

A Few Thoughts for the Hunkered Down

Tuesday, December 1, 2020

World AIDS Day in the Season of COVID

But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and when there came a lion or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and smote him and delivered it out of his mouth; and if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard, and smote him and killed him. Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, seeing he has defied the armies of the living God." And David said, "the Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine." And Saul said to David, "Go, and the Lord be with you!" —1 Samuel 17:34-37

Today is World AIDS Day when we are to remember and pray for those afflicted with the disease and to pray for a cure. Gladly it can be reported that AIDS is not only fading from our general consciousness, but most cases are also being successfully treated. Times have changed, and much for the better. Although it is a very different disease there is much perspective and even encouragement to be had by remembering the early months and years of that crisis as we make our way through this season of COVID. We are now facing a dangerous disease of world proportions, but today we can remember that we have been there before.

The appearance of AIDS was mysterious and frightening, and while it first seemed to be only a big city and gay community disease, it soon spread beyond those bounds and across the nation. The medical community was scrambling, first to discover just what this disease was, and then to find any kinds of treatments. The public soon got an education on night sweats, persistent fever, weight loss and Kaposi's Sarcoma. We received mixed messages from the medical world as to how we should respond. (Sound familiar?) On the one hand we were told early on that this was a blood-borne disease and was not going to spread easily like a flu virus, but only through blood. Having registered that assurance, we were also told of the tremendous precautions we must be taking with rubber gloves and strong cleaning solutions. A few physicians were predicting a dark future and all sorts of grim possibilities. For a very brief period the blood supply was not safe, and though that problem was soon recognized and corrected, people were afraid to receive transfusions for years to come. Sadly, many hemophiliacs and those regularly receiving blood products were infected during that dangerous time. The rubber glove industry multiplied in size over those months, and the practice of rubber gloves for all kinds of medical and related work has generally stayed with us since. I have a hunch that masks will endure long after COVID is history.

AIDS also spawned all kinds of protests. These activists directed their anger primarily at the government and at our president for allegedly not doing enough. A few seemed convinced that it was some kind of conspiracy. There were pushes for ever greater funding of research toward a cure. I well remember a woman in my congregation who was saddened and frightened by these calls. Her son was dealing with ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease), and she feared that funding might be taken from that field of research to be directed to this newer disease. Even forty years ago it seemed that everything eventually became a political issue.

While it was easy to become caught up in the more immediate manifestations of this plague, we were occasionally reminded of the devastation it was doing worldwide, particularly in Africa. Millions of children were orphaned because of AIDS. It took some time for the medical community to fully understand this disease, and progress against its spread came slowly. Safer practices were soon being observed to stop the spread of AIDS. In the early years we began to hear of treatments which slowed its progress and extended the lives of victims. In time it all faded from the headlines and from our consciousness, and during that silence good things were happening. There is still no cure or vaccine, but the right combinations of antibiotics are being found which can hold the disease at bay. AIDS has become like a chronic illness which can usually be controlled. It also continues to make for real suffering and death, and we need to pray for a cure.

Remembering the AIDS epidemic is not a pleasant sentimental journey. I mention it all because it has a lot to say to us in our present dilemma. As we remember this earlier ordeal, we can be comforted to know that we are not alone in our fear and discouragement. We have lost friends and loved ones just as happened years ago. We are reminded that life is frail and has always been that way. When we hear confused messages about COVID we can know that there have been confused messages before. This little bit of history assures us that the extreme opinions are usually wrong, and in time the medical community finds their way.

Let us remember A.I.D.S and the many who still suffer, and may the strides made against this disease offer us hope as we pray for more successful COVID treatments and a vaccine. As David prepared to face Goliath, he took courage from his former victories over the lion and the bear. May the faith of David fill our spirits as we remember earlier medical victories. There is hope.

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

As those who keep the night watch look for dawn, so, Lord, we look for your help. May a cure be found; May we find love to strengthen us and free us from fear; In the name of him who by dying and rising again conquered death and is with us now, Jesus Christ.

—Ecumenical AIDS Support Team (Edinburgh)