

Reaching Out in Faith During the Double Epidemic

A double epidemic has struck our nation at this time. The first is the coronavirus epidemic and the second is an economic epidemic with massive unemployment. As a result, many are being over-whelmed by the third epidemic of **fear**. Like so many plagues earlier in Christian history there is no vaccine or antibiotic that can save us. So how should we respond and still be true to Jesus's most famous teachings. *“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”* (Matt. 7:12): *“Love your neighbor as yourself”* (Matt. 22:39): *Greater love has no man than this, that he should lay down his life for his friends* (John 15:13).

“When People feel uncertain, they tend to focus on things that bring them certainty,” says Uma Karmarkar, a neuro-economist at the University of California ó San Diego. *“Most of us don't have the ability to make new vaccines or enact new policies, but the one action that we can control, that feels like we are doing something is to stock up supplies. It's called panic buying. Grabbing all the toilet paper you can get your hands on. Food, hand sanitizer, anything people can get their hands on even if they don't need it. It's grab and go, uncertain of the future and the fear of getting infected.”*

In the midst of the panic buying resulting from the fear of the coronavirus and the present economic conditions resulting, can anyone hear the words of Jesus crying out of, *“Fear Not”* and *“Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.”*

Historians point out that the terrible Antonine Plague of the second century, which might have killed 25% of the population of the Roman Empire, led to the spread of Christianity. This was a result of Christians caring for the sick through the love of Christ. It was noted by the church historian Pontianus how Christians did *“good to all men, not merely to the household of faith.”*

In 1349 the Black Plague spread to Norway and within a year killed a third of the population. Later plagues reduced the population to half by 1400. The religious sociologist Rodney Stark claims that death rates in cities with Christian communities may have been just half of what other cities experienced.

It has been the Holy Spirit working through the word of God that has sustained and strengthened, the Christian community in the midst of the plagues, economic depressions, and other tragedies in the past. In John 14:1 Jesus tells us, *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in Me.”* Deut. 20:3,4 declares, *“Remember the word of the Lord. Do not be fainthearted or afraid; do not be terrified or give way to panic before them. For the Lord your God is the one who goes with you.”*

In 1527, when the bubonic plague hit Wittenberg, Germany, Martin Luther refused to flee the city and protect himself. Instead he stayed and ministered to the sick. This cost his daughter Elizabeth her life.

Luther wrote in the midst of the plague a tract entitled, *“Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague”*. In it he wrote, *“I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me, however I shall not avoid place or person, but will go freely as stated above. See this is such a God – fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God.”*

The New Life Evangelistic Center team is implementing a similar balance during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. As they ask for God’s protection, and practice protective hygiene and distancing practices, the New Life first responders are on the front lines directly assisting those who have no home in which they can self-quarantine. This direct assistance includes the provision of food, shelter, hygiene kits, masks, water, and spiritual support.

The staff at New Life Evangelistic Center believe the word of God. They accept it as fact when Psalm 91:5 declares, *“You shall not be afraid of the terror by night; nor of the terror that flies by day; nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness, nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday. A thousand may fall at your side, and then thousand at your right hand, but it shall not come near you.”*

The New Life Evangelistic Center staff and the partners who support their work have chosen to live in the freedom God has provided through Jesus Christ and not in a spirit of fear or unbelief.

The book of Philippians is a book just packed with directives for experiencing freedom from fear. One very important directive stressed in the book of Philippians is for us to put our minds in the right place. Instead of letting the crazy tapes of negativism, hopelessness, and fear dominate our thinking, let us determine now that we are going to follow the directives found in the Word of God.

In Philippians 4:4-8 we are told to, *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things”.*

My friend Elliott Davis, anchorman on Fox 2 news released the following at 11:29 am on April 4, 2020.

“Right now, our nation is in trouble. We are fighting an enemy such as we’ve never seen. It is an enemy straight from the pits of hell that’s ravaging the world, our county and our area and leaving this terrible destruction in it’s wake.”

“I know I’ve painted a grim picture. But I know in my life that God shows up when it’s darkest, and it’s pretty dark right now. The nation is frightened and no one is sure what to do to stop this Coronavirus menace and so we are trying everything we can.

We must pray for all of our Government leaders who are making difficult decisions. But just like with Job in the Bible, when it was darkest Job’s faith was strongest. As my former Pastor Mike Jones used to say, that’s when God shows up and when he shows up, he shows out. The crisis for Job passed and God healed Job and healed the land and restored him. That same God is on the throne right now and can also heal this land and rid us of this awful plague.

No matter what, I put my money on Jesus whose more powerful than Coronavirus.

Just like in the darkest days of World War Two the nation sent up prayers which ultimately were answered. I believe that God is still in charge. He is the God that I love and praise and the one I believe will see us thru this crisis. As I say so often. I trust the Lord and I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Just wanted to share my thought as we all work to weather this storm. We will overcome!!”

I agree with Elliott that Jesus is more powerful than the coronavirus. Now we are given a choice of whether or not we will lay in our beds at night unable to sleep as fear of the coronavirus haunts us, or will we receive the promises of God’s Word which tells us, *“When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being snared”* (Proverbs 3:24-26).

It is so easy for fear to wrap its snarling hands around us until we find ourselves suffocating in worry, anxiety and fear. In the middle of the storms of life, Jesus is asking us the same thing He did His disciples in Mark 4:40, *“Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”*. When we are filled with fear there is no room for faith.

Chris Aaron asks this question in his essay entitled, *“We are the Light of the World”*. *“Throughout the history of the Church, there have been many crises that this world has suffered through. From the outset of our faith, the Church went through many brutal trials and overcame them all. The martyrdom of saints is often the breeding ground for the salvation of many. Throughout Church history, the trials did not cease or diminish but continued to strengthen the church.”*

“The story of the Christian church is not one of blessed peace and plenty, but of hardship, toil, and pain. Even before COVID-19, there were thousands of brothers and sisters in Christ being persecuted for their faith on a daily basis. In countries where the persecution and suffering seem most severe, we hear testimony after testimony of radical miracles and salvation experiences. Why does the church seem to thrive when it physically suffers? What does COVID-19 expose within the church in the United States and Europe? During times of trial, the church is called to witness to the nations as a light in dark places.”

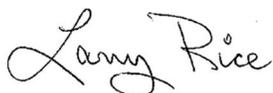
The hour has come for us to turn our hearts toward God and step out in faith, radically helping those in need. James declares, *“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?”*

In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action is dead. *“But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?”* (James 2:14-20).

Faith demonstrated through deeds of love will be the result when we truly receive Jesus as our Lord and Savior and then yields daily to Him in prayer.

Without such, fear will creep back into our lives and paralyze us when it comes to helping the poor and the homeless. How critical it is that each one of us during this coronavirus crisis receive Jesus, pray without ceasing and let His love flow through us.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Larry Rice".

Larry Rice