Covid-19 and the Judgment of God

Co-Missioners,

Today Steve Albertin tackles a question that many are quietly asking, and few are daring to face. Avoidance is rampant also in swathes of the church, where one would wish to find backbones sufficiently stiffened in Christ to have honest and forthright discussions about matters like this. How pleased we are to assume that all of you, at least, are equipped to do that.

A while ago we asked a number of writers to weigh in on this topic. Steve is the first to honor that request. It helps, we're sure, that he's retired. If and as we hear from others, we'll be quick to pass their thoughts along too.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

Covid-19 and the Judgment of God



It immediately caught my attention on one of my newsfeeds: “Michael Moore offers crackpot theory for the coronavirus pandemic.” The article appeared on May 6 in *Celebrity News* citing a recent episode of Moore’s podcast “Rumble.” It quoted Moore saying,

> “The coronavirus is a warning before Earth gets ‘revenge’ over climate change…. If you think COVID-19 has been a bummer, then trust me, you literally can’t imagine just how awful earth’s revenge against us is going to be for trying to choke it to f—ing death. We are in a serious, multilevel planetary emergency…. I really want all of you to please take this moment, take this virus as Earth’s slap on our collective face. Treat it as if nature is trying to tell our species to back off, slow down and change your ways.”

Though Moore never speaks of God, he certainly personifies the Earth as if it is someone punishing us and taking revenge upon us for our disobedience. Much of our modern world has convinced

itself that God no longer exists. Others have sentimentalized God into some distant and harmless being. Yet, such a world feels threatened when some unexpected and inexplicable crisis like a pandemic wreaks such havoc on life. All of our assumptions about managing and controlling our lives are collapsing. We insist that it is no one's fault. We assume that it is something that science can surely manage. However, when someone like Michael Moore dares to question this worldview and talks as if there is someone or something out there taking "revenge" upon us and giving us a "slap on our collective face," it is ridiculed as a crackpot theory. Many think that such a notion as the Judgment of God is outdated and primitive. But perhaps it is not. At least Michael Moore thinks that the Earth is not happy with what we have done and is making us pay for it. Could that be the Judgment of God?

The Judgment of God (or what some like St. Paul and Luther call the Wrath of God) is not just God playing whack-a-mole or tit-for-tat with sinners who get out of line. The Judgment of God is God's negative criticism and verdict of all of life that is broken and estranged from God. Could that be what Michael Moore is sensing in these remarks of his?



Times of crisis and catastrophe have always shaken people up and affected their approach to life, and their understanding of it too. In a recent Wall Street Journal article entitled "Coronavirus and 'Vindication of God'" (May 1, 2020), Lance Morrow refers to the great Lisbon earthquake of November 1, 1755 that killed as many 50,000 people, with even more dying in the tsunami and fires that followed. This massive catastrophe "altered the Western mind," as Morrow puts it. It changed the way people thought and behaved. Who knows how the current pandemic will change the way we look at our world today? Many already insist that after the pandemic passes, there will never be a return to life the way it was.

Morrow points out that 45 years before the catastrophe of Lisbon, the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz invented the term "theodicy" which Morrow calls "the vindication of God." Theodicy asks, "How can evil exist if God is all good and all powerful?" Morrow says, "It was, and remains, the core dilemma of faith…." Catastrophes like Lisbon and all the evils that seem to have become even more monstrous over the centuries

increasingly call into question whether it is possible to believe in a God that is both all good and all powerful. Either God is not all good or not all powerful. Who needs a god that is not good or not able to deliver?

Morrow describes how theologians used to explain the dilemma by making a distinction between natural and moral evil. Natural evil meant things like earthquakes and floods for which humans usually are not blamed. Moral evil was the kind of evil for which humans can be blamed, horrors like Auschwitz or Pol Pot's killing fields. However, now the coronavirus has proved such distinctions inadequate. A naturally occurring virus abetted by human manipulation in a lab and subsequent failures to contain has mushroomed into an evil for which humans can be blamed.

Then Morrow reasons, "There remains a residual temptation to see the coronavirus as inscrutable pushback, as a ferocious reality check. Is the pandemic some sort of cosmic rebuke? If so, a rebuke by whom and of what?"

Could that be the Judgment of God?

"Or," Morrow asks, "is the coronavirus morally meaningless? Is it merely a world-wide accident in which humankind has collided head-on at 80 miles an hour with an 18-wheeler full of germs?"

If Covid-19 is purely accidental, then we have a world without God. Life is finally one great meaningless tragedy. Morrow does not want to go there. He still wants to believe in God. He concludes his reflection by pointing to the Book of Job in which God refuses to solve this dilemma. He hopes that we may "be obscurely comforted by its ruthlessness, its devastation."

Both Moore and Morrow intuit the Judgment of God in this catastrophe of Covid-19, though in different ways. Moore does not name it but senses it. Morrow names it but is unable to come

up with a theologically satisfying conclusion that provides any kind of comfort.



In contrast to both, Martin Luther simply assumes the Judgment of God in his now suddenly relevant work "Whether One May Flee From A Deadly Plague." (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 43 (Devotional Writings), 119-138) I had never thought such an obscure letter that he wrote to a local pastor would ever become so popular. Recently reactions to and commentaries on this document have flooded the internet. The parallels between Covid-19 and the plague of Luther's day are obvious. Suddenly a dreaded disease strikes down people willy-nilly. Right from the get-go Luther simply assumes that the plague is an affliction and punishment from God. Of course, the plague is not God playing whack-a-mole or zapping you with the plague because you yelled at your kids. As original sinners, we are under the Judgment of God *even before* that sin erupts in bad behavior. As expected, this kind of description of the human predicament appalls and horrifies the moderns who are always trying to be good. No wonder the great humanist scholar, Erasmus, was so offended by Luther's *Bondage of the Will* in which Luther describes at length and in opposition to Erasmus this damnable human bondage to sin.

Nevertheless, Luther is unconcerned by the dilemma described by Morrow and portrayed in the Book of Job. For him there is no such thing as undeserved human suffering. *All* are under the Judgment of God. Yet Luther still maintains his joyful faith in God—even in the midst of the horrors of the plague! He does not give up on God and his neighbors even as death fills the streets of Wittenberg. He never flees the plague. How is this possible? Because of Christ! It is only in Christ that the dilemma "How

can evil exist if God is all good and all powerful?” is resolved.

In Christ, we see a God who is all-loving and all-powerful even as the deadly Covid-19 indiscriminately and irrationally afflicts and kills. Like every evil before it, Covid-19 mocks the existence of a loving God. Yet, in the midst of such Judgment of God, we can still believe in an all-loving God. We see that love in Christ. There God suffers with us in the midst of all evil and disease. There God assures us that we are not alone. There God is with us, loving us all the way to the tomb, Christ’s and ours.

However, Christ is not just another innocent sufferer crushed by suffering and evil. Christ is raised! God is indeed all-powerful and promises us to deliver us from the power of sin, death—and Covid-19! That is the God in whom we trust. That is the God on whom we stake our lives. Trusting that promise can do amazing things to people. There are some marvelous of examples of that in Luther’s piece on the plague as he joyfully goes about his work even as death and the Judgment of God surround him. All because of Christ! Thanks be to God!

Steve Albertin

Indianapolis, Indiana
