

2 Advent 2020

A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

I do enjoy history and I used to be good at memorizing important dates and historical facts. Many times, in life, we are reminded that we should learn from our past, so we don't repeat prior mistakes and bad judgement calls. Great generals have studied ancient battle plans in order to win modern wars. Governments have toppled because of lessons not learned in the ways that they deal with people and other cultures. So, I took the time to go back and research the circumstances that we now find ourselves in.

Fortunately, with the assistance of the Internet, I was able to research ancient documents from the very early days of 2020. I found an article from March, concerning Christian perspectives on dealing with COVID 19. The article is entitled: **"Removing the coronavirus mask: may this crisis reveal us as Christians"**. It was written by Mr. Ed Stetzer.

The article discusses the initial controversy about whether masks were advisable or not. Did they hurt or did they help? The World Health Organization held a briefing on March 30th and gave the following guidelines:

"Who should wear a mask:

--Those who are sick. WHO officials recommended that those infected with the COVID-19 coronavirus should wear masks to prevent spreading it to someone else.

--Those who are home caregivers for those who are sick. People caring for the sick should wear masks to protect themselves and to prevent further transmission throughout a family unit.

--Those who are frontline healthcare workers. The people most at risk from this virus are frontline health workers who are exposed to the virus "every second of every day".

Even now, we can all agree that these three groups make sense. There were mask shortages at the time, pretty much everywhere, so the thought that everyone should wear a mask was not practical and priorities had to be made. But part of this was also due to not knowing what we did not know at the time. Things changed as more data became available.

Mr. Stetzer, however, was talking about a different type of mask that we, as Christians often wear. He wrote:

"But masks have another purpose. We normally think of them as things to cover who we are — to hide or disguise what we really value. I think this virus will take off some masks— and help reveal our true selves.

And I think a whole lot of masks are about to come down.

This is not a crisis anyone wants, but I am hoping this crisis displays who Christians really are. We've launched CoronaVirusAndTheChurch.com to help, but let's face it: as things accelerate, and the masks truly fall, we will show what kind of Christians we really are. I'm ready to know". He continues:

"I believe serving and loving others as Christ himself has served us through his death and resurrection is central to our faith — even when it involves personal risk and cost. That's what I hope this crisis will reveal. One way we do that is to care for one another

— all of us, yes, but let me write to Christians for a moment because maybe we need extra reminding. Yes, social distancing is the news of the day, as it should be, however, if we end up distanced from one another, we will be worse off, not better.

The point is simple. Social distancing is necessary. Relational distancing is not. Let's seize the opportunity to check on our neighbors. Let's build a relational bridge when the virus wants to create a social moat.

During the coronavirus epidemic, we will be separated. We still have to stick together. Let's show who we really are, as Christians in our day. This is our moment" (end quote)

I'll come back to this in a bit.

There is some controversy with the Book of Isaiah as to whether one person wrote all 66 chapters or possibly three or more authors. It is centered around the Babylonian exile of the Jews. If Isaiah wrote the entire book himself, he is foretelling events that occurred many years after his death. Some scholars believe that he wrote chapters 1-39, a second author or group of authors wrote chapters 40-55, and a third author or group wrote chapters 56-66.

But either way, everyone agrees that the focus of the book, changes with Chapter 40. Chapters 1-39 warn of God's judgment, if the people place their trust in secular rulers, rather than in God. Chapters 40-55 lift up the promise of redemption for a people who are experiencing the judgment about which the prophet warned in the earlier chapters. The rest of the chapters deal with the return of the Jews to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the city and the temple.

In Chapter 40, Isaiah is writing to the Jews still in Exile where they have been for the past 50 years. Many of those who were taken by the Babylonians died in slavery far from home. God offers the promise of hope.

“Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord’s hand
double for all her sins”.

These are words of caring and love.

Isaiah offers words of hope that the Jews are soon to leave this wilderness and to come back home.

But first, there are expectations of them by God.

“A voice cries out:

‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,

and all people shall see it together,

for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Hearts must be changed and made ready for God to work miracles. The valleys of hopelessness must be raised, the hearts of stone must be melted, and the roughness of anger, hatred, and resistance must be made smooth. Then God will work her wonders.

We see a similar message by John the Baptist as he also **quotes** Isaiah. Then he says:

“The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8I have baptized you with* water; but he will baptize you with* the Holy Spirit.”

This was a message to those Jews who were living in a wilderness of separation from God. Hearts of stone had to be changed and opened to new possibilities. Jesus proclaimed a message of hope and love. Salvation was offered to those willing to seek God and to serve others.

