Why Covid?

Romans 8:18-28
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
By: Ryan Dueck
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Good morning from my home office!

Well, isn't this ironic? Here I am preaching a sermon about Covid on a week when I have tested positive.

Here I am, recording a sermon on my laptop on a Saturday afternoon to be used during a worship service I cannot attend. It feels like we're back in March 2020!

At the outset, I want to assure you that health-wise, I am fine. I have a few lingering symptoms, as you may be able to tell (my voice is still a bit scratchy).

But overall, my experience of Covid has been rather underwhelming. It hasn't been a pleasant experience, but it has felt pretty much like any other cold I have had in my life.

It's felt a little boring, truth be told, for which I should probably be thankful.

I want to thank those of you who texted or emailed me expressing concerns about my health, praying for me, offering support. I do appreciate this.

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Sitting in isolation this week gave me a lot of time to think about Covid.

I thought about media and the role it plays in shaping our perceptions…
I thought about health and how we often take it for granted…
I thought about public trust in institutions and what to do when it has almost completely been eroded…
I thought about risk and whether we are implicitly demanding that our governments deliver some theoretical (and impossible) zero-risk state before resuming our lives…
And of course, I thought about how divisive Covid has been and continues to be.

But then I was reminded that this sermon is not an opportunity for me to collect every stray thought I've had about Covid while in isolation.

I have opinions on each of the matters above, like everyone else, but they remain just that. Opinions. I'd be glad to discuss any of them over coffee with you once I'm out and about. ☺

This sermon series is about *your* questions, not mine. I got a lot of questions about Covid. Here's a sample:

- Should we just accept that we are in something like a "war time" and hunker down for the long haul?
- Should we just "trust science?" This is one that we hear a lot these days.
- Should we stop complaining and count our blessings? Surely this is almost always good advice!
- How do we understand parts of God's creation that appear to exist only to cause destruction?
- Can a virus be "redeemed?"
- What does it all mean?

There were way too many to answer each one specifically, so I tried to roughly divide them into two broad categories.

1. How should we think theologically *about* Covid?
2. How should we respond as Christians *to* Covid?

I'll probably weave in and out of those two categories in the reminder of my sermon. It's difficult to neatly separate our thinking from our acting as Christians or as human beings. They are always, inevitably intertwined.

I'm going to quote an email from one of the people who asked about Covid, because it framed some of the general Christian approaches out there quite well:

> Some more conservative-minded churches have created meaning out of being persecuted by the government. Their call is to continue to worship and be church, standing against restrictions. The pandemic itself is a meaningless threat. They are called to stand strong in their faith…
>
> More liberal-minded churches seem somewhat silent. There is the "love your neighbours by following government guidelines and keep everyone safe" ethical response. But that's hardly a uniquely Christian message—it's exactly what public officials are telling us.

This resonates with what I have observed as well.

It may (or may not!) surprise you to learn that I think there is some truth in both the conservative and liberal approaches this person describes.

I actually don't think all conservative responses are crazy. Some are, but not all.

To be clear, I am not advocating and have *never* advocated breaking the law or contravening public health restrictions. I do not think that the church is being singled out for persecution during this pandemic. I disagree strongly with people who take such approaches.

But at their best, some more conservative folks have asked important questions:

- Is public worship just another discretionary leisure activity, like going to the movies or the casino? Should it be lumped in the same category? Or does it meet a deeper and more basic human need?
- What does depriving people of social contact for long periods of time do to their health?
- Is Covid the only measure of public health that we are permitted to take seriously?
- Should our faith have something to say about how we live as Christians in a context that is dominated by fear?
- Are we becoming singularly obsessed with a safety that we can ultimately never have (and have never had)?

Even if we come to different conclusions than our more conservative sisters and brothers, I think we can acknowledge that these questions are worth talking about openly, honestly, and charitably, without descending instantly into accusation and suspicion.

And of course, on the more liberal side, I do believe that the "love your neighbours by trying to keep them safe" response is a deeply Christian one. It is *absolutely* a non-negotiable Christian conviction that care for the weak and vulnerable, the sick and suffering must be prioritized.

The question, though—and it's one that I don't think more liberally-inclined churches ask often enough—is *which* neighbour?

In the early months, possibly even the first year, I think a compelling case could be made that the priority was to do whatever it took to save lives from the virus itself. It was a time of emergency and emergency measures were required.

But as vaccines have arrived, dramatically reducing the risk of severe outcomes, and as we've observed some of the fallout from the restrictions that have been implemented, I think it is also vitally important to inquire about other neighbours that God has called us to love.

This week there were articles in two fairly left-wing publications—*The Atlantic* and *The New York Times*—that pondered the cost that these last two years have had upon children and young adults.

The emerging story out of America (and I think the same holds true in Canada) is that children are falling badly behind academically and socially. This is particularly the case among kids from poorer backgrounds (sadly, often racial minorities).

Children are experiencing catastrophic levels of mental health distress. Suicide attempts have risen. Behavioural problems are rampant. The *Times* article summarized it like this:

> For the past two years, large parts of American society have decided harming children was an unavoidable side effect of Covid-19. And that was probably true in the spring of 2020, when nearly all of society shut down to slow the spread of a deadly and mysterious virus.
>
> But the approach has been less defensible for the past year and a half, as we have learned more about both Covid and the extent of children's suffering from pandemic restrictions.[1]

The story is a similar one when it comes to college and university students. One survey cited by *The Atlantic* reported that 95% of students have experienced mental health issues over the past two years.[2]

All of this is to say nothing about the broader adult population, where crisis levels of addiction and overdose, domestic violence, suicide, mental health crises, unemployment, and just plain old loneliness and despair have all increased, each of which destroy lives in their own ways.

