

A Few Thoughts for the Hunkered Down

Thursday, March 11, 2021

The Exasperation Factor

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. —Ephesians 6:4

“Come now, let us reason together,” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.” —Isaiah 1:18

One wants to keep up on the bug and the progress of the vaccine, and unfortunately this requires one to read the news. (It is no secret that I am not on good terms with the media in these days.) The other morning, I was much annoyed with an update that I found on-line. The brief report from a virus expert was laced with fears and worries about virus mutations, possible weaknesses of the vaccine, possibilities of a new spike and the inequities of the drug’s distribution, and was topped off with a full does of scolds about masks, distancing and relaxed precautions leading to world catastrophe. Amidst all those warnings and harangues was the actual content of the report: We need to remain especially cautious for the next six weeks while the vaccine gets out to our seniors and the vulnerable.

After a moment of annoyance and grumbling over having been the recipient of so many fears and scolds at such an early hour, I was struck with a strange realization. I am in basic agreement with this scientist! For some time now it has appeared that the vaccine will have reached those in special need by about mid-April. If the numbers of new cases and hospitalizations are down by then we should be ready to re-evaluate the situation and very possibly relax the restrictions we have been living with for too long. The scientist and I actually see eye to eye... sort of.

I am still disgruntled with this expert, for the same reason that I have been disgruntled with most of the experts through this whole crisis. Even when I accept their essential message, I cannot accept the way that they present it, and I am not addressing mere matters of niceties. For a year we have been subject to reports loaded with all kinds of fearful possibilities and relentless scolds. Why can’t these same messages be presented without all the fear and harangue, and with some gracious reasoning and a few rays of hope. Rather than browbeat people about still wearing their masks for the next six weeks, couldn’t we instead be told that they might come off in two months if things continue to go well?

These concerns are not just a matter of polite presentation. It has to do with *respecting* and *trusting* one’s audience. Too often experts presume great ignorance

among their audiences and with that the belief that people must be threatened if they are to obey. Fear and scold become the basic instruments of the experts' and media's toolbox. Politicians don't even try to appeal for cooperation but jump to enact regulations and dictates, assuming that this is the only true and effective way to govern. This is sad, for a year of fear, scold and government regulation have polluted the emotional atmosphere of our nation.

Our national leaders in science, media and government should consider the words of Paul when he addressed the very important matter of instructing young people. *Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.* The world is a dangerous place and there are so many ways that children can go astray, but despite the seriousness of the situation, parents must not lead by fear and threat. There is a more gracious way. There is indeed a time for harsh words and sharp warnings, but the heart of our guidance should be positive. Young people who grow up on a steady diet of harangues and gloom become frustrated, negative and disillusioned. Their spirits are crushed. What is true for children is also true to adults, and those entrusted with leadership should understand this.

Many are convinced that daring to give the public any kind of date or goal line for improvement would only end in disaster if that goal was not met and had to be put off to a later time. I disagree. Yes, a goal not realized can be hard to accept, but not as hard to accept as endless months without a word of real hope. Again, we need to hear the Apostle's wise instruction. Paul wants us to trust our children to understand, and not act as though they must always be presumed completely ignorant and then coerced into doing the right things. This same principle applies to any kind of leadership.

Perhaps I must learn to become less sensitive to the haranguers and fear mongers. It is clear that we should all pray for wise and gracious leaders who will dare to lead with candor and hope. And while we are at it we would do well to consider our own leadership in the arenas of service with which we have been trusted. Now is a good time to teach the world how to lead with grace and hope.

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

Almighty God, you have proclaimed your eternal truth by the voice of prophets and evangelists: direct and bless, we ask you, those who in this our generation speak where many listen and write what many read: that they may do their part in making the heart of the people wise, its mind sound and its will righteous, to the honor of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

– Norman Goodacre