

The New Testament Church
Lessons from the Plague of 1665
March 18, 2020 – John 15:13 - Pastor Paul Jehle

“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.” - John 15:13

As I have pondered the spread of this Coronavirus, historic parallels come to mind. Though graphic and hopefully much worse than anything we experience today, the Bubonic Plague (or Black Death) of 1665 that hit London, England comes to mind. It had hit several times prior to its inception in 1348. Between 1350 and 1400, more than 60% of the population where it hit died! There are some critical lessons we can learn from this historic parallel.



Scientific studies today say that this was an airborne virus that attacked the lungs, spreading by coughs, sneezes and contaminated surfaces. Probably originating in China, it hit London in mid 1665. By May; 43 had died. In June, 6,137. July increased to 17,036 and by the end of August 31,159! It was no joke. Panic ensued and the streets of London were empty as people fled to avoid contamination from this invisible enemy but where the people fled they threatened others without knowing it since many were “carriers.”

Our story begins in September of 1665 in the small town of Eyam, Derbyshire, about a 160 miles north of London. George Viccars, servant of a local tailor, received a damp cloth from London for his shop and hung it before his fireplace to dry. George was dead in seven days. The pestilence spread quickly throughout the small village of 350 people. They prepared to flee, but something stopped them from doing so.



William Mompesson was the new parish pastor that had replaced Puritan Thomas Stanley who refused to rejoin the Church of England after the Monarchy was restored in 1660. He still lived in the village. But this was no time for division, and together both began preaching open air sermons together in June of 1666. Together they pleaded with the people that God wanted them to stay and not flee, so neighboring villages would not be infected. They

would lay down their lives, preferring others over themselves. Amazingly, the village decided to heed the advice from two pastors united for such a time as the one they now faced.

They quarantined the village with large stone boulders – no one enters and no one leaves. They practiced isolation (now called “social distancing”) as much as possible. Houses where infection began were marked with red crosses on the doors so others would stay away. The words “Lord have mercy” were written on the door as the entire village prayed that God would deliver them and others.





Though not knowing the science, they reasoned that even money was spreading the disease. Thus, they used shallow holes (wells) where they mixed vinegar and water to place the coins in for goods brought to the village, avoiding the direct exchange of money that might further spread the disease beyond their village.



Elizabeth Hancock, who brought the disease to her farm without knowing it after helping to bury a fellow neighbor, buried all six of her children as well as her husband within six days. In order to save others, she buried her entire family herself. Her story remains as one of suffering and sacrifice, yet she continued to serve others in spite of her loss. Thus, her legacy lives on and is marked to this day in Eyam, Derbyshire, England.



In fourteen months, when the disease dissipated by November of 1666, only 90 had survived (26%). But, none of the surrounding villages were infected, and quite literally, the small village of Eyam had sacrificed its life but stopped the spread of the plague! Today, in the midst of the pleas of Prime Minister Boris Johnson in England regarding the Coronavirus, the little tourist village of Eyam displays on its signs and marks the simple actions of dedicated believers who followed the advice of two pastors who put their differences aside to self-quarantine out of love for others. May this help us today as we think of our neighbors and not just ourselves and display the true spirit of Christ for such a time as this. As one FaceBook post put it; *“do not change your behavior to avoid being infected, assume you are infected and change your behavior to keep from infecting others.”*



Note: In the Old Testament, Priests (pastors of the Old Testament) were responsible for administering health laws. This involved the responsibility of cleanliness such as washing the face, hands, feet and clothes (see Mt. 23:25; Lk. 11:39; Ge. 43:31; Dt. 21:6; Judges 19:21; Lev. 14:8-9). When contagious disease was encountered, quarantine was required (Num. 5:2-3; Lev. 13:45-46). Foreshadowing the arrival of Jesus, external health preventive measures (social distancing) should be coupled with prayer for healing that the disease stop and individuals are cleansed (Malachi 4:2; Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18; Matthew 4:23; 8:2-3). Praying for healing today is the fulfillment of the Old Testament exhortation to “heal thyself” both internally (spiritually and morally) and externally (Ruth 3:3; Isaiah 1:16).

It is Biblical to pray for healing, even if *“deadly poison”* or *“pestilence”* comes our way as Mark 16:18 and Psalm 91:3 declare! However, whom God chooses to spare is His business, and thus it does not excuse us from following the basic laws of health for all these laws were for the purpose of *loving our neighbors*. So keep washing your hands (it takes 20 seconds to repeat the Lord’s Prayer), face and continue to practice social distancing until the plague of this virus ends!