

THE GOD WHO SUFFERS
Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist
April 5, 2020
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

The year was 1666.

Yet another outbreak of the bubonic plague had erupted in London, England. In hindsight it was the final iteration of a centuries-long pandemic in Europe that ultimately killed 25 million people. At the time, it was just one more crisis ... after one more crisis ... after one more crisis.

The small town of Eyam - much further north of London in England - had hoped to stay immune from what they viewed as a "big city problem." But even back then, movement of people and goods did not stop altogether in a public health crisis. And all it took was one shipment with one bundle of one infected item from the nation's capital to bring the town of Eyam to its knees.

The plague had come. What, then, to do?

Eyam was - and still is - on a major trade route between two larger cities in northern England. Neither Sheffield to the west nor Manchester to the east had yet to be infected. But without dramatic action to stop the spread, it was only a matter of time. Thousands more would be put at risk.

Only months before the outbreak in Eyam a new pastor had arrived on the scene, replacing a long-term beloved minister who had retired to the outskirts of town. Before the plague hit, the clergymen had disagreed on just about everything it seems: doctrine, politics, generational shifts occurring all over the country.

But when it came to the plague they were emphatically of one mind. It was their Christian duty, they believed, to convince the village to self-quarantine - to stay home and save lives - in order to keep the plague trapped in Eyam and away from the surrounding population centers.

To be clear, the clergymen were not recommending a self-quarantine to keep the villagers, themselves, from getting sick. Choosing to stay in Eyam - and not high tail it out of there at the first sign of infection - meant greater likelihood of death for their parishioners, not less.

Imagine, now, five months into my ministry with you, that Pastor Tremba and I are asking you to do the same, in the face of the novel coronavirus ...

The new pastor assured the people he would offer the very best pastoral care and comfort

as they faced this brutal illness, with no known cause, no known treatment, no known cure.

Although the new pastor was terrified, as were the villagers, he believed it was more righteous to sacrifice his own life - and, may I point out, the lives of his own people - than risk the worst for their neighbors.

Talk about *engaged compassion!*

Die they did, in Eyam, England, that year. Nearly half of the town's small population, including the wife of the new pastor.

But it worked.

After four months of quarantine, with a ring of stones marking the village in a one-mile radius around its edge ... after four months of abandoning worship in their beloved parish hall and moving instead to an outdoor amphitheater ... after four months of having nearby townspeople leave food at a boundary stone ... after four long months ... that seemed like four decades ... the plague finally ran its course in Eyam.

And life, as they say, went on.

Sort of.

The town of Eyam really was never the same. Too many people had died. Too many people dwelt in grief the remainder of their days. One woman had buried six children and a husband within the space of a week.

But others remembered their sacrifice with gratitude and awe. Their story was told far and wide. Pilgrims began traveling to their village as an act of reverence. Another new pastor eventually came along, instituting an official "Plague Sunday" in the church calendar to honor them. And into the twenty-first century, with the decline of industry in that region of the country, tourism to this "Little Town That Could" has kept the village afloat financially.

We who are a mere twelve days into our statewide stay-at-home order - intended to *save* our lives, not sacrifice them for the good of New York or Washington, DC - we already know that life as we knew it is gone, just as it was for the people of Eyam, England 350 years ago.

In the height of allergy season, every sniffle, every cough, every sore throat sends us running to the medicine cabinet for a thermometer to check our temperature. Our vacations have been cut short. Our income is in danger, or for some of us has already dried up. Our family members have contracted the virus. Our mental health is at risk. And, yes, our very

lives are at risk.

It is easy to fall into fear.

But this is the beginning of Holy Week in the Christian calendar.

“Hosanna, hosanna!” we shout as we wave our home-grown branches. “Save us, God, we beg you!”

This week is the culmination of the journey we began Ash Wednesday: literally forty days ago (including Sundays in this count). A mere five weeks ago we marked our foreheads with the sign of the cross, saying, “know that you are dust ... and to dust you shall return.” “In life and in death we belong to God.”

A mere five weeks ago we began praying with and to and maybe even *on behalf of* “The God Who Suffers” “the worst the kind death ... a crucifixion.” Fear of death is what we *do* in Holy Week: we acknowledge it; we wrestle with it; we try to avoid it; and we ultimately succumb to it. Knowing that somehow, someday, God’s resurrecting power will be at work. That God really does work all things together for *good!*

And so, in the spirit of Holy Week, in the spirit of that brave new pastor in 17th century Eyam, England, in the spirit of the apostle Paul writing to the early church in Philippi, I call upon us to think of our quarantine the way Jesus thought of his - at least in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke: not as something he *wanted*. But as something he could endure. As he stood firm in his love of God and neighbor, even when all hope had seemed lost.

And if we do this, if we think of our quarantine the way Jesus thought of his, the Scriptures promise that God will lift *us* high. And honor *us*, in our sacrificial love for God and neighbor.

And in the beautiful words of St. Julian of Norwich, uttered in the dark night of the plague, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well!”

Amen.