught up in the same groaning, we need to pray and allow the Spirit to pray with and through us the pain, the loss, the grief, and the hope of the world.<sup>2</sup> What else do Christians do in a pandemic?

**We go.**

We go, as we are able and with safety in mind, to bear with others the suffering and to bring help and healing. Christians have been doing this kind of helping and healing work for centuries.

- Many hospitals today owe their existence to the church for their founding and continued backing.
- The same is true for many schools and universities which were started by churches because Christians have long understood the importance of education.

Today, Christians are joined in these helping/healing ways by people of other faiths and people of no faith—and that is good news. But the point is: we go, as we are able, as God has equipped us, to show God's love to those in need.

Throughout the pandemic, we do not lose heart. Jesus said: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the Age."

- Whatever we go through, Jesus is there.
- Whatever suffering we experience, Jesus is with us.
- Whatever help we can offer, Jesus enables us.

What can we do now? We can continue to lament with those who grieve.

We can also help—and we have helped by:

- Giving food to the Food Bank, when there was need.
- Checking in on neighbors.
- Running errands for others.
- And praying healing for the sick, strength for the helpers, and an end to the pandemic.

These are the things that love does. Jesus modeled for us the love of God that came among human beings, that healed and made whole, and that forgave and made new. The ultimate sign of love was the Cross on which Jesus died: this is love poured out for the sins and sorrows of the world.

There's a story I want to share with you about love. I found it on Facebook. It concerns the response of young children to the question: "What does love mean?" Their responses were both insightful and precious, like

---

<sup>2</sup> 40.

the little girl who said: “Love is when Mommy gives Daddy the best piece of chicken.” Or the little boy who responded: “When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth.” These sayings show that children, even at a young age, get what love means by watching the people around them. (That’s a good thing for us to remember: our children are watching).

But for me, it is the following comment that tells us what love means for anyone who suffers:

A four-year-old boy had an elderly next-door neighbor who recently lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry, the little boy went into the old gentleman’s yard, climbed onto his lap, and just sat there. Later, when his mother asked what he had said to the neighbor, the little boy said, “Nothing, I just helped him cry.”

Sometimes, it is enough to help someone cry. For in doing so, grief that is shared becomes hope for the world. “Faith, hope, and love abide,” wrote the Apostle Paul, “these three. But the greatest of these is love” (Romans 13:13).

Whatever you do during the pandemic, beloved, remember to love. Find ways to love yourself, and others. And remember the love of Jesus Christ for you, the love that bears all things, even a pandemic. Amen.