The early Christians, hearing this message, in times of persecution, longed for hope. and to see God’s kingdom in their midst.

What does all of this mean for us in 2020? I joke about how long-ago January and February seem to be to us now. It does feel like a different world. I try to look at the bigger picture of how the pandemic is affecting people through their eyes. However, I admit that I have a lot of strong feelings when it comes to how folks are responding to the pandemic, as well as how they care for others. To be blunt, the selfishness of many, amazes me. I know that many are scared. They need to be able to take care of their families. They need a job to do that. Federal programs expire in just over three weeks.

Many are running out of money and are at risk of losing businesses and their homes.

Food insecurity is a huge issue. I understand this.

On the other hand, I usually watch the governor's news briefings on Facebook. I have to try to just listen to what she is saying. But, invariably, I end up looking at the continuous stream of comments that are scrolling by as both she and the Chief Medical Officer are talking. Some of the comments are supportive, but so many are cruel, irresponsible, and hateful. Many show no semblance of concern for anyone else but themselves. Again, I have no idea of what is in their hearts. Do they honor God or Jesus? Who knows? But I have found that being a professed Christian is not necessarily a pre-requisite for staying safe during a pandemic.

This article, from the Washington Post, came out just over 3 weeks ago:

“The complaints started to mount after a teacher who tested positive for the coronavirus had been at work mask less — working with toddlers and infants.

In fact, no one was wearing masks at Little Lambs Christian Day school, the day care at Fairlawn Christian Academy in Radford, according to Virginia Department of Health records.

But on Monday, Pastor Stephen Phillips sent a memo to parents, telling them that there was nothing to be worried about — and that they shouldn't trust federal health authorities.

“Don't allow yourself to be controlled and manipulated by media hype and government propaganda,” the pastor wrote, according to a copy obtained by The Washington Post and which is also referenced in state records. “Please do your own research!”

Not surprisingly this brought swift consequences. The state suspended the Day school's food-service permit, which Noelle Bissell, director of the New River Health District, said is the only regulatory authority health officials have over establishments that flout coronavirus restrictions.

All the school had to do to get their permit back was to follow the guidelines. But the Pastor refused and sent out this letter to parents:

"Because we have refused to adopt state mandated Covid guidelines, we have had our license to do business rescinded," Phillips wrote in a letter provided to The Post by a parent. He added: "If you are not already aware, the entire Covid pandemic has been a hoax to establish the anti-Christ Kingdom on earth." (end quote)

There have been numerous examples throughout the country of churches allowing large worship gatherings and not enforcing the wearing of masks or physical distancing. Episcopalians, in Michigan, have again paused in-person worship services due to safety concerns.

We are called as Christians, to care for those most vulnerable in society. It is what Jesus did. We may not be able to change what others do, but we can set the example. The right to worship in public, at all costs, and despite the risks to others, **may be a right**; but in my opinion, **is not** the right thing to do.

Christians are called to be Jesus in the world. This is not an easy task in the best of circumstances, let alone during a pandemic. But we are not relieved of our calling, by the pandemic either. Moments of crisis define who we are and what we believe.

There are ways for us to take care of our sisters and brothers safely, and believe it or not, we can do this while wearing a mask, doing our best to physically distance, and washing our hands frequently and often.

Like Isaiah, we need to remind others that God is still in control. There is always hope in God's promise to be with us and to walk with us always.

We need to straighten the way and soften our hearts for God to act.

In 2004, President Obama said the following:

“Do we participate in a politics of cynicism or a politics of hope? I'm not talking about blind optimism here ... No, I'm talking about something more substantial. It's the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs; the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores; the hope of a young naval lieutenant bravely patrolling the Mekong Delta; the hope of a millworker's son who dares to defy the odds; the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too. Hope in the face of difficulty, hope in the face of uncertainty, the audacity of hope: In the end, that is God's greatest gift to us, the bedrock of this nation, a belief in things not seen, a belief that there are better days ahead.”

(—Barack Obama, Speech at the Democratic National Convention, July 27, 2004.)

God promises better days through the prophet Isaiah. We see those better days in the promise of hope through Jesus.

We may not be able to be Jesus to others because only Jesus is Jesus. But we can strive to love others as Jesus loves us and through this love will come the hope of better days ahead.

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way”[c]—

3 “a voice of one calling in the wilderness,

‘Prepare the way for the Lord,

make straight paths for him.”[d]

Amen!