

A Faith Response to the Coronavirus

The coronavirus outbreak is stirring up anxiety, confusion, and major inconveniences. It is a situation in which we can easily overreact or underreact. How can our faith tradition guide and comfort us through this troubling time?

A good starting point is to remember that the most repeated phrase in the Bible is “Do not be afraid!” or “Have no fear!” God probably sends us this message so frequently because fear is such a big part of human nature. Fear can alert us to dangers in our lives to keep us safe, but fear can also lead us astray, toward selfish responses.

Enough for Everyone

Of course, we see these same dynamics play out in Scripture, where fear leads to hoarding. The most famous story is when the Israelites are in the desert without food (Exodus 16). God rains down manna from heaven but also cautions them to take only what they need for now. They disobey but find that the food they attempt to store away goes bad immediately.

The consistent message we hear in the Bible is that we need to trust in God, who will provide enough for everyone. The problems come when people begin to take more than they need.

Fear of the coronavirus has caused some to stockpile and hoard unreasonable amounts of hand sanitizer, face masks, and other supplies against the recommendations of leaders. The problem is that this wipes out supplies for those who truly need them the most—health care workers and those most vulnerable to the disease—without really making the buyers safer.

Protect the Vulnerable

Scripture and the social teachings of the church remind us again and again that we—as individuals and a society—must protect and give priority to those who are most vulnerable and at risk. We see this from the laws in the Old Testament that looked out for the poor and the widows, to Jesus’ embrace of people on the margins of society, to the early church’s adamant support of those who had less. The Bible urges us to put those who are most at risk first.

In the midst of the coronavirus, the vulnerable take many forms. Most obvious are those who are elderly or

have other health conditions that make them most susceptible to illness. Those who are younger may not be concerned about our own health risks, but if we help pass on the virus, it can be a life-or-death situation for others.

Others are financially vulnerable and do not have the flexibility to take sick leave that many of us take for granted. That puts them in a difficult situation when they become ill and may have to choose between putting their job at risk and staying home to protect others. Likewise, many parents do not have the flexibility to stay home when school is canceled for their children.

The situation is impacting many others, such as small business owners who may already be on shaky financial ground.

A Spirit of Sacrifice

This health crisis is challenging many of us to make sacrifices in our lives. Some are huge, such as those made by exhausted health care workers around the world, desperately trying to keep patients alive (while avoiding the illness themselves).

Other sacrifices fall more in the category of inconveniences. It is inconvenient when events are canceled, schools close, and travel is limited. It is inconvenient to wash our hands intentionally and regularly.

But this kind of sacrifice is at the very center of our faith. Every time we gather around the Lord’s Table, we celebrate the powerful way Christ showed us how to love others. He sacrificed *everything* in self-giving love for us, and he invited us to do the same. In turn, we die to ourselves—through inconveniences and more—in order to love those around us. Truly loving others will always cost us something.

Actions that may not entirely make sense to us can have huge effects. Scientists point to the 1918 flu when St. Louis proactively and aggressively closed its schools to prevent infections.

Death rates in the city

