



LET'S ~~NOT~~ COME TOGETHER!!

**THIS MESSAGE IS PANDEMIC RESPONSE APPROVED**

Dear Parents and Youth!

Hello Everyone! I hope you are all doing well. It's beautiful outside, and though we can't just up and go to the park, I hope you are finding some time to read, write, play, draw, or do whatever you like to do outside. I have watched a bunch on Netflix and Youtube and worked on the house a bunch. I have a new computer and lots of games to play, so I hope I can be sure to balance my time well with the big projects that I have to do, too!

Several of the states have begun discussing plans to reopen our communities. We want you to know, though, that we do not feel comfortable just yet coming back together: we're going to stick to our June target for now! And so we'll keep working on letters and zoom calls to keep in touch with you.

Remember the website! Use it for information and some fun stuff. And we'll see you on Wednesday (on Zoom!)

Everyone stay well and safe – The Youth Leadership

## **DEVOTIONAL FOR THE WEEK OF APRIL 27**

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I'm going a bit deep today, because I want to take the moment to talk about the issue of sickness.

When pandemics happen, they always raise a bunch of questions about God, specifically about why God allows pandemics to make us suffer. Sickness, even on a wide scale as this, always feels very *personal*, like it is about us and not others.

It's natural that we look for answers. Already I've heard a few times that a pandemic is a way that God punishes those of who are sinners. Or that it is a way to test our faith, as a way to suffer in order to make our faith stronger. I get why people think that, but both of these answers miss something particularly important.

The idea that God uses a pandemic to punish sinners (or *those* sinners, or *our sinful people*) is just wrong. I know that for sure because it is an old idea. If we look back at the book of Job, we find this idea pretty clearly:

So Satan went out from the place of the Lord and gave Job painful sores all over his body, from his feet to his head...When Job's three friends...heard about all the trouble that had come upon Job, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him.

When Job's friends come to him, they are convinced that he is suffering because he has sinned. The next few chapters are given to their debate: "Does God pervert justice? Does the Almighty twist what is right? When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to their just punishment...If you are pure and upright, he will rise up and restore you to your prosperous state." Even though the story of Job makes it clear that Job was blameless, it reveals the idea that sickness was one way God punished the wicked. It shows up in other stories, too: the Egyptians were made to be sick until they gave permission for the Hebrews to leave. Deuteronomy states in several places that God brings sickness upon his enemies. And kings Jeroham and Hezekiah each were made sick for their sins.

And so by the time that Jesus began his ministry, the Pharisees, and the Jews in general, believed that a sick person was one who had sinned against God. Which means that every time Jesus healed someone, he was effectively showing that he had the power to forgive sins – that he was God. It came to a head one day when Jesus healed a man who was paralyzed, in front of a group of Pharisees. He healed frequently, and his disciples did so likewise. Little by little, each healing broke down the idea that these people *deserved* to be sick – and so we know that sickness doesn't go by that rule.

The idea that sickness is a test of suffering for faith isn't very helpful, either. While not entirely wrong, it is not entirely right, either. Some people die from cancer cursing God, but some die from it blessing Him: some survive cancer feeling as though God has given them another chance, but others survive it feeling even more in control of their own lives. If sickness asks us how strong is our faith, it never leads to a very consistent answer. And it leads to a moral problem: if I am sick and dying, am I to suppose that my faith was not enough to have Him heal me? Certainly not. In the end, thinking that God sends us pandemics to improve our faith does not really comfort anyone or explain much of anything.

The question we really want to ask is why God allows bad things to happen, and sickness is included because it threatens (or leads to) death, and we Americans are very afraid of death. Science has convinced us that death is an ultimate end: there is nothing after, so we might as well seize every opportunity to stay alive as long as we can. The New Testament doesn't think that way: that's why there are so many men going so enthusiastically to a martyr's death. They know that after death comes a meeting with the father, and they do not fear it.

The answer to this question (what theologians refer to as the theodicy) is deep and complicated, and better left for another devotional. But as regards sickness, this too refers to another question that we can address here.

A virus is not very complicated. Unlike an enemy soldier or a terrorist, its purpose is not to kill us (for a virus dies when its host dies). It does not map out a strategy to eliminate us. It has a simple set of instructions to follow and when it happens to possess a certain set of abilities – to survive in the air and outside a body for several hours – that allow it to pass quickly to new hosts, it becomes a pandemic. A virus is a part of the natural world around us. We believe that God created and designed the world. We see the wind blow, the ice flow, the herds migrate. We build walls and fences to control it, but sometimes our efforts fail. The winds blow too hard, and we call it a hurricane. The ice flows too fast, and we have

an avalanche. A herd moves in panic, and we call it a stampede. And a virus passes too quickly too severely, and we have a pandemic.

The larger question is where do we fit in to a world that threatens us, a world God created? In the story of the Garden of Eden, the world was made around us to be non-threatening. When Adam and Eve stood inside it and declared by their rebellion that they would take over, they removed themselves from that original design. The design was broken: they stood outside it. And with that it became threatening: death came into the picture, and the world around us became a little harder to deal with.

We are called to find a balance: to care for God's creation and not abuse it, but neither to give up to how hard it can be to survive in it. And that stands for the virus, as well. Do not fear the pandemic, but neither should you give up to it. Be safe and keep apart, but find ways to connect (like by the Internet, by text message, by written letter even). It will pass, but also appreciate the people who are trying to make it pass faster. Help when you can, but don't help it to spread faster.

We have a tendency to improve after we suffer through some natural disaster. After earthquakes, we build stronger houses. After tornadoes, we build basements. And after a pandemic, we learn how to live a little bit better so it doesn't hit us as hard the next time.

And if this pandemic helps us in any way, it is to push us to ask questions, and by asking, to know God just a little bit better.

“Rejoice in the Lord always! The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Peace be with you all during this time of isolation. – **Dr. Rowland**



**DISNEY IN THE AGE OF CORONAVIRUS**