

The Coronavirus Opportunity

Trinity Cathedral, Pittsburgh, 22 March 2020

Psalm 23, the psalm appointed for today, has a place in the Christian life unequalled by any other passage of Scripture. Many of us were taught to recite it by heart as children. My wife and I taught it to our children, and she would recite it with them when they were having one of those nights when they were too frightened to fall asleep. There could hardly be a more opportune time to read this psalm: the world is in crisis, people are filled with fear, so much so that most of the churches in which it would have been read are closed—no better time for this classic antidote to fear.

Antidotes are of two kinds: some treat our symptoms while we are waiting for the cause to disappear, others actually deal with the cause. This psalm works in both these ways.

The most obvious symptom today is fear. Some people are displaying it, some people are disguising it, but in some degree or other, all of us are suffering from it. We show it in various ways: some of us freeze and can do nothing, some run around doing things to try and make what we are afraid of go away, others put on a brave face and say they can cope with it, still others put on a calm and relaxed face and say there is really nothing to cope with. Most of us experience all these in turn, or even all together. The primary danger we face is our own death, but there is so much else to fear: the death of a loved one, the loss of a job if our employer can't survive months of lost business, the loss of our savings if they're invested in the stock market, the loss of the world we've been living in—who knows what normal will be like when normal returns? Fear of the unknown is perhaps our deepest fear. Some of us are even afraid that we are approaching the end-times described in the Bible. And there is no one who can assure you that you or a loved one is not going to die, and no one can assure you that these are not the end-times. The Bible

tells us that no one can say when they will be, which means no one can say that it's not next week.

Our fear is as much of a problem as the coronavirus. In our current situation, we need to deal with the effects of the virus, and at the same time deal with our fear. Truly heroic efforts are being made to fight the virus. Doctors, nurses, orderlies— everyone who is able to keep working in our health care system is gearing up to meet this outbreak with the same hard work, long hours and ceaseless dedication that is already on display in countries where the outbreak is at its height. We can be sure that no effort, no trouble, no expense will be spared to prevent people catching the disease this virus carries, and to help those who catch it survive. Health care workers will rise to the occasion, have no doubt about it.

But our health care system cannot do much about the fear. Fear is not a symptom of the coronavirus infection; it is not caused by the infection or the risk of infection; it is a spiritual condition, not a medical one, and it must be dealt with by spiritual means. It is the spiritual community, the Christian community, it's we who must rise to this occasion. Those who have had a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ have a resource to draw on that others don't have, and we must not only use it to the full ourselves, but make it as widely available to others as the medical community is making its resources available. The New Testament tells us that even when *we are being killed all the day long, when we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered... we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For [we are] sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Neither death, nor life, nor anything else is anything to fear for those who know how much God loves them, how much God has done for them in Jesus Christ, how certain eternal life and happiness are, and we can conquer our fears, if we take a deep

breath and plunge fully into the faith we proclaim week by week.

The words of the 23rd Psalm have been a way of taking that deep breath, an antidote to fear, for thousands of years, and its words are as effective an antidote today as they have ever been. Just look at them. *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.* God won't leave us without help. He is here with us and for us now, today, whether we are in church, in hospital, or at home, because He is in our hearts. *He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.* He is taking care of us, leading us through this present darkness not just to safety but to peace and plenty with all those we love for ever and ever. We need not be afraid. We can go into the darkness with our hand in the Hand of God, which is to us better than light and safer than a known way.

