

COVID-19, Toilet Paper, and Lenten Disciplines

A sermon on James 4:13-5:6; Jonah 1:1-3:2 & Matthew 12:33-42 by Nathan Nettleton, 15 March 2020

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Message

The COVID-19 scare can reinforce our Lenten call to prepare our hearts by facing up to our mortality and the real limits of our control over the world.

Acknowledgement

The central thrust of this sermon, and some of its images and ideas, are indebted to the article "[Can Lent help prepare us for a pandemic?](#)" by [L. Roger Owens](#), published in *The Christian Century*, 4 March, 2020.

Sermon

A week and a half ago, I witnessed the early stages of the great toilet paper panic. Out in the suburbs on my way home from a pastoral visit, I went into a supermarket to do just my usual weekly shop, and I saw queues of people at the checkouts with trolleys full of giant economy packs of toilet paper. A staff member who I saw wheeling out another pallet load of the packs told me that he couldn't wheel them out fast enough and certainly had no need to try to put them on the shelves before they were all snapped up.

There is no real threat to the supply of toilet paper in Australia. It's manufactured here and truck loads of it are arriving at supermarkets everyday, just as they always have. As [Waleed Aly said in Friday's paper](#), "one day, when this whole coronavirus episode is mostly a memory, someone will write a PhD trying to explain the great toilet paper panic of 2020." He then went on to make some fairly insightful suggestions as to what it might find, suggestions which I will come back to.

At its simplest level, what people think they are doing is preparing. No one is entirely sure what they are preparing for, but there is a serious possibility that many of us could be isolated in our own homes for days or weeks, and so people quite reasonably want to be prepared. Increasingly, not only the rumours on social media, but governments and health authorities are telling us that we should make preparations for such possibilities.

For people like me who are prone to underplaying the risks and laughing at the absurdities, it is fun to speculate on why people have been stockpiling toilet paper more than food. Some people are doing both, but toilet paper has been the big panic item, which is crazy. You can wipe your bum with a face washer, but you can't eat toilet paper.

Nevertheless, in scary and uncertain times, people feel the need to be doing something to prepare, and when it is not entirely clear what preparations are going to be necessary, we easily follow the herd. I've heard people admit to having bought toilet paper, not because they had intended to but simply because they saw everyone else doing it and suddenly felt a panicky need to do likewise. We need to feel that we are doing something to be prepared.

The viral spread of fear and panic is probably every bit as dangerous as the disease itself. Certainly the economists think that, but actually so do a whole lot of people who don't give a stuff about the economy but care very deeply about our mental health and the state of our souls. And yet, I don't think I've heard any significant advice from the authorities on how to prepare our souls for living through a period where spot-fires of fear are constantly flaring up and threatening to incinerate our faith, our hope, our spiritual calm, and, if the fisty-cuffs in

the supermarkets are any indication, our capacity to see beyond ourselves and be generous and caring with one another.

For us in the churches though, we should be quite well prepared to address this at the moment, because we are just a couple of weeks into the season of Lent, a season that calls us to examine our own preparedness to live lives of resilient faith, hope and generous hospitality in difficult and inhospitable times.

So it seems to me that a conversation between our Lenten preparations and our coronavirus fears is very important. You might think I chose tonight's Bible readings with that in mind, but actually, I chose them about five weeks ago before I had any inkling that we might be talking about a major health crisis now. And yet listen to what our reading from the letter of James had to say:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will travel to such and such a town and spend time there, doing business and making money." You do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. (James 4:13-14)

Right there we've got uncertainties over travel, economics, and even life and health! And right there we've got a very blunt call to face up to the uncertainties and to our inability to control the way things are going to unfold. That's one of the basic calls of this season of Lent, right there, the call to face up to our own mortality and to the very real limits of our control. When we marked the sign of the cross in ash on each other's foreheads on Ash Wednesday, we did so with the words, "From dust you came, to dust you shall return." If those words didn't seem very real to you then, maybe another two and half weeks of escalating health warnings are giving them a bit more bite. Perhaps we should be smearing ash on our heads again, although the authorities would prefer that we didn't touch each other.

