

Where is God in COVID-19?*

I wonder if you'd prefer to read about something other than COVID-19. I would prefer to write about something other than COVID-19, but I cannot. It is what is on all of our minds and hearts, and it will color our world for weeks to come. While I am finding it helpful to limit how often I look at the news, I still come across coronavirus information every time I check my email or talk to a friend. It's everywhere, and it should be: it's a matter of public health.

Right now, though, I am more interested in what news God is giving us, what our faith calls us to do in light of these circumstances. Certainly we should be good citizens and follow the guidelines given to everyone: Avoid travel. Practice social distancing. Wave instead of shaking hands. Stay home as much as possible. And don't forget about mental health. Implementing these measures for social isolation will take a toll on us all, so reach out to family and friends regularly. Stay connected by a phone call or text. Drop off supplies or a card on the doorstep of those who cannot venture out. Donate to food banks (money is fine!) and buy gift cards to local businesses, who are hurting right now.

We might be tempted to ask where God is in all this mess. We would not be the first to ask the question. In today's story of Moses striking the rock, the wandering, disconcerted Israelites voice their doubts: "Is the Lord among us or not?" (Ex 17:7). We see them argue with and complain to Moses like we humans often do when we are scared and angry. They feared for their lives. If they did not have water soon, they would die. Would God provide? Would God keep them safe? They chose to take out their frustration on an easy target, their leader Moses. This reading comes to us at this particular time, on March 15, 2020, as both an assurance and a warning. God does give the Israelites water; God was there all along. But it can be tempting to turn against one another in times of stress.

When we talk about the ways in which God cares for us, we typically think in spiritual terms. God gives us salvation and eternal life and makes us whole. In the gospel story, the Samaritan woman drops her bucket at the end of the story and runs off to tell everyone about Jesus. She received the living water that she really needed; she no longer required the literal water from the well. Yet we see over and over again that God cares about more than just our souls: God cares about our bodies, our minds, our relationships,

It may seem odd to read the Samaritan woman story today which is all about breaking down social boundaries (Jews and Samaritans did not get along, and women and men typically did not have extended conversations about religion) when we cannot extend a simple hug or handshake to anyone. Right now we are putting up physical boundaries for the sake of public health in a slightly confusing display of love. God calls us to look out for the well-being of all people, especially those who are the most vulnerable among us. Taking care of your own body is a way you can take care of the body of your neighbor.

God is here. God is in every live-streamed worship service, in every cancelled social event, in every medical care worker's calm demeanor, in every breath and prayer. We as Christians follow all of the experts' guidelines in this uncertain time, but we also, vitally, carry with us hope. As Paul said : "we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, **and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.**"

*A parishioner sent me this meme, if you'd like to take the title literally: **Christ Over Viruses and Infectious Diseases.**