



A Christian Response and Witness in the time of COVID-19

By Annette Brownlee

On Friday, March 13, 2020—just before the University sent out its directive moving all classes online—several students said to me over the course of the day, “I’ve never been through something like this.” The current global pandemic is unprecedented in the experience of almost everyone living. There have been, to date, greater death tolls (the 1918 flu pandemic killed 50 million worldwide, the 2009 swine flu pandemic killed 150,000 to 575,400 worldwide). There has been greater national and international devastation (WWI and WWII). But the COVID-19 pandemic has its own distinctive character: states of emergency, nation-wide lock downs, travel bans, the closure of most public institutions, and dire economic repercussions due to this devastating virus.

How do we shape a Christian response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

- First, we follow all directives of public health officials, the University or other places of employment, and follow the advice of medical experts. This includes suspending the primary Christian practice of gathering to worship the Lord. It is our Christian duty to take responsibility for ourselves and those we live with, so that we do not inadvertently spread the virus and tax already overwhelmed health care systems.
- We pray for all medical personnel daily and repeatedly. They are risking their own health to care for others. They are already exhausted; and they carry the burden of having to make difficult decisions about the allocation of scarce resources, such as ventilators and in some places, oxygen.
- We do not hoard. In the face of our own fears and personal anxieties we act responsibly and turn outward in prayer and concern for others more affected than we.

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Many in previous generations took for granted—in ways that are unthinkable to us—that life was not predictable, that disease, the inability to travel, death at an early age or in infancy—were a part of life. No so anymore. Ephraim Radner in his blog about COVID-19, “The Time of The Virus” (<https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/03/the-time-of-the-virus>) makes the observation that previous Books of Common Prayer contained prayers for times of plague. No more. Most in the minority world would be quite uncomfortable praying, as the 1662 Book of Common Prayer put it, that God might “have pity upon us miserable sinners, who now are visited with great sickness and mortality.” This prayer turns to Scripture as the lens through which to make sense of God’s agency in their (1662) own time: Moses, Aaron, the Israelites in the desert, and David with his imprudent census and the resulting pestilence. What about us? Is COVID-19 God’s will? God’s hand? We are ill-equipped to reflect theologically on God’s agency in a time like this. The Church raised the white flag years ago, surrendering its distinctively Christian voice in the public square. We imposed our own kind of self-quarantine: limiting our sermons, prayers, and teaching to the realm of the personal.

Scripture: a compass for our times

COVID-19 calls us to learn again from our forbearers, who looked to Scripture’s descriptions of God’s agency in times of disaster as a compass for their own times. One obvious place to turn is to the story of the plagues visited upon Pharaoh and Egypt at the time of the Hebrews’ deliverance from slavery. Can this story help us to see how God cares for the world during our own difficult time? Ellen Davis, in *Opening Israel’s Scriptures* (pp. 44-48) notes a key difference between Moses and Pharaoh. Moses recognizes God in extraordinary events. Pharaoh does not. When

God shows up in the burning bush Moses recognizes something bigger than himself and listens to and heeds God’s voice. Pharaoh refuses to recognize any power larger than himself. He tells Moses, “Who is the LORD that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go.” (NRSV, Exodus 5:1-2). The ten plagues which follow (Exodus 7:14-12:26) cause economic, natural and personal hardship and devastation. They are an opportunity for both the King of Egypt and for the Hebrew people to recognize God’s sovereignty over creation and their own lives. God tells Pharaoh as much just before the seventh plague. God says to Pharaoh, “For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. 16 But this is why I have let you live: to show you my power, and to make my name resound through all the earth” (Exodus 9:15-16).

Reflecting theologically with great care

It is with great care that we look at the COVID-19 pandemic in light of God’s actions. Any quick or simplistic theological reflection fails to do justice to the complexity of the Scriptural witness to God’s character. God describes the purpose of the ten plagues clearly: they are not punishment. They are an invitation to know God: “The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out from among them” (Exodus 9:15-16). A catastrophe is no time for the Church to begin straining its unused vocal cords in the public square. The Church’s response then, must be through the witness of our actions. Actions born of our recognition of our participation in God’s care of the world through our participation in Christ’s ministry. The ethicist, Philip Turner, in *Christian Ethics and the Church: Ecclesial Foundations for Moral Thought and Practice* observes that at this time of a diminished public voice the

