

John 9:1-41 & Mark 12:29-31
“Light in the Darkness”
Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 22, 2020
First Lutheran Church, Glencoe, Minn.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, *those watching on Facebook and on Cable TV:*

[Darkness of Uncertainty]

Jesus said: ***“As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world”*** (John 9:5).

Today there is much darkness of uncertainty. The health officials give us new regulations to follow daily in order to slow the spread of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19). What are we to do? Where do we turn? Do we despair? Do we hide and pray that we have enough toilet paper?

No, we turn to our Lord Jesus. In Him alone, we have light.

So, what does Jesus say? ***“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these”*** (Mark 12:29-31).

In these dark times, never forget that Jesus is here for you and me. Even though there is much uncertainty in the world today, we are certain that Jesus is still here for us for ***“[He] is the same yesterday and today and forever”*** (Hebrews 13:8).

So, Jesus gives us the light through this dark time. He reminds us that we are to always love God — since He always loves us. And, He reminds us to love our neighbor as yourself.

[Pandemics are Nothing New]

Within the past decade, we have dealt with many diseases. In 2009, we had the H1N1 Swine Flu Pandemic. In 2012, we had the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). In 2013, the Ebola epidemic in West Africa. In 2015, we had the Zika virus epidemic. Today, we have the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic.

For every disease that has come our way, thanks be to God, we have either cured or contained. We pray, that is the same with the Coronavirus.

As we all know, diseases are nothing new. Disease is a product of sin being unleashed into the world through Adam and Eve being led by Satan into eating that forbidden fruit. At the same time, God has given us minds, so we can combat disease and its chief cause, sin:

- God has given us pharmaceutical companies, pharmacists, doctors, nurses and others to keep us **temporally** healthy.
- God has given us pastors who preach His Word and administer the Sacraments to keep us **spiritually** healthy.
- God has also given us the love of our neighbor, as we lift up each person we meet in our daily vocations — boss, employee, teacher, student, shopper, or stranger we meet while pumping gas or at the grocery store.

[Luther's Letter: Whether One May Flee From A Deadly Plague]

Now, as I said, diseases and pandemics are nothing new. In fact, Martin Luther lived through a plague in the year 1527 as he was in Wittenberg, Germany.

Like today, there was much darkness of uncertainty. People were asking questions like: Should we flee from the plague?

One such man sent Luther a letter with questions on what to do during a plague. This man was Reverend Doctor Johann Hess, who served Christ's flock in Breslau.

Luther responded to his letter¹ saying:

“Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Your letter, sent to me at Wittenberg, was received some time ago. You wish to know whether it is proper for a Christian to run away from a deadly plague. I should have answered long ago, but God has for some time disciplined and scourged me so severely that I have been unable to do much reading or writing. Furthermore, it occurred to me that God, the merciful Father, has endowed you so richly with wisdom and truth in Christ that you yourself should be well qualified to decide the matter or even weightier problems in his Spirit and grace without assistance.”

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 43: Devotional Writings II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 43 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 119–38.

In other words, Luther is saying that we should all use our own best judgement during times of plagues and pandemics. But, as Luther always does, he continues for nearly twenty pages on how Christians are to respond during these trying times.

First, Luther writes of the pastoral office:

“Those who are engaged in a spiritual ministry such as preachers and pastors must likewise remain steadfast before the peril of death. We have a plain command from Christ, “A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep but the hireling sees the wolf coming and flees” (John 10:11). For when people are dying, they most need a spiritual ministry which strengthens and comforts their consciences by Word and Sacrament and in faith overcomes death.”

So, during this time, Pastor Welch and I are available here at First Lutheran Church by appointment to give you the gift of forgiveness of sins and strength for our faith in the Sacrament of Christ’s very Body and very Blood. Just give the church a call or email.

Luther also writes of our secular leaders:

“Accordingly, all those in public office such as mayors, judges, and the like are under obligation to remain. This, too, is God’s Word, which institutes secular authority and commands that town and country be ruled, protected, and preserved, as St. Paul teaches in Romans 13:4, “The governing authorities are God’s ministers for your own good.” To abandon an entire community which one has been called to govern and to leave it without official or government, exposed to all kinds of danger such as fires, murder, riots, and every imaginable disaster is a great sin. It is the kind of disaster the devil would like to instigate wherever there is no law and order.”

So, essentially, Luther is saying that pastors and public leaders are to use their best judgement, but they are never to abandon their flock or their community.

But, what about everyone else? Could others run and hide?

Yes, Abraham, Isaac, David, Elijah, and Moses all fled from death when it was possible and saved their lives. Yet, they did this without depriving their neighbors of anything, but first meeting their obligations toward them.

