

Pastoring in Plague-Times

By Chappell Temple

You might say that he showed up at just the wrong time. For it was just after coming back to his home town at the age of 31 to serve as a leader in his church – having been turned down for the job seven years earlier – that a devastating war broke out in the region, one that not only lasted for three decades but that claimed more than eight million casualties, or some 20 percent of the German population at the time. Ostensibly it was a difference between Catholics and Protestants – still sorting out the after-effects of the Reformation – that set it off, but like so many other such conflicts, it soon morphed into something far greater with the religious differences of the dispute lost in the greater geopolitics of the time.



Still, the young pastor faithfully did his work the best he could, even while the armies of the great nations all around his province of Saxony ravaged the land, leaving farms and shops depleted and destroyed. What's more, the pastor found himself not only forced to deal with soldiers who were quartered in his house, quickly diminishing his own supplies, but with hordes of refugees who poured into his walled city for protection until Eilenburg – which Martin Luther had once called a “blessed lard pit” – too was overflowing with human needs.

And then it struck – a disaster so severe that even the invasion of the Swedes paled beside it. For the combination of overcrowding, ruined crops, and a crippled infrastructure produced a famine so extreme that it is said that thirty or forty people fought in the streets to claim not toilet paper but a dead cat or crow. And the plague that followed in 1637 quickly spread throughout the town, claiming more than eight thousand persons in a single year there.

To make matters worse, however, the church superintendent went away for a change of air and never came back. And of the remaining five clergy in town, four quickly died from the plague, leaving only the young archdeacon to carry on. He often read the funeral service to some 40 to 50 persons a day, in fact, and in all, he buried some 4,480 individuals that year, including his first wife.

Still, Martin Rinkart labored on with an almost inexplicable trust in God and a readiness to give thanks. For even though worn out and prematurely aged by the time that a long looked-for peace ended the Thirty Years War in 1648 (some fourteen months before his own death), the poet turned preacher left behind an incredible testimony to that faith in a hymn we have far too often relegated only to the Thanksgiving season. Written just as the plague began to hit his hometown, *Nun Danket Alle Gott*, became the theme of Martin Rinkart's life, in fact.

Now thank we all our God, with hearts and hands and voices; who wondrous things hath done, in whom His world rejoices; who from our mother's arms hath blessed us on our way, with countless gifts of love and still is ours today.

Then just in case it was not plain, the second verse spelled it out further:

O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us; with ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us; and keep us in His grace and guide us when perplexed, and free us from all ills in this world and the next.

And in an age of anxiety-fueled by yet another plague – this one a virus that is sweeping the globe – perhaps those words of Martin Rinkart are worth remembering today as well. For like that young cleric, the task of the church is not to run away from those who are ill, but to minister to all whatever it may take. To quote the former prime minister of England, Margaret Thatcher, this is indeed “no time to go wobbly.”

As all things do, the coronavirus too will eventually pass and the good news is that it is not going to take thirty years to do so. In the meantime, may those of us in the church demonstrate not only the compassion of Martin Rinkart, but his courage as well. After all, how did that former cantor turned caregiver end his hymn?

“For thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore.”

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