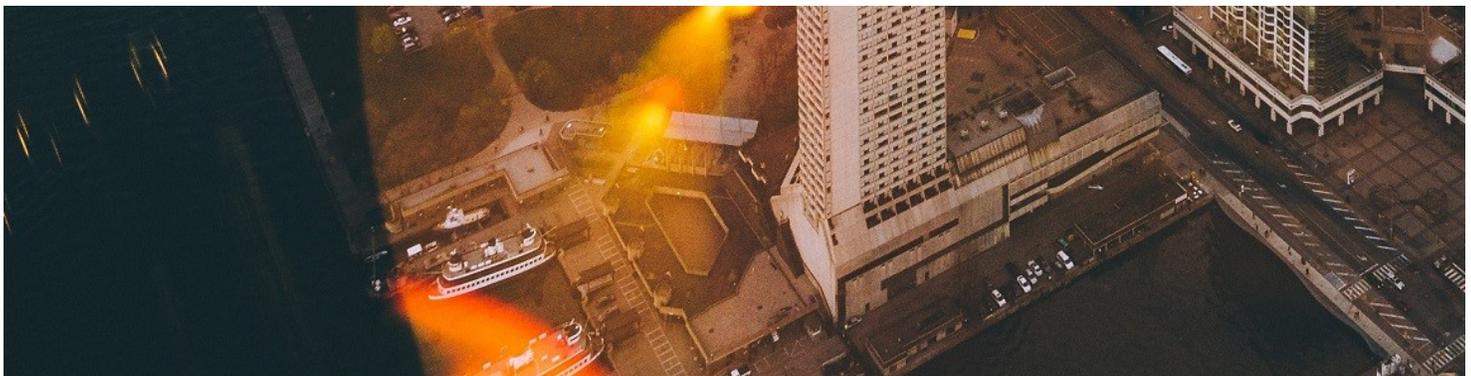
Church’s greatest contribution to society is its people. “The exemplary power of lives well lived, is perhaps a key way the church models the truth of the life and death of Jesus Christ in the west today” (205).

How then in this time of COVID-19 do we witness to the truth of the life and death of Jesus Christ in the West today? The civil mandate to go home and stay home is a kind of imposed civil sabbath: no shopping, no running around, no going out to eat, to movies. No making plans for the future or worrying about money. It is meant to be a time of rest not only for God’s creatures but for the land. (Already air pollution is down in many parts of the world). A time for God’s distracted and self-absorbed creatures to remember that we are first and foremost recipients—and not the creators—of all that is good in our lives: the land, rain and sun, family, friends, work, and most of all God’s grace and provision. We receive this imposed civil sabbath as such, letting go of the illusion that we can control our lives and futures. In the middle of our anxieties we do pray, sing, and give thanks.

But we know that in this imposed civil sabbath there are many who have no homes to go to. Or have homes that are safe. Some cannot get home because of travel bans. Wycliffe College has a residence for 80 graduate students, many of whom are international students. Many of the 80 cannot go home. Wycliffe is caring for them.

We know that this imposed civil sabbath is devastating for those who are hourly wage earners, who run Mom and Pop stores, who run home-based day care centres, who live off of tips received in restaurants and bars. Starbucks and Loblaws will survive. What about the others?

Due to its length, please visit our blog [at wycliffecollege.ca/blog/christian-response-and-witness-time-covid-19](https://wycliffecollege.ca/blog/christian-response-and-witness-time-covid-19) for the full article.)



A Message from the Principal

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

*Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night;
nor for the arrow that flieth by day; Nor for
the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor
for the destruction that wasteth at noonday.
Psalm 95.5f.*

I am writing to you at an extraordinary time at the College. The coronavirus is making its exponential assault around the globe as governments implement ever more stringent policies in order to retard the spread of the disease.

And so, here on 5 Hoskin Avenue, we have initiated drastic measures. We have closed our classrooms, and have begun to teach out the remaining three weeks of the term by video conference. The first class of about thirty happened on the morning of March 16, and I understand that both students and their professor were satisfied with the level of engagement. I want to say how grateful I am to our skilled IT team and to our intrepid faculty for their dedication and willingness to adapt. I also want to acknowledge our indebtedness to the many benefactors who made it possible for us to develop our technological infrastructure. The ability to offer classes remotely has been a real asset in making our teaching accessible to a few students, but we never thought that it would become essential for the entire school.

Effective at the end of the day, Saturday 21 March, we formally closed the residence and a number of students have left the building. We will maintain a much-diminished community of about 20 or so who, for various reasons, cannot go home, but we are being diligent in maintaining appropriate physical separation and hygienic precautions. It has been a stressful week for our students and residents, and I hope you might spare a prayer for them.

Our students continue to impress me. Effective March 15, as many of you know, the local Anglican churches were closed to corporate worship by the directive of our bishop. So, our resourceful students assembled in the Chapel for their own service. Their worship was complete with a sermon and hymns! During this period of isolation, we will continue to hold informal Chapel services where students can

gather to pray and hear God's Word. And we are broadcasting these daily services on the Wycliffe College Students' Facebook page. It is inspiring to see our community continue to care for one another.

