

Pastor T.C. Arnold
Christmas Eve
Luke 2
December 24th, 2020

A year ago, on Christmas Eve, if we were to say words like “social distancing,” we would have no idea what that means. Last year at this time, the use of a word like “Quarantine” might not ever come up in conversation. But today, that’s a different story.

However, throughout history, such things were well known. There is a story about a Derbyshire village in England, the village of Eyam, where one can visit today and get a history lesson that demonstrates how its people showed great strength, faith and self-sacrifice during the time of a terrible plague 350 years ago.

The story begins with an itinerant tailor who stayed at the stone cottage of Mary Cooper in the summer 1665. In late August a parcel of cloth arrived for him from London. Feeling its dampness, the tailor, George Viccars, spread it before the fire to dry.

Two days later, he was wracked with a fever. A rosy rash covered his body and by the evening of the second day he was dead. Within hours, Mrs. Cooper, the woman whose house he stayed, discovered that her son had the same symptoms. He also perished. The next day Peter Hawksworth died. So did Thomas Thorpe, neighbors on both sides. Across the street Sarah Sydall also died. The bubonic plague had overtaken this small village of 400 people.

In response the town rector, William Mompesson, called an emergency meeting. He announced that all Church Services would now be held outside. There were to be no more gatherings for funerals. The people had to bury their own dead... and there were a lot of them. They quarantined to hold the sickness to just the village boundaries. And for such a small town, this was truly a self-sacrifice for the sake of others.

All told, 260 of the 400 residents died during this plague that lasted from the summer of 1665 to December 1666. And on Christmas of that year, the villagers gathered together for a great burning of goods and clothing in order to purge away any lingering “seeds of poison.” The children, again, began to play in the streets and the warmth and dignity of ordered life returned to the people of Eyam.¹

A joyous Christmas celebration. The one who breaks the darkness comes – the light of the world. Jesus comes to destroy the devil’s poison. The fire, that doesn’t burn clothing but rather purifies that which has been defiled by sin. The incarnate Lord of Bethlehem – the King of kings the Lord of lords comes forth and there is much rejoicing. What better time is there to celebrate the end of something terrible than at the beginning of a life given for you and me. A joyous Christmas celebration. Unto us a Child is born. Unto us a Child is given. Christ the Lord.

The plague of a virus may be on our minds in 2020. Today we can resonate with a story from 350 years ago now more than ever. However, there is actually a much worse plague we deal with daily. It’s called the plague of sin. Because of this plague, the whole world, not just a village, region, or country needs a remedy. And God lovingly gives it. He gives it in the form of His Son, the one we

¹ Facts for this story are found in *The Plague Village of Eyam* by Gary Thompson. *Touchstone*, November/December 2020.

celebrate today. Jesus was born for this purpose. Jesus was born so that lasting death has no effect. Jesus was born to die so that we live for all eternity.

Christmas 2020 may be different than any other Christmas you have known before. For Christ Lutheran, it's been different. We didn't go caroling this year. We didn't make cookies for our older members. We didn't have the kind of Children's Christmas program that we are used to seeing. The virus changed so much for our parish family, and for the families of our homes as well. We know people who have died. We know how things are different.

Beloved, while this may be a first for us, this type of thing is not the first for this world nor the church. There have always been plagues – for as long as there has been sin. This may be a first but this is nothing new. And every time – no matter if its suffering because of a disease, the loss of a job, the brokenness of a family tragedy, the horrible news we never saw it coming, the Lord remains the Lord through it all. And one thing we can count on for sure. Jesus triumphs. He leads us through the darkness into His marvelous light.

For those in the village of Eyam, the plague came... it was horrible... then it was over. For us... no matter if it's COVID or whatever distress causes our hearts to be anxious... It comes... it's horrible... and then it's over. Our promise for that is what we are here celebrating this evening/night. The promise that Jesus comes to reconcile us to the heavenly Father through dying on the cross for us means that... while this world may be horrible at times... it will be over. Over for all of us. That's hope, beloved in the Lord. And Christmas, while a new beginning with a Savior born in Bethlehem, is actually the beginning, the middle and the glorious end.

To this day, the 350 year old story of the bubonic plague is still told inside the village church through the various relics therein. There is a cupboard made from the wood of George Viccars, the itinerant tailor's, old cloth box. Rector Mompesson's pulpit and chair are still in use. There's an illuminated plague register of all who lost their lives hanging in the chancel. There is a "plague window" which hold six stained glass panels that tell part of the dramatic story that occurred so long ago.

But there is nothing that can be compared to the story told today... of a Savior born in Bethlehem for you and me. Jesus is the story within every story... of tragedy, of glory. Jesus remains the heart and soul of our story – in good times and in bad. So, this Christmas that is unlike any other... It's really still the same. Jesus, the same today, yesterday and forever. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.