



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Plaguing Interruptions

Clay Nelson © 18 October 2020

I find myself feeling a little more at peace this morning. We have once again eliminated Covid 19 from the community. And the election season that felt like it would never end is now over for another three years. Perhaps now life can go back to the way it was, a 2019 normal. Phew! I wasn't sure how much more I could take, for neither pandemics nor elections necessarily bring out our better angels.

But who am I kidding? We will never turn back the calendar. The way it was has been irretrievably interrupted by a plague of biblical proportions. How will it play out? It is a question that has been explored as long as there have been pandemics.

In an outbreak of disease in fourth-century BC Athens, people "became contemptuous of everything, both sacred and profane," according to the historian Thucydides.

Shakespeare lived his entire life in the shadow of bubonic plague; born April 26, 1564, a few months before a new outbreak of the plague. Besides the one following his birth, he survived severe outbreaks in 1582, 1592-93, 1603-04, 1606, and 1608-09. Plague constantly appears throughout his works in the form of everyday exclamations: "a plague upon it when thieves cannot be true to one another"; "a plague of sighing and grief! It blows a man up like a bladder"; "a plague upon this howling"; "a plague of these pickle-herring!" But this is a sign less of existential angst than of deep familiarity, the acceptance of plague as an inescapable feature of ordinary life.

His acceptance, or perhaps resignation is a better word, is revealed explicitly in Macbeth written during the 1603 outbreak. His lines conjure up a country so traumatised that it no longer recognises itself, where the only smiles are on the faces of those who have somehow not followed the news, and where grief is so nearly universal that it scarcely registers:

*Alas, poor country,
Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot
Be called our mother, but our grave, where nothing
But who knows nothing is once seen to smile;
Where sighs and groans and shrieks that rend the air
Are made, not marked; where violent sorrow seems
A modern ecstasy. The dead man's knell
Is there scarce asked for who, and good men's lives*

*Expire before the flowers in their caps,
Dying or ere they sicken.*

Shakespeare seems to have doubted that there would ever be a medical solution to the plague and, from what we know of the science of his time, his pessimism was justified. He focussed his attention instead on a different plague, the plague of being governed by a mendacious, morally bankrupt, incompetent, blood-soaked, and ultimately self-destructive leader. Clearly, present life is imitating art.

In his book *The Plague*, French existentialist philosopher and author Camus tells of a plague in small town in French Algiers. The novel relates the town leaders' initial denial of plague. When they accept the truth, it is too late. The hospitals are overflowing. Many are dying. When they quarantine the town, some try to commit suicide, some try leaving secretly, smugglers become rich while the priests preach that it is divine punishment.

As the situation worsens, the authorities shoot people who try to flee. They declare martial law to control violence and looting; conduct funerals without ceremony or concern for the families of the deceased. Gradually, people become despondent, wasting away both emotionally and physically.

The plague continues for months. An antiplague serum is developed but it doesn't save even an innocent child. The priest argues that the child's suffering is a test of faith — the priest soon dies too.

There is a hero in this story, an atheist doctor who continues to treat the afflicted, risking his own life. He is revolting against the absurdity surrounding him. Instead of committing suicide or fleeing into religious faith, he chooses taking responsibility for his life, enjoying the goodness and beauty around him, and by creating his own meaning in an objectively meaningless world. He does this by struggling against suffering and death even when his efforts predictably fail. This is what a hero does, fighting defiantly against absurdity.

For Camus the plague represents this absurdity. There is no justice regarding who lives and dies from the plague; there is no rational or moral meaning to be derived from it; religious myths or angry gods don't explain it. The gods watch the unfolding calamity with arms folded, either unwilling or unable to do anything. The plague is neither rational nor just.

Moreover, wishful thinking doesn't help, but instead, it distorts reality. Miracle cures won't work and real cures aren't right around the corner. *Life is fleeting, our lives are ephemeral.* Neither wealth nor education completely shield us from microscopic pathogens. Yet people forget all this. They're surprised that they're vulnerable, that their status or accomplishments don't provide immunity. They shouldn't be surprised.

For *the plague is everywhere* — people suffer and die; psychopaths create havoc; nations commit genocide. We live in a plague-filled world. *The plague is always with us* — our lives can end at any moment. Death doesn't await us at the end of the tracks, it's right here, now. It is a constant companion of our transitory lives. Eventually, the plague will kill us all.

In the book, Camus' hero asks, "But what does it mean, the plague?" His answer is, "It's life, that's all."

Later he says, "All I can say is that on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims — and as far as possible one must refuse to be on the side of the pestilence. What's true of all the evils in the world is true of plague as well. It helps [humankind] to rise above themselves. There are more things to admire in [humankind] than to despise."

Camus' conclusion about what we should do? Express care and concern for our fellow travellers and try to help them. The problem with this remedy is that doing so often requires interrupting our plans. Better to hope others might interrupt their lives to help.

Social psychologists have been studying something they call the bystander effect for fifty years. They are seeking to understand what the conditions are that motivate people to refuse help to those in trouble or to simply look the other way. One of the theories is that the more people there are around the more likely they will choose not to interrupt their plans by helping. But there are numerous examples that challenge their theory.

It's 9 February 2016. At a quarter to four in the afternoon a mother parks her car on a canal-side street in Amsterdam. She gets out and heads to the passenger side to take her toddler out of the car seat when, suddenly, she becomes aware the car is still rolling. She barely manages to jump back behind the wheel, but it's too late for brakes. The car tips down into the canal and begins to sink.

The bad news: dozens of bystanders saw see it happen. No doubt even more people hear the mother's screams.

But then something unexpected happens. The owner of a real estate agency on the corner thinks, "Car in the water? That can't be good." He runs to get a hammer from his office toolbox and then sprints right into the icy canal. Another bystander is already swimming towards the sinking automobile, and then a third bystander is in the water, too. At the last instant, a woman hands the estate agent a brick, that later will prove crucial. A fourth bystander grabs an emergency hammer from his car and is the last to dive in.

“We began bashing on the windows,” the estate agent recounts. They tried to smash one of the side windows, but no luck. Meanwhile, the car tilts and dips, nose down. It was finally the brick crashing down hard on the back window that cracked it.

After that, everything happened very fast. The mother passed her child to one of the bystanders through the back window. For a moment, the kid gets stuck, but a few seconds later they manage to work the toddler free. One bystander swims the child to safety. With the mother still inside, the car is inches away from going under. Just in time, the remaining three bystanders get her out, to be greeted by others along the street with blankets to warm them up.

Not two seconds later, the car vanishes into the inky waters of the canal.

During this pandemic there have been countless stories of those who have interrupted their lives for the sake of others. Even in these dark times there is hope for humankind. Interruptions may yet save us.

Discussion / Meditation

When has your life been interrupted?

Was it for better or worse?