

Finding Hope and the Pandemic in the Commandment to Remember

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When I began my three-year seminary program many years ago, I had not studied the Bible. So I decided to start at the beginning and visit the local rabbi.

“I’m beginning my Christian ministry training,” I told him. “Would you please teach me about the religion of Jesus?”

Surprised, nevertheless with much grace for this young Christian, he invited me to his study.

“The first thing you need to know,” he told me, “is that Judaism is the only religion with a commandment to remember. Among Jews, to forget is to forsake. In His past acts, God reveals His saving character to us today. That’s what keeps Jews focused and hopeful when the present becomes difficult and the future looks dark.”

In His preface to the Ten Commandments, God did not launch a half-time pep talk to buck up for future challenges ahead.

In fact, the first Commandment doesn’t appear until the second verse of the chapter: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2). In the first verse, immediately before this, He reminds them of His authority to make such a demand: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exodus 20:1).

GOD’S LICENSE TO RULE

God’s exclusive license to rule His people, that is, lies not in some philosophical belief or even theological creed, but rather, *the manifest history of His saving action among them*.

His delivering them into the Promised Land from slavery in Egypt seals Israel’s identity forever as God’s beloved children; remembering that event in the annual Passover celebration is therefore key to His purposes for them, and thereby, to their future hopes.

Significantly, God sent an angel of death among the Egyptian oppressors to instill respect for Himself and His people. First, however, He sent an angel of life ahead to place the blood of a lamb on the doorposts of Jewish homes—signaling death to “pass over” His children. Similarly, the blood of the lamb and its lifesaving effects are central to Jesus’ death as the “Lamb of God,” and to His resurrection as the conqueror of death.

Thus, the intersection of history that placed Jesus’ sacrifice squarely amid the Passover.

At Easter, that is, Christians remember the ultimate hope of humankind, namely, that “through (Jesus’) death, he might...set free those who were slaves all their lives because of their fear of death” (Heb. 2:14-23).

ROME’S IRON FIST

It’s easy to tell the story of God’s marvelous deliverance in times of peace and prosperity. During Jesus’ ministry on earth, however, Israel suffered under the iron fist of Roman occupation. The enemy was literally at your doorstep as centurions stood on street corners; roads were lined as by telephone poles with crucified Jewish protesters.

In this electric atmosphere, to celebrate God’s saving you from enemy domination—as in Egypt—stirred deep passions and desperate expectations. As such, it could be fatal; Barabbas’ rebellion had ended him up in jail with Jesus to be crucified. Some Jews wondered if Jesus were the son of the warrior King David, returned to rescue the nation, that is, by sword (Matt. 12:23).

Amid such anxiety and fear of death lying ahead, here’s Passover’s wisdom and power to germinate hope: The future is uncertain, which stirs speculation. But the past is fixed, which stirs security.

In this fallen world, the winds of doubt and fear will blow. In fact, Jesus warned His followers. “You will have trouble.” But He followed this reality with a promise: “But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

And so today, we pray for life and deliverance from the coronavirus. But if we focus wholly on the future, we forget where the power to overcome our present circumstances lies. We lose our root mooring and become disoriented and anxious—especially when we or others we know are not delivered.

A THANKFUL HEART

During the Roman occupation, Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, “Do not be anxious about anything, but ask God for what you need, *always asking with a thankful heart*” (Phil. 4:6, 7).

A thankful heart germinates in a positive, encouraging event that has already happened—real, and thereby secure. That’s why Paul can add this promise to his message: “...and God’s peace, which passes all human understanding, will keep your hearts and minds safe in union with Christ Jesus.”

Personally, I know that’s true, because I’ve experienced it.

And yet...

Let’s face it: A catastrophe like the coronavirus reminds us that we’re not in control. Social distancing may starve it, but it submits to no gun, missile, warship, nor even medicine or other humanly devised strategy. It mocks our well-crafted theologies and prayer formulas, leaving us not only anxious, but ashamed.

Maybe that’s one priceless lesson that only persevering through deeply painful ordeals can teach us—even to trust that God remains in control.

The God whose wonders we proclaim to the world, so it might seem, is impotent before this disease. Where, indeed, have all the healing ministries gone? Who among us would even dare lay hands on a virus-confirmed person—like the lepers of Jesus’ day?

In the face of such an evil juggernaut, it’s tempting for a Christian teacher to gloss over the destruction and focus entirely on the wonderful promises of God’s future healings—many of which I have personally experienced.

Yet a god who does not take into account human suffering, is not the God revealed in Jesus on the cross.

POLLYANNA FAITH

If the casualties are not acknowledged, in fact, it’s easy to slip into a contrived, Pollyanna faith that doesn’t accommodate the reality we all must face. Ultimately, it becomes an attempt to whitewash our fear—and embarrassment that amid the battle for God’s life-giving Kingdom come, some, even many, die.

Even as the Promised Land requires the desert ordeal which trains us to appreciate it, the Easter resurrection requires the suffering of Good Friday.

This tension between God’s bright promises and the world’s often dark warnings forces us to be real and confess openly that we just don’t have all the answers.

In fact, the God who allows pain and suffering in this world is ultimately the only one who can overcome its awful effects among us.

FANTASY OF CONTROL

Yes, as John the Baptist declared, “The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the Good News” (Mark 1:15). The virus has reminded us, however, that His Kingdom rule is not yet fulfilled among us—and will not likely be fulfilled until the Lord returns.

In fact, the repentance John exhorts calls us to renounce the fantasy of our control so we can experience the reality of God's control.

I believe we're called to fight against this virus, both fiercely against the enemy and compassionately for its victims.

Yet many mysteries remain. Nevertheless, we press on after the Father's healing, both via our natural medicines and social distancing, and His supernatural Spirit.

Meanwhile—and that simple word becomes paramount today as we all struggle together for meaning and healing—In what credible hope can we trust?

I would answer, "Remember."

Like our early Jewish forebears in faith, take time in your devotions to remember what God has done in your life. Thank Him for his saving acts, and like the Passover's signature Psalm 118, praise the God whose "love endures forever" (Ps. 118:1-4).

Then fight like heaven with others to defeat the virus as the Father leads you.