

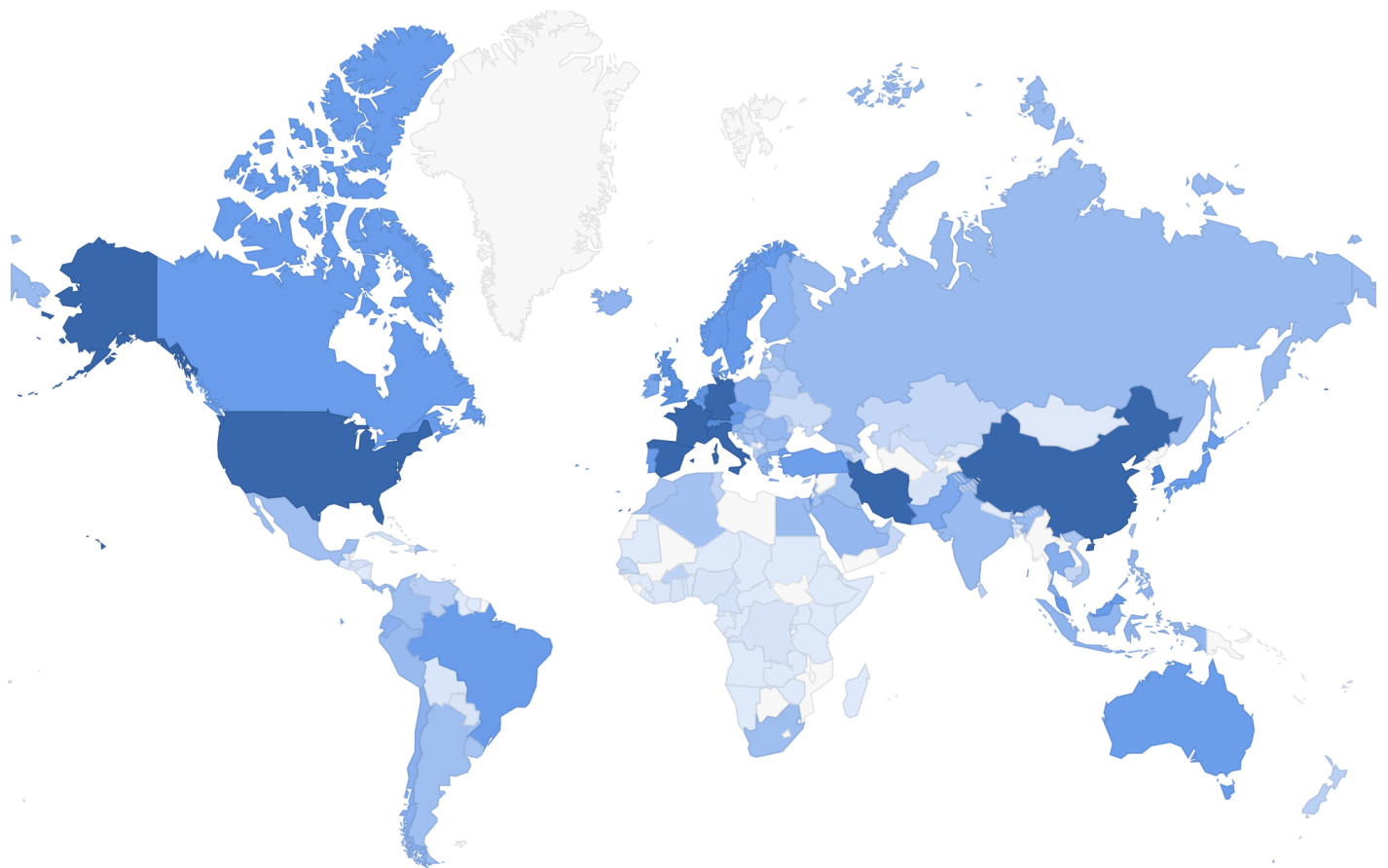
Hope and Meaning as the Virus Swirls

Co-Missioners,

We send you the first in a series of theological reflections on the pandemic that now upends our lives. Today's writer is Steve Albertin, an ELCA pastor (recently retired), a masterful Law/Gospel theologian, and a long-time member of the Crossings Board of Directors. He is also the author and narrator of a new Crossings video series entitled "Faith Seeking Understanding." We encourage you [to check it out](#).

