**Church, “We’ve” Been Here Before**

**By Aaron Syvertsen** / **April 1, 2020**

Grace Church Family,

As we get deeper into this pandemic, and the mixture of emotions and fears seems to intensify with each passing week, I wanted to share some encouragement from brothers and sisters in Christ from centuries past.

Last Fall, I mentioned in a sermon that reading history, and specifically historical biography, is something that stirs my affections for Christ.  While I never could pinpoint why, I am more convinced now than ever that reading history is a healthy form of withdrawal. It’s a withdrawal from the intensity of the current moment in such a way where I am reminded that God has never left His throne.  Don’t misread this: reading history and historical accounts ARE NOT meant to water down the current crisis with Covid-19 or struggles attached to it. My goal in reading history isn’t aimed to convince myself that this pandemic is “not that bad”, because to be honest, I do think it’s that bad.  And it’s getting worse, and I am not just hearing it from the news, I’m hearing it from friends and fellow believers who work on the front lines in the hospitals.

Rather, my goal is to be reminded and convinced again and again that God is sovereign and in control as much today as he was the day before Covid-19 infected the first person last year.  My goal is to be encouraged by the joy we have in a God who sustains, and my joy is not attached to whether or not I suffer. In fact, it’s been in times of wide-scale suffering that the church distinctly showed itself to be wise in its decisions, while bold in their faith.

So we as Christians don’t water down real suffering and crisis.  Instead, we lift up the God who has defeated the grave, by the blood of the lamb, and therefore we can live with a faith that outshines fear.  And that brings me back to history. Church, “we’ve” been here before. We can stand confidently on the Word of Truth, and by the Spirit within us, we can join fellow believers from centuries past in trusting God and doing the next thing.  I pray you are encouraged and emboldened by the brief accounts below.

**Cyprian and Dionysuis – 3rd Century**

Rodney Stark (who’s not a believer) wrote in his 1997 book, The Rise of Christianity, about the plague of 251 AD that tore through the Roman Empire.  At its peak, 5,000 people a day were dying in the city of Rome alone. During this outbreak, both Roman and Christian accounts recorded that the elites of society, including the doctors and politicians, evacuated and fled Rome.  If you had the means to get out, you did. Everyone that is, except the Christians, who were also the most persecuted people group during this time because of their faith.

Two pastors of note during this time were Cyprian and Dionysius, the latter of which wrote an Easter letter to pay tribute to the heroic reactions of fellow believers:

“Most of our brother Christians showed unbonded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Needless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy…The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom*.”*

A century later, the pagan emperor Julian was writing about the significant increase of the Christian faith within the Roman Empire, and what did he attribute it to?

“The recent Christian growth was caused by their ‘moral character, even if pretended,’ and by their ‘benevolence toward strangers and care for the graves of the dead.’” In a letter to another priest he wrote, “The impious Galileans (Christians) support not only their poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.”

So, how did Christianity go from being a persecuted, small minority movement in the Middle East to becoming a worldwide global movement? The answer is the sovereign control of God, but further, God using the witness of his church and their willingness to count the cost of compassion for other people to show the love of Jesus Christ.

**Augustan – 5th Century**

In the year 410, the unimaginable happened – the Roman Empire was overtaken by a Gothic army, bringing the beginning of the end to the most powerful empire the ancient world had ever known.

450 miles southwest of Rome, there was a city in North Africa called Hippo that was part of the Empire, and news was travelling about the invasion. The bishop of Hippo was a man named Augustine, who would remain in that post until 430 when invaders were on the brink of taking over the city.  When Augustine was told about two other bishops in neighboring cities that were recently tortured to death, he was urged to flee the city.

Augustine replied, “Let no one dream of holding our ship so cheaply, that the sailors, let alone the Captain, should desert her in time of peril.”

**Martin Luther – 16th Century**

In 1527, the Bubonic Plague was discovered in Wittenberg, Germany, the small town where Luther was based and the place where he nailed his 95 theses to the Castle Church.

This plague was highly deadly and extremely contagious, although this was before germ theory was even discovered and there was a lot less knowledge as to how it spread and how to treat it.  A friend of Luther’s wrote him asking him what guidelines he would provide people on how to respond, and Luther responded with this (and pay attention to how it speaks of the wisdom of “social distancing” as a way to love your neighbor):

You ought to think this way: “Very well, by God’s decree, the enemy has send us poison and deadly offal.  Therefore, 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.

**Richard Allen – 18th Century**

Author Ed Stetzer, in his book “Christians in the Age of Outrage”, wrote the account of Richard Allen in Philadelphia:

During the Fall of 1793, yellow fever gripped the city of Philadelphia. Historian Richard Newman writes that, “from the moment it began, the yellow fever epidemic was a public-health crisis. Thousands of citizens fled, hospitals became overwhelmed, and dead bodies rotted in homes.” Within this crisis, it was the emerging black church under the leadership of Richard Allen which entered into the suffering. Some assumed that persons of African descent were immune to Yellow Fever, and the free black community was approached to provide help. Spurned by the church they had served and slandered by others, Allen and his church served the sick when others isolated themselves for fear of catching the disease.

Despite the overt racism he faced, Allen modeled an empathetic approach to loving his neighbors. Allen and his fellow volunteers were heartbroken over the suffering of the sick. They resonated with those patients who had been cast out… Allen never lost sight of the truth: Those around him were lost and needed Jesus. His empathy informed his witness, and it is one reason why the AME grew and his name is remembered today.

**C.S. Lewis – 20th Century**

Finally, we end with C.S. Lewis, who ministered and wrote in the middle of the deadliest century in history even as “technological” advances happened all around it.  When asked about the fear of living in an age where countries and develop and release atomic bombs, and how Christians are to live, he responded with this:

In one way, we think a great deal too much of the atomic bomb. “How are we to live in an atomic age?” I am tempted to reply: “Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an age of syphilis, an age of paralysis, an age of air raids, an age of railway accidents, an age of motor accidents.

This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.

**Final Word**

The act of withdrawing from the latest updates regarding Covid-19 to read history will strengthen us to return into the current moment with a Christ-centered focus and a love your neighbor attitude.

And that leads to my final point, which is so obvious we often miss it: **the Bible is historical book.**God reveals himself through the course of a historical narrative, telling the story of God’s plan rooted in history to redeem and restore his fallen creation through Jesus Christ.  Even before you pick out books that share accounts of history, read your Bible. It will not only show you history, but it will show you the character and nature of the One who is sovereignly reigning over history.  Then it will prescribe how we can join in on the story, and how we too, like the accounts mentioned, will be literally written into history one day.

Be encouraged church.  God is on the throne, He will receive the glory, and he is inviting us to play a part.  Play it well.