

An Impossible Goal¹

Is it safe? Is it safe to come to church? Is it safe to sing? Is it safe to receive Holy Communion? Is it safe to have a cup of coffee? Is it safe for children to come to Sunday school or VBS? Is it safe to wear masks or not to wear them?

The search for safety is an impossible pursuit. Life is not safe. It is not safe to live. Sin robbed us of every safety and now life itself is filled with constant risk. Perhaps the strangest thing about the pandemic is the way we responded to it. We sought to find a path to safety that would relieve us of the burden of risk. Maybe it was predictable but I did not see it coming. Did you?

Other eras with other pandemics found a different response. From polio to influenza, people expected that life came with risk and they accepted that risk. When a vaccine was developed, they lined up to receive it. But they did not put their lives on hold while they were waiting for such a vaccine. They lived with the risk — the risk of death. It does not appear that we are ready to live with this kind of risk.

As a culture, we are prepared to surrender life under our terms but we are unwilling to accept the risk that life is fragile and that death is real. We will kill the babies in the womb or fight to preserve the right of someone to decide when they no longer want to live and we will make sure that when they no longer wish to live, they have a safe and painless way to die. But we will stop everything in the face of a pandemic until we are assured that it is safe to resume our previous lives. How odd?

Personal responsibility was once the hallmark of our nation. Even in the face of injustice and before mountains of prejudice, we took responsibility for our decisions and choices. But things have changed. Not only are we unwilling to accept any level of risk, we seem to delight in being victims. It is always somebody else's fault and someone else's responsibility. The pandemic only highlighted this surrender of personal responsibility and how comfortable we were with our victimhood.

The problem is that this is incompatible with Christianity. Christianity expects and even requires that we accept responsibility for our part in the wrong of the world. We cannot blame it all on Adam and Eve nor can we blame it on others. In the baptismal rite this is unmistakable. Borrowing Luther's Flood Prayer, we pray: *Almighty and eternal God, according to Your strict judgment You condemned the unbelieving world through the flood, yet according to Your great mercy, saved believing Noah and his family, eight souls in all. You drowned hard-hearted Pharaoh and all his host in the Red Sea, yet led Your people Israel through the water on dry ground, foreshadowing this washing of Your Holy Baptism. Through the Baptism in the Jordan of Your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, You sanctified and instituted all waters to be a blessed flood and a lavish washing away of sin. We pray that You would behold [name(s)] according to Your boundless mercy and bless [him/her/them] with true faith by the Holy Spirit, that through this saving flood all sin in [him/her/ them], which has been inherited from Adam and which [he himself / she herself / they themselves] [has/ have] committed since, would be drowned and die. Grant that [he/she/they] be kept safe and secure in the holy ark of the Christian Church, being separated from the multitude of unbelievers and serving Your name at all times with a fervent spirit and a joyful hope, so that, with all believers in Your promise, [he/she/ they] would be declared worthy of eternal life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

Think about what we are praying. There is mum and dad with the little baby in their arms and sponsors in tow and here we are praying that by baptism the Father would behold this child according to His mercy, bless the child with true faith, and by this baptism forgive the inherited sin of their first parents and, here it comes, the sin this baby has committed since. Not even the infant in the hands of his or her parents is immune from sin and we admit this personal responsibility.

Therein lies the difference with the past. We no longer accept that life is dangerous and death is always near and we no longer admit any personal culpability for this death and the danger we face. That is at least one reason why we have applied to the corona virus a standard our forefathers did not apply to other pandemics. They lived with death and they accepted personal responsibility for the choices they made in life. We do not want to admit either. We prefer to live in the Pollyanna world of imagined truths rather than the real world of terrible truths. So in this world we will do whatever is necessary to pursue the goal of safety while deferring matters of worship, religion, and faith as nonessential to daily life. In this world we will gladly exchange the illusion of safety for the reality of what it means to live in a world of sin. And so the Gospel is less urgent than putting on a mask and keeping six feet of distance and altering our lives in response to a threat none of us can even see.

So what will this mean for our future? Can we guarantee enough personal safety to satisfy those who are fearful? Can we bypass personal responsibility for sin in order to keep from offending those who do not believe they are sinners? Can we preach a Gospel which will not offend this personal immunity from blame? The world wants us to tell them that everything will be okay. But it won't. Even if a vaccine for the corona virus is found and we never face its threat again, everything will not be okay. Not tomorrow and not ever. At least not apart from the rescue and redemption of Jesus Christ who fixes the mess of our sin with His own blood and dies to give us the power of His life.

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Near the beginning of this pandemic I had a discussion with parish leaders, most of whom were not attending and had little desire to attend given the threat of COVID 19. I asked them what it would take for them to feel safe so they could return to Church. None of them had an answer. In other words, this was a moving goalpost and one that lived largely in the realm of their feelings. Some of it depended the assurances of science but most of it was the illusive emotion of safety and security. This is a standard and goal impossible to reach for any congregation and for any community of faith. So we are still waiting for some folks to return. Maybe they will never return. Unless we can guarantee them safety in the moment, they are not willing to hear of the safety of eternal life. This problem, my friends, will not go away.