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community



The Leprous Pandemic

by Steven A. Albertin

This last week during an online meeting of the Crossings Board, one of the participants, Cathy Lessmann, observed that in the midst of the current pandemic she now better understands and appreciates the plight of the lepers at the time of Jesus. Cathy's prophetic observation got me thinking. I began to see the parallels multiply. In that first century world, many lived in fear of leprosy and those afflicted with it. When there were lepers around, you kept your "social distance." Lepers were "quarantined" in leper colonies. You did not even want to touch a leper for fear of "contamination." Lepers feared "touching" their loved ones and friends for fear that they too might become diseased.

Today we know more about leprosy (Hansen's disease) and understand that such fears were unfounded. We can actually treat the victims and do not need to quarantine them to die in leper colonies. Nevertheless, the experience of leprosy then is so much like our experience of the COVID-19 epidemic today that it makes the New Testament's accounts of leprosy more relevant than ever.

Like leprosy, the coronavirus creates fear. We are afraid that we might catch it. We are afraid of others who might have it. If we



have been diagnosed, we are afraid of contaminating others. Those who have been exposed (they do not even need be tested positive) may not have to live apart from society in leper colonies, but they do have to live apart in quarantine. That could be in a hospital, at home, or even in a separate room at home for fear of contaminating friends and family. There have been times in the past when I have struggled to appreciate what it meant to be "unclean" in the Scriptures. Now that sense of being "unclean" and "untouchable" is all around us. We wear masks and gloves. We are washing our hands constantly. We dare

not be in gatherings of over ten. We practice social distancing and religiously maintain our six feet of separation. Businesses close. Retirement accounts tank. Economic damage is growing. Lives will be ruined. Thousands will die. We are afraid of becoming unclean, contaminated and...leprous.



There already have been reports of people hoarding badly needed medical supplies, let alone toilet paper and hand sanitizer. There is growing evidence of price gouging. Attorney General Barr threatens that anyone found engaging in such activity will soon receive a knock on their door. It won't be to deliver a bouquet of flowers. Fear can easily slip into suspicion of the other. Suspicion can become hatred. We begin to have nightmares of economic collapse, poverty and death. The Great Depression

all over again! Such economic chaos can easily become social chaos. Can The End be far behind?

More and more this pandemic resembles the apocalyptic visions of the ancients who looked at the destruction caused by such disasters and saw the judgment of God. Could the virus be some kind of judgment reminding us that we can never be our own gods? Just when we think we have it made, riding high on the strongest economy we have ever had, the roof falls in. Our idolatries have been exposed. Our arrogant presumptions are uncovered.

In his Large Catechism in his explanation of the First Commandment, Luther reminds us that we all have our gods. We all have something that we most fear losing and most love having. We are incurably theolatrous. One of the surest signs that our gods are betraying us is our fear. This leprous pandemic that is putting fear in the hearts of everyone is exposing the idolatry that contaminates the hearts of everyone.

Jesus breaks into this fear-ridden world embracing such lepers. He announces that in the presence of the God whom he calls "Father" we do not need to be afraid...even of a leprous pandemic. He became unclean for the sake of all the lepers he loved. He suffered the consequences of loving like that on a cross. However, not even a tomb could quarantine the love of God for lepers. When Jesus burst from his three-day quarantine, he showed that there was no reason to be afraid for *any* reason. Trusting that promise drives out the fear. It frees people from their fear to care for their neighbor.

That promise needs to be on the lips of the church in these dark days of our current leprous pandemic. That promise is not only the source of our hope but for the hope of the world.

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Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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