The story of Jonah is pertinent too. We heard much of it in our first reading and we heard Jesus comment on it in our gospel reading. The danger in the Jonah story is a terrible storm at sea, but did you notice what the first response to it was? The sailors said to each other, "Let's draw lots to find out who is to blame for getting us into this danger."

A couple of days ago, a Chinese official was suggesting that it might have been US military personnel who were to blame for bringing the coronavirus to China. In January we were doing an awful lot of finger pointing over who was to blame for the severity of the bushfires. Proper examination of the causes is appropriate and necessary, but all too often our only real motivation is to ensure that the finger of blame is pointed at somebody else.

The Jonah story goes on and having identified Jonah as the guilty party, the next question is what do they need to do with Jonah to appease the angry gods who have sent the storm. The question results in Jonah being thrown overboard as food for the sea monsters. In a funny kind of way, this brings me back to [Waleed Aly's analysis](#) the great toilet paper crisis.

You see, his preliminary hypothesis is that when we feel like the world is spinning out of control and we feel helpless to do anything about it, we desperately look for any little ways to regain some sort of control over something, anything, even if it is just the supply of toilet paper. The need to be prepared is an expression of something deeper, the need to stave off

our feelings of helplessness and our fears of being unable to do anything to get things back under control.

The sailors who threw Jonah overboard were battling the exact same fears. Since time immemorial, humankind has responded to big terrifying storms, droughts, earthquakes, and plagues by imagining that they must be the work of angry gods and by looking for ways to cajole those angry gods to relent. Identifying someone like Jonah who is to blame and sacrificing them to the gods is the classic form of this, but underlying it is our deep fear that things might be out of control, and our need to find something we can do that will have some sort of impact. Even if it is just toilet paper.

This instinct to try to appease the gods also reveals the extent of our magical thinking. The idea that if we do what the gods require we might be able to affect the outcome of the latest storm or plague is magical thinking. It is an expression of our need for some kind of control, and you will find lots of it in Christian churches. Yesterday, both the [Greek Orthodox Church and Margaret Court's Victory Life church claimed that their followers are divinely protected against COVID-19](#), even if, in the case of the Orthodox, they all go on receiving communion from the same gold spoon placed into one mouth after the other. Magical thinking. Christian faith becomes a lucky charm to ward off evil.

At times like this, you will always hear some extremist churches claiming that the disaster is an expression of God's anger poured out on a wicked society. But then if the disaster strikes the church particularly hard, as has happened with the Shincheonji church in Korea recently, suddenly the rhetoric changes to this being an attack of the devil on the righteous. Magical thinking always looks for an explanation that doesn't have to deal with the terrifying possibility that this is just random. Weirdly, we are more comfortable with the idea that the devil might be calling the shots than with the idea that things are genuinely out of control and not being directed by anybody anywhere.

This is what Jesus was addressing in our gospel reading when he said that "an evil and adulterous generation asks for magical signs." The religious people were freaked out by what Jesus was doing and saying, and in the face of their uncertainty and the threat of things spiralling out of control, they fall back into magical thinking and want to see a demonstration of power by which to judge where Jesus fitted in to the power structures of the universe.

Jesus rebukes their magical thinking and tells them that they will be given no sign "except the sign of Jonah." Like Jonah, Jesus would be the victim of this magical thinking, this attempt to gain some control over the terrifying elements by identifying the one who should be sacrificed so that everyone else might not be destroyed. Like Jonah, Jesus does not respond with violent, self-protective rage, but accepts his powerlessness, surrenders himself to the storm and is swallowed up by the grave. And like Jonah, Jesus is only held in the belly of the earth for three days before death loses its grip on him, and he reappears among us to lead us in a way of life that is not crippled by the fear of death.

