

There's an elephant in the room. Its name is COVID – COVID 19. I think every person I have spoken with this week has mentioned it.

The dreaded coronavirus that is wreaking havoc worldwide is raising anxiety among us.

On the one hand, these outbreaks of viral diseases occur from time to time.

When I visit my mother's family cemetery at St. Peter's Lutheran in Hilltown, PA, there are several small gravestones – babies and young children – dated 1918. It was called the "Spanish flu", a strain of influenza that killed over 50 million people worldwide.

In my lifetime, there have been influenza pandemics in 1968 and 2009, the SARS coronavirus pandemic of 2003, and now the current SARS-2 renamed COVID-19 pandemic – Pandemic meaning it has spread or can potentially spread throughout the world.

Historically, some pandemics have been catastrophic, decimating 60% or more of whole populations. And others have generally been forgotten.

Among people of faith, the elephant COVID-19 is very much in the room.

Some say to ignore it – it will eventually go away.

Some are panicking – hoarding sanitizer and face masks and refusing to go out in public.

Some churches are cancelling services, completely excising the peace from the liturgy

and the pope has even decided to hold his public services indoors, live streaming so that the faithful can participate remotely.

Don't we wish there were a bronze serpent to look at!

Well, I am ahead of myself here. Jesus mentions the bronze serpent in his conversation with Nicodemus, so here is the back story, from Numbers 21.

*⁴ From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. **And the people became impatient on the way.** ⁵ And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food." ⁶ Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷ And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.*

Jesus says: just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

It would relieve our anxiety about COVID-19 if we could make a copy of it, look at it, and live.

But Jesus offers something even better.

Jesus knows that what there is something even more deadly than COVID-19 or any of the other pestilences we might encounter.

It is being without God.

Being without God is the emptiest existence of all.

It offers no hope, no purpose beyond surviving the moment.

Being without God is having no future to speak of.

How is it possible for anyone to be without God?

It is hard for us believers to imagine.

But there are many who refuse to believe that there is some higher authority than themselves.

And there are those who once thought there was but who no longer think so.

And there are those who know there is God, but who refuse to obey his authority – who rebel against God’s commands – and find themselves without God.

Snakebitten by their own sin.

I am reminded of an article in an advice column in which a young man wrote in because he was angry with his girlfriend. They had gotten drunk and had unprotected sex. She got pregnant. He insisted he wasn’t ready to be a father and insisted she get an abortion. She changed her mind and is planning to deliver the baby. And he is angry with her because he doesn’t want the responsibility of being a father. The columnist wisely pointed out

that his anger was misplaced – *he* chose to drink excessively, *he* chose to have unprotected sex, and therefore is responsible for the consequences that come of such choices. If he is angry, it should be at himself for those choices.

God's people sometimes make bad choices.

The book of Numbers is full of the stories of God asking for trust and obedience from the people he had rescued from slavery, but instead he got complaints and refusals to do what he asked.

He was leading his people on the way of life, but they didn't like the path and rebelled against it.

They got impatient.

Sometimes, the consequences were sickness and death.

The people found themselves without God.

In the case of our backstory in the wilderness, the people complained to Moses and Moses turned in prayer to the Lord.

He obeyed the Lord's word that supplied a remedy for the deadly snakebite.

Those who followed the Lord's instructions to look at the serpent on the pole were saved from death.

But it was only temporary – the people eventually died the death that is the consequence of the original sin of Adam and Eve.

What is the remedy for that affliction? That pandemic that has a 100% mortality rate?

It's not the sanitizer and vigorous hand hygiene that we should use for COVID-19 and ordinary flu.

It is the remedy Jesus lays out to Nicodemus: *no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.*

just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Jesus himself –lifted up on the cross – is the remedy for sin’s affliction.

Jesus is the way in which people who were without God become “with God”.

Baptism by water and the Spirit is the means by which the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus becomes the cure for the sin which causes us pain and death.

Our trust in Jesus to be our remedy is our salvation.

We look at him hanging on the cross

and know that our life has value to God,

- has purpose for others,
- has a future in eternity, and
- has hope for tomorrow.

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Yes, there is an elephant in the room – but as people of faith, we know it is not the end of the world.

We are wise to sanitize,
to share the peace with elbows,
and to stay away from others when we are sick.
But let us not panic or let the elephant trample our faith.

Let us remember – and proclaim in conversation – that Jesus has
conquered death and invites all to trust in him.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.