He restoreth my soul. He puts us back together when the chaos of our lives seems to be tearing us to pieces. It's not just a matter of our fears being calmed; He shows that we have in Christ the resources we need to live without fear. God does not just reduce the paralysis fear causes, He gives us the courage to go about our daily lives trusting in Him rather than trusting to luck. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:* Notice that 'I will'; it's not a prediction, not a verb in the future tense, but a determination in the present tense: I choose, I am determined, not to be afraid because I trust the God described in the Bible, the God Who became man and Himself braved death, and did it for me. *For thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.*

Let me repeat that the words of this psalm, when we use them for that purpose, address not only the symptom, but the cause. The cause of our fear is not the virus, but our

helplessness, and the psalm drives home the truth that with God we are not helpless. These words not only calm our fear, they replace our fear with courage: Todd Beamer and a cell-phone operator recited the Lord's Prayer and then this psalm together over the phone on Flight 93, and after saying these words Beamer found the courage to go into the cockpit and bring down the plane that was aimed at the US Capitol Building. In the situation we find ourselves in today, there is no better resource than this psalm. Say it every day, as often as you need to for as long as you need to.

This is a crisis, but like every crisis, it is also an opportunity. It's an opportunity to show that the Christian faith is not just talk, it is something that makes a difference in the lives of those who have made it their own. It makes living with our present unknowns possible, it makes the prospect of living in a way that keeps everyone safe not only possible, but a life to embrace with courage and even joy for as long as necessary. Health care workers have been circulating a message online recently that reminds them that their work during this outbreak could be their finest hour, and they are right. It's their opportunity to show what they are capable of. It's also an opportunity to show what our faith is capable of.

I recently attended what's called Active-Shooter training, an event put on for college chaplains who might—God forbid—find themselves under attack at a religious service. The primary take-away for me was what the officer said about panic. 'Panic is contagious,' he said, 'we all know that. What you may not know is that calm is contagious, too. One person who does not lose his head can transform the whole situation, and save lives as effectively as if there were an armed policeman right there with you.' We Christians, when *we fear no evil even in the valley of the shadow of death*, can be that contagious calm among our families, our friends, and in our community. Actually it wouldn't be our finest hour, because we've done this before, and under worse circumstances: during

the third century persecutions, in some of the cities where the persecution was most severe, there were outbreaks of plague, and Christians began taking care of the sick. Everyone outside the Christian community who hadn't caught the plague was leaving their city, and leaving the sick behind, even their own family members. The Christians did not leave the city, but stayed, those still healthy taking care not only of their own sick, but taking care also of the non-Christians who had been left to die by their own families. According to one historian, writing only a few years after this, 'the actions of the Christians were talked about by everyone, and the citizens glorified the God of the Christians, and were compelled by the evidence to acknowledge that the Christians alone were truly god-fearing.'¹ It was after this that Christianity began to spread through the Roman Empire so fast that it soon became the majority religion.

In fact, living without fear of death is what Christians have been doing in less dramatic ways ever since. In a recent issue of *The Atlantic*, the director of the National Institute of Health talks about how he began his journey to faith while he was a medical student, because he met so many dying Christians who seemed not to fear death. 'One patient who suffered from advanced cardiac disease, which included almost daily episodes of crushing chest pain, came through this all with remarkable peace and was very comfortable sharing the reasons for that with me, namely her faith in Jesus. And at one point after one of those sharing moments, she looked at me in a quizzical way and said, "You have listened to me talk about my faith, but you never say anything. What do you believe?" Just very direct, very simple question, and it was like a thunderclap. Like a realization that I could not walk away from, but that was the most important question I've ever been asked.' And he

¹ Eusebius *EH IX.viii.14*, my translation. Cf Pontius, *Life of Cyprian 9f*.

later answered it by becoming a Christian himself.² Let this continue to be our finest work: to live so that non-Christians in our own time wish they had the calm, and compassion, and the courage, that they see in their Christian friends and colleagues. Let's take that deep breath and plunge deep into the faith that this psalm models for us, renewing our faith, renewing our courage, building us up as faithful witnesses to the power of Christ to strengthen, to heal, and to conquer not only the fear of death, but death itself.

Philip Wainwright

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https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/interview-francis-collins-nih/608221/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=share&fbclid=IwAR0KyAlzuc6L8V9TJNfDINg8iSBACDRUQZgpYGes5AcIcc8hNDzp-nM9_Lw