Now I need to be honest here. It is relatively easy for me to talk about not being crippled by the fear of death, and to talk somewhat blithely about the fact that the overwhelming majority of people who are infected with this coronavirus will recover. It is relatively easy for me because, even though I live in a house with over a hundred other people, I have a long history of good health, no chronic risk factors, and a robust immune system. There are no

guarantees, but if and when I get it, I will probably survive it. I am well aware that many of you are way way more vulnerable than I am, and that the fear of that is further exacerbated by scary talk of the possibility that those who are already older and sicker might be refused treatment when the hospitals get overwhelmed and harsh decisions have to be made about who will and won't get access to emergency beds and ventilators.

I don't want to ridicule your fears at all. This is a serious situation. Like many people, it has taken me a while to realise how serious it is, and no doubt my own sense of invincibility has been part of that. But the virus is spreading exponentially which means that its pace will continue to escalate rapidly for a while yet, and it is probably only a matter of time before some of us here are directly affected. And unless you do your praying in a locked room and don't come out, prayer is not going to protect you from the virus. Prayer is not magic.

But real prayer can and will help us to prepare our souls for facing these uncertain times. And by real prayer, I don't mean desperately pleading with God for protection. That's magic. The real prayer that we are called to, especially during this Lenten season, is a prayer that unflinchingly looks reality in the face, like Jesus "setting his face like flint and heading for Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51), and seeks God's wisdom for living well in the midst of it.

As [L. Roger Owens wrote in the Christian Century recently](#), this cold hard look into the face of reality is exactly what Lent calls us to do again each year, and the discipline of doing so helps protect us against two opposite errors that are very apparent during a pandemic. The first is catastrophising – running around in a screaming panic imagining things to be even worse than they are and by your panic making them so. If you are a catastrophiser, our Lenten disciplines call you to take a good hard look at reality and to see that the reality is not as bad as you are imagining it to be. This is not the end of the world, even if the delusional self-centred worlds that we construct for ourselves are coming crashing down. Like Jonah and Jesus, let them crash, for there is a better world on the other side of them.

But the other opposite error, the one I'm prone to, is the deluded imagining that everything is much better than it really is and that everything will be fine. Magical thinking is one expression of this: everything will be okay because some magical saviour somewhere will swoop in and rescue us and make everything better. But it also expresses itself in the head-in-the-sand reflex that can't bear to face how bad things really might be and protects itself by laughing at the panickers and shaking twice as many hands and going to twice as many football matches or other large crowd events. For those of us in that category, our Lenten disciplines call us to take a cold hard look at reality and make peace with the uncertainty and powerlessness that we are burying under our cheerful bravado.

Whichever side we fall on, the common reality underlying both is our desperate fear of our own vulnerability, our own mortality, our own helplessness. Whether we catastrophise it or go into cheerful denial about it, this Lenten season calls us to look it in the face, and like Jonah and Jesus, with ashes smeared on our heads, surrender ourselves to it. When Jesus calls us to follow him in the way of the cross, it is a way of surrender to vulnerability and helplessness, but we are called to take it in the footsteps of one who has already shown us that vulnerability and helplessness and even death are far more survivable than we had feared.

In the company of Jesus, in the footsteps of Jesus, we are called to make peace with our own vulnerability and helplessness, and to thus learn to respond to this escalating pandemic with

neither catastrophising nor deluded complacency, but with compassion, love, generosity, and self-sacrificial sharing. I don't know what that will look like for each one of you. For some of you, it might mean being the generous neighbour who dons mask and gloves and vulnerable love to take care of sick neighbours, even when it increases your own risk. For others it might look more like stockpiling pasta meals and board games to help your own children make it through an enforced isolation. But for all of us, the call is to know deep in our bones that nothing, not even virus or death, can separate us from the love of God, and to live from that knowledge, courageously, compassionately and generously, as we follow in the footsteps of the one who has shown us that surrendering to the most extreme helplessness and vulnerability is but a step on path to the wide open spaces of resurrection life and love.