These are not incidental costs. This pandemic has certainly led to many deaths connected to the virus, and this is deeply tragic. Can we acknowledge that our response to it has also contributed to many deaths?

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[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/04/briefing/american-children-crisis-pandemic.html

[2] https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/01/university-covid-policies-remote-learning-mental-health/621159/

We have often (quite rightly) been urged to remember that each Covid death represents a real human being with a real story—someone who loved and was loved by others. The same is true for each of the categories described above. Can we name this honestly?

Can we acknowledge that "staying safe" during this pandemic has often come with no small amount of privilege attached to it? In many ways, the wealthy have offloaded a great deal of the risk in this pandemic to the poor.

And this is true on a global scale as well, with wealthy countries like Canada hoarding vaccines while many parts of the developed world struggle to even offer first doses.

Can we, at the very *least*, acknowledge that what it means to love our neighbours during a global pandemic is a complex and multifaceted question that cannot be reduced exclusively to epidemiology?

I think we can. And as we head into the third year of this thing, we must.

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And then there's the phrase you hear quite often these days: "I trust science." This is approvingly quoted by many Christians and non-Christians alike. What should we make of statements like this?

How science operates in our public understanding and discourse is a fascinating and often misunderstood topic.

The discipline of science is about observing and describing the world around us. By *definition*, science is unqualified to determine questions of ethics and morality and how these ought to shape public policy.

Indeed, it would not even be remotely difficult to construct a scientific argument for simply letting this disease run its course.

Why not just let this virus take out all the weak, aged, frail, asthmatic, diabetic, and otherwise vulnerable among us? As a race we would emerge stronger. Many have argued that our current climate crisis is due in no small part to human overpopulation. Well, here's a solution!

If all of this sounds horrible to you—like something straight out of the Nazi playbook—that's because it is. But it is horrible for *moral* (and, I would say, theological) reasons, not scientific ones.

Science can tell us what *is* the case. It cannot tell us what we should do in light of what is the case. You cannot derive an "ought" from an "is," as one of my philosophy professors used to say.

Science can never tell us what Jesus can: that the weak *should* be cared for, that pragmatism should *not* trump compassion, that love *is* a higher principle than anything that can be measured and proved in a laboratory.

So, whenever you hear someone saying something like, "Well, I just trust science," big red flags should be waving in your brain.

Nobody "just trusts science." It's always something more like, "I believe in science with a whole set of moral assumptions operating in the background." And more often than not, these moral assumptions are profoundly Christian in nature, even if this is not acknowledged or understood.

Even the most secular among us have thoroughly Christian assumptions about the value of every human life operating.

Science does many things incredibly well. The existence of vaccines is proof of this! We should be enormously grateful for all that science has done and is doing to save lives around the world.

But science cannot tell us what we *ought* to do. It can't tell us how to weigh risks, how to prioritize among various vulnerable populations. It can't tell us what it means to love our neighbours or how to locate the threat of this virus within the many other very real health concerns (physical, mental, social, spiritual) that people are facing.

This is not the job of science. The wisest scientists have always acknowledged this.

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I want to end with the why question. What is the meaning of this pandemic?

As human beings, we are meaning-seekers and meaning-makers. All human suffering seems to demand an explanation.

I've sat with enough people in pain to know that they will settle for truly terrible theological rationales for suffering if the alternative is that there is no meaning at all. We long to know why.

The big picture is that disease and plague and human suffering in all its forms has always been part of the human experience, at least downstream of Genesis 3 in the Christian story.

Creation groans, as Paul says in our reading from Romans this morning, and we along with it.

There is a deep mystery here when it comes to if or how human sin affects the nonhuman world, but the Christian hope is that creation itself—right down to the subatomic level—will be restored and redeemed.

The natural world will no longer be a threat, no longer a site of struggle, but one of peace and wholeness and harmony. All things will somehow be made new in order to reflect God's creational intent.

And in the meantime, the Christian story has always been about faith, hope, and love emerging *out* of suffering, not in its absence.

In John 9, Jesus and his disciples encounter a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Jesus responds, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned…but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3).

What might some of the works of God be that need to be displayed in our time?

Perhaps the work of God is for the church to play a role in healing the tribalistic divisions in our society.

Perhaps the work of God is for Christians to embrace simpler and more humane forms of living.

Perhaps the work of God is for us to learn some of the things we have forgotten about our interconnectedness and the duties we owe to one another.

Perhaps the work of God is to return to God in faith.
To remember that we are dependent creatures who cannot save ourselves.
To remember that we are *not* God.

Brian Zahnd recently wrote a book called *When Everything's on Fire*. That's a title that reflects how many of us feel these days. I was struck by this paragraph while reading this week:

> It's true that the universe is not benign… we can't deny that cruel vagaries abound, babies get brain cancer and brides die on their wedding day, but God is love and God will redeem their stories. We know that harms are hidden among us, a fragment of genetic material can unleash a deadly global pandemic, but God is love, and love alone will have the last word.
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> **I'm not naïve. Every moment of existence, we are at risk. We are never perfectly safe, but we are always perfectly loved**.[3]

We are never perfectly safe. But we are always perfectly loved.

If you're anything like me, you've felt a range of emotions over the past two years. Confusion, resignation, uncertainty, anger, fear, fatigue.

And so, I want to close with the words of Paul from our reading in Romans. If you are feeling weak and unsteady right about now, maybe a little short on hope, like you don't really know what's going on any more or what to do about it, I pray you can hear this as the word of God to you today:

> In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.
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> And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:26-28).

Even in all of this, God is working for good. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

[3] Brian Zanhd, *When Everything's On Fire: Faith Forged From the Ashes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 155.