

# *“Remember the Past, Improve the Present”*

**Genesis 32:22-31; Romans 9:1-5, Matthew 14:13-21**

**Part II of VII in the sermon series:**

**“For Such a Time as This:**

**Seven Lessons for Living Through Pandemic Times”**

**Based on Esther 4:14**

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From the Pulpit

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A Communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 2, 2020, 9th Sunday After Pentecost, dedicated to all the men, women and children on the frontlines in the fight against COVID-19 including the members of our office and building staff at First Church, to Carl Miller and Gina Harris who lost their lives to COVID-19, to Karl Danneberger who survived COVID-19, to all 18,056,159 people infected and to 689,589 that have died worldwide and to all 4,765,155 testing positive and the 157,921 who have died of COVID-19 in the USA as of this morning and always to the glory of God!

## **“Remember the Past, Improve the Present”**

Genesis 32:22-31; Romans 9:1-5, Matthew 14:13-21

Part II of VII in the sermon series:

“For Such a Time as This:

Seven Lessons for Living Through Pandemic Times”

Based on Esther 4:14

As we step into the second sermon in this series, I would like to rename Lesson #2 – ***“Remember the Past, Improve the Present.”*** Allow me to share two more passages of scripture. From Exodus 24:1-2:

*“Then God said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship at a distance.”<sup>2</sup>*

*Moses alone shall come near the LORD; but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.”*

From Hebrews 11:1 –

*“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”*

*“Remember the Past, Improve the Present.”*

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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All of us know that plagues and pandemics have been a part of human history. The worst Flu Pandemic in World History still remains the Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919 – known most commonly as “The Spanish Flu” because it was believed to have its origins in Spain. Calling it the worst in human history, E. Thomas Ewing, a history professor at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg writes:

*“By the time three waves of Spanish flu swept across the globe in 1918 and 1919, at least 50 million people were dead, including 675,000 Americans.”* (By comparison, flu pandemics in 1957, 1968 and 2009 combined claimed an estimated total of 225,000 Americans and 3 million people worldwide.) It was believed to have infected 500 million people worldwide – 1 out of every three global citizens.

*“(In 1918) they didn’t even know it was a virus,”* Ewing said. *“There had been decades of research on microbes, so they understood that it was transferred person-*

*to-person through respiratory drops, by coughing and sneezing. But viruses weren't discovered until the 1930s, because they didn't have powerful enough microscopes."*

Takeaway #1 – we didn't know it was a virus and there was NO testing because no testing existed.

Takeaway #2 – Spanish flu was also more infectious than COVID-19, caused symptoms much faster and was far more deadly, Nichols said. And unlike COVID-19, which poses the greatest risk to the elderly, Spanish flu targeted the young.

*"It affected everyone young and old,"* said Christopher Nichols, an associate professor of history at Oregon State University, in Corvallis. *"But it disproportionately killed the healthiest among us -- the all-American 22-year-old football player, the strongest lumberjack. People in their prime were getting struck down very quickly. So, the fear that animated people in the fall of 1918 was qualitatively different."*

The Spanish Flu started among the troops stateside as they were training and preparing to go to battle in Europe during WWI. The Spanish Flu claimed the lives of 45,000 young men before they reached the battlefields of Europe, in a war in which we lost 53,000 soldiers in battle.

Takeaway #3 - Despite those differences, the parallels between 1918 and 2020 are still striking. In both cases, there was **no vaccine** and **no treatment** for the disease along with an overriding fear that a besieged health care system might crack.

Takeaway #4: In both pandemics, the most effective immediate response was -- and is -- **social distancing**, Nichols said. "It was called 'crowding' control" back then, he said. "But whatever you call it, limiting contact worked in 1918 -- and it works today."

We have learned several other lessons from studying the Spanish Flu response. In cities which shutdown schools, churches, tent revivals, funerals, restaurants, parades, family reunions, and lots of other places where there was social gathering, the pandemic was controlled well. In cities where that didn't happen, the Flu spread quickly and struck hard. We often here the comparisons between St. Louis - where they practiced social distancing- and Philadelphia where they didn't. The number of deaths was astronomically higher in the "City of Brotherly Love" – a 5 to 1 ratio including 5,000 people who died two weeks after a parade of 200,000+ people welcoming back the troops.

We also learned some other lessons. People wore face coverings in 1918-1919. But they often wore them outside and then took them off when they came inside. They totally got this wrong. We now know that masks are needed both places to prevent the spread – especially when you find yourself unable to socially distance outside. We now know to avoid indoor gatherings in close quarters.

We also know the response to the Spanish Flu was slow in developing. President Wilson and the federal government wanted to stay focused on the war effort. The nation had its first ever draft for war, we were gathering and sending troops from across the nation to Europe, we were driven by major production for wartime – all of which caused a slow response. There was a mentality that "We have to stay focused on the war and the economy and this flu will pass." It didn't pass. Ironically, it spread from Fort Riley Kansas in January 1918 to Queens, New York because troops infected were moved from Kansas to New York to ship out to Europe. It stayed around for three massive waves covering three years.

Also, there were those who protested against social distancing, wearing masks, and any shutdowns. The protesters claimed their individual freedoms were being unduly threatened by anyone who implemented restrictions in federal, state or local governments. They attacked them publicly as communists (which was a REAL threat coming from the Soviet Union in 1918) or fascists – or both. They became violent in their confrontations. In one case, a Health Care Worker shot and killed two people who refused to wear masks and “threatened his life.” He was found “not guilty” for his reaction to their threats.