So, we can run and hide to save ourselves. But first, we are to care for our neighbor. We are to not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need. (Luther's explanation to the Fifth Commandment in his Small Catechism.)

Luther goes on to write:

“Anyone who forsakes his neighbor and leaves him to his misfortune, becomes a murderer in the sight of God, as St. John states in his epistles, ‘Whoever does not love his brother is a murderer,’ and again, ‘If anyone has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need [yet closes his heart against him], how does God’s love abide in him?’ (1 John 3:15, 17).

So, we are to love our neighbor as yourself. As neighbors, we look out for one another. We care for one another. We do this because Christ first cared for us for **“while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”** (Romans 5:8). **“We love because He first loved us”** (1 John 4:19).

So, if we hear that our neighbor is running short on toilet paper, we share. If we hear our neighbor is running short on soap, hand sanitizer, food, we share.

And, if you don't know your neighbor's phone number, just check our new church directory. Sometimes, all we and our neighbor needs is a simple phone call – especially since it is so easy to become isolated during this time.

As we live in this time of darkness and uncertainty, the heart of Luther's letter is this:

“Now if a deadly epidemic strikes, we should stay where we are, make our preparations, and take courage in the fact that we are mutually bound together so that we cannot desert one another or flee from one another. First, we can be sure that God’s punishment has come upon us, not only to chastise us for our sins but also to test our faith and love — our faith in that we may see and experience how we should act toward God; our love in that we may recognize how we should act toward our neighbor. I am of the opinion that all the epidemics, like any plague, are spread among the people by evil spirits who poison the air or exhale a pestilential breath which puts a deadly poison into the flesh. Nevertheless, this is God’s decree and punishment to which we must patiently submit and serve our neighbor, risking our lives in this manner as St. John teaches, ‘If Christ laid down his life for us, we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren’ (1 John 3:16).”

Now, don't forget about Satan during times like today. He loves it when we live in fear and doubt. Luther also responds to Satan's lies, writing:

“Because we know that it is the devil's game to induce such fear and dread, we should in turn minimize it, take such courage as to spite and annoy him, and send those terrors right back to him. And we should arm ourselves with this answer to the devil:

‘Get away, you devil, with your terrors! Just because you hate it, I'll spite you by going the more quickly to help my sick neighbor. I'll pay no attention to you: I've got heavy blows to use against you: the first one is that I know that helping my neighbor is a deed well-pleasing to God and all the angels; by this deed I do God's will and render true service and obedience to him...

“[Satan,] if you can terrorize, Christ can strengthen me. If you can kill, Christ can give life. If you have poison in your fangs, Christ has far greater medicine. Should not my dear Christ, with his precepts, his kindness, and all his encouragement, be more important in my spirit than you, roguish devil, with your false terrors in my weak flesh? God forbid! Get away, devil. Here is Christ and here am I, his servant in this work. Let Christ prevail! Amen.’”

[Helping Our Neighbor]

Now, as we assist our neighbor during these times, we are not to be reckless, but smart. Even during Luther's time, people haven't really changed. He writes:

“[Some people] tempt God and disregard everything which might counteract death and the plague. They disdain the use of medicines; they do not avoid places and persons infected by the plague, but lightheartedly make sport of it and wish to prove how independent they are. They say that it is God's punishment; if He wants to protect them He can do so without medicines or our carefulness. This is not trusting God, but tempting Him.”

“Some are even worse than that. They keep it secret that they have the disease and go among others in the belief that by contaminating and poisoning others they can ride themselves of the plague and so recover... I certainly believe that this is the devil's doing... The devil is never idle.”

Instead, we are to ask God mercifully to protect us as we care for our neighbor. So, how can we care for our neighbor during these times as the government tells us to only be in extremely small groups and practice social distancing?

During these times, we can easily become isolated and depressed. So, be there for each other. It may not be in person, but by phone or video chat.

As for our Divine Services, you can always watch First Lutheran Church services during this pandemic on our Facebook page and on cable access. But, when this is pandemic passes, *let us not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another* (Hebrews 10:25) as we return to corporate worship in this place.

You may be in fear, but know this: God casts out fear. You may be sick, but know this: God is the healer of souls.

Always remember: Jesus is the Light of the world and He will get us through this dark time. So, do not despair, but take courage that Jesus will never forsake His flock for He is still speaking to us in His Word. And You have seen Him each time you received His very Body and Blood at this Altar. Christ is here! He is always here — for you! Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠

To read the entire letter from Martin Luther “**Whether One May Flee From A Deadly Plague**” click:

<https://blogs.lcms.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Plague-blogLW.pdf>