As we begin to learn to live differently, it is all becoming more real. The past two weeks had an almost apocalyptic quality to them. Voices in the medical community were calling for aggressive measures in the face of this unseen and, for most of us, unfelt foe, and one might almost have expected to witness a gathering darkness on the horizon. But this week we are trying to do our part to try to "flatten" the curve of infection in the hopes that, perhaps by May, we might resume our "normal" lives. But much remains uncertain, including what "normal" will actually look like when this threat is past. Will our hygienic consciousness ever return to what it was? What will be the long-term economic effect of this crisis?

What we hope we shall not return to is an all-too-prevalent sense of complacency. Our self-sufficiency and our confidence in the advances of science and medicine have led us to take things like community and personal health for granted. These times call for increased vigilance not only for our own safety, but for the safety of others. It is not just a fear of contracting an illness that enforces our "social distancing," but also the fear that we may be unwitting vectors of disease.

Many, of course, are asking where God is in this pandemic. Christians have always understood that we live in a disordered natural world, a world that mirrors our own resistance to God's good purposes. And yet, we are confident that these good purposes will ultimately triumph, for we have seen them at work in the raising of Jesus from the dead. Therefore, "thou shalt not be afraid for the pestilence that walketh in darkness," proclaims the psalmist. Let us continue to pray for courage and for the eyes to see God at work as we face future uncertainty. And let us inquire after one another's welfare as we continue to exhort each other to keep the faith. In these days of isolation and through the technological means available to us, let us be persistent in connecting with others, with those we love, with those who are neglected, with those who

are fearful. And this includes those outside our Christian family.

As many in our secular culture seek to quell a rising panic, they will perhaps turn to God. And we must be prepared to come alongside them, offering them hope as we point them to Jesus Christ. This is not the first time the Church has faced plague and pestilence. As early as the third century, Christians in Carthage rallied to the aid of the sick in an epidemic that swept through North Africa and the whole of the Roman Empire. "Many of us are dying," wrote Bishop Cyprian, but the devotion of the Christians braving anti-Christian persecution and willing to risk their own health for the welfare of their neighbours also won many to Christ.

Just so, may the trials of our day bring out a supernaturally-inspired compassion within us. For, as Tertullian claimed, "It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. "Only look," they say, "Look how they love one another!" (Apology 39).

With every good wish for health and wholeness,

+Stephen

For the latest updates on Wycliffe College's response to the coronavirus situation, please visit wycliffecollege.ca/coronavirus.



From the Registrar's Office

TST SCHOLARSHIPS—DEADLINE EXTENDED

Applications are now being accepted for the TST Board of Trustees Scholarships, Bursaries and Awards. Applications must be submitted by **4:00 pm EDT, Tuesday, April 28, 2020 (extended deadline)**.

A general flyer and individual award flyers are attached. More information and application forms are available on the TST website at <https://www.tst.edu/academic/scholarships-and-bursaries> (click on “TST Board of Trustees Scholarships, Bursaries and Awards”).

The awards open to non-Ontario residents/international students are the Marjorie Watson Powles Award and the David Cameron Memorial Award.

Please note, only currently registered TST students may apply, incoming students are not eligible.

KEY ACADEMIC DATES

- **Apr. 1, 2020 - Registration opens for summer courses.**
- For more academic dates, visit <https://www.tst.edu/academic/key-academic-dates>.

Job Opportunity

Graham library is hiring a **Student Assistant: Theological Resources Project**

The student will work under the supervision of the theology librarian to enhance the theological resources available on the library website and Quercus. The period of Employment is from 4 May to 28 August 2020. To qualify, the candidate needs to be a graduate student in a program of divinity or theology at the University of Toronto, with good written and excellent verbal communication skills, the ability to work independently, the ability to work with computers, and good attention to detail.

The hours are from Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The rate of pay is \$16.15 per hour.

To apply, submit cover letter and CV to Billy Gekas, Circulation Supervisor (william.gekas@utoronto.ca) by Wed. 25 March, 2020. Short-listed candidates will be contacted for interview after 30 March.

Lenten Devotionals

Lent is a time of solemn reflection leading up to the celebration of Christ's resurrection at Easter. As a tradition, Wycliffe College reflects on the self-sacrifice of Christ together as a community through weekly Lenten devotionals written by our students.

You receive them in your email inbox only if you sign up specifically for these devotionals. Sign up at <https://www.wycliffecollege.ca/newsletter> and check the “Weekly Lenten and Advent Devotionals” option.