**Over the last 102 years, we have learned valuable lessons from the Spanish Flu pandemic. Until such time as we have a vaccine, we need to acknowledge and follow five behavioral practices.**

First, we need to socially distance. We need “space” to be safe. Second, without a vaccine, masks and gloves (when called for) are needed inside and outside to prevent the spread of a virus as virulent as COVID-19. Third we need to avoid indoor gatherings that put us within 6-20 feet from others (the distances keep getting further apart). Fourth, we need testing and contact tracing to effectively track the movement of the virus. Fifth, COVID-19 is not political, it is Viral. Therefore, we need to get a grip and get a mask and move through this as best we can because without a vaccine the main tool, we have to fight COVID-19 is our behavior.

Since we decided to have only virtual worship and encourage you to stay home when we gather by YouTube and Facebook Live each Sunday, there has not been one Sunday that has passed when I do

not ache to be together again. I miss you all so much. It really hurts my soul to be apart from you. I miss you all. I love you all.

I also have found myself becoming what I best describe as an “urban fox” – two words which don’t belong together – two words I never imagined in my lifetime I would use for myself (or other human beings). What I mean is that when I have seen you up close, I have felt a withdrawal response - an isolation response kicks-in. It defies my very nature. Instead of embracing, I back off. I can’t explain it. It goes against every nerve and fiber within me. It runs counter to every molecule in my body to be apart from you, to not embrace you, to stay away from you. My heart says, “go out” and be with everyone. My head says, “Stay In” and get through this – and help your congregation get through it, too. Honestly, I am not proud of these bizarre and contradictory feelings. I battle with these bizarre and contradictory feelings every day. They defy my personal and pastoral nature and yet they define the new, pandemic logic of 2020. I don’t like feeling like an urban fox.

In the midst this war against a virus, you are my heroes in this struggle to battle to COVID-19. You are on the frontlines. You put on your thin armor of gowns, facemasks, sometimes facial shields and go to work every day. You save lives. You meet the public in supermarkets, stores, banks, hospitals (as chaplains, doctors, nurses and staff), perhaps even schools again in the coming days and weeks – and so much more. You serve meals to our hungry and homeless neighbors. You take risks to make a difference. You show up and serve others. You are my heroes.

Those who are following all the guidelines – masking, distancing, staying out of public gatherings inside and outside – you are ALSO

my heroes. You are also saving lives. I love you as you help us flatten the curve so we can be together again.

On Friday, I stepped inside a hospital for the first time in five months (which is so strange as a pastor – not having been allowed to visit the sick in five months). I entered as a patient. I saw firsthand what it looks like to be on the frontlines. I was deeply touched by the focus, nerve and courage of each person doing their job to care for me and so many others. To all of you in the health care field, I salute you all. You inspire me. I pray for you every day. It is my opening prayer in the morning and final prayer at night.

While in the hospital Friday, I received a message from Laura Baird. She sent me the story of two OSU nursing students who are taking part in clinical trials that might help fight COVID-19. Roommates Ashley Boldt and Katie Campanelli both tested positive for COVID-19. They got through it and now they are part of trials to treat the disease. They are amazing testimonies to beating this virus. Thank you, Ashley and Katie! And Thank You Hamish Baird for pioneering work that will make a difference and thank you Laura for sharing this good news! Your actions all speak louder than words.

Thank you to all the frontline heroes on church staff, among our volunteers here, and in the community far and wide! Thank you! Thank you!

Some of the lessons we learn in pandemic times are hard to face. Some feel like history repeating itself. In Exodus 24, God tells everyone who is coming to worship to “keep your distance.” Moses is allowed closer, but all the others must stay away. You would think the shared trials and triumphs would produce intimacy between God

and the people. But no. **“Keep your worship over there, please. Don’t come any closer.”** Always at a distance.

To be sure, God socially distances for the people’s own good – it’s not like one just runs up and hugs God without expecting to be seriously burned by holiness – but the wisdom of distance doesn’t erase the people’s desire for nearness. And touch. And comfort. Not just a pillar of fire to watch but a small bit of flame to keep warm. Not just a cloud to follow but a hand to hold. But God is clear: “Keep your distance.”

We learn from God in Exodus that distance saves lives.

We would give anything to be close. But for now, God wants us to stay apart and stay alive. Please know our time will come when we are together again – embracing and holding on to one another (drawn from the UCC Daily Devotional).

As we read in Hebrews, God is blessing us with faith in these pandemic times. The author of Hebrews writes, *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* We may not see the enemy – the tiny Coronavirus named COVID-19. But we should not fear the unseen. \ We should have our faith-filled convictions to guide us. After all, we have the convictions of things not seen. We have the conviction of faith in healing, hope in seasons of despair, love at all times. We have God’s love and our love for another to sustain us and comfort us. We have faith in God and science to find a vaccine, faith in humanity to persevere and find a way to come out the other side of this pandemic. We have faith in one other. We have faith and belief – that we will be together again. We will embrace. We will sing and dance and laugh and pray and

celebrate together – just like we are finding ways to all of this while we are apart.

May God keep you strong as we are apart. May God keep you safe and healthy while we are apart. May God hold us together while we are apart. I love you and miss you so much. Let us continue to grow in our faith and love of Jesus Christ in this day and forevermore.  
Amen.



