

## ISOLATION

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Matthew 1:18-25

Recently, I was searching for a bit of information and was digging through some old *From the Pastor* emails which I send out each week when I stumbled on something I had written that caused me to shudder. One year ago, on December 10, in the *From the Pastor* email, I wrote about the sharply rising cases of COVID-19 in our county and our country. I wrote these words, “Thankfully, vaccines are starting to roll out. However, it may be a year before we are all inoculated and our lives can return to normal. Meanwhile, we need to continue mask-wearing and distancing.” I remember writing those words and at the time I thought that a year sounded awfully pessimistic, but it was what the scientists were suggesting. Well, here it is, a year later, and we are looking at a massive wave of the newest variant of this virus, the omicron.

Omicron, as we all now know, is a letter of the Greek alphabet. I had assumed that naming the virus variants with letters of the Greek alphabet was a common practice, like naming hurricanes after people, or naming the streets in Atlantic City after spaces on a Monopoly board. But it is not. According to an article in the Washington Post, I learned that assigning Greek letters to COVID variants is a brand new practice established by the World Health Organization. Scientists already had an established naming system for virus variants. One example would be B.1.1.7. I have no idea what that means. Apparently, the media didn’t either and so they began identifying variants by the names of their country of origin. This was a practice that the World Health Organization determined to be “stigmatizing and discriminatory.” For example, you may recall an early, highly contagious strain dubbed the UK variant. The folks in Britain weren’t terribly happy with that label. Neither were the people at the University of Kentucky.

The World Health Organization convened a series of meetings to develop a new naming protocol. They contemplated using the names of birds, the names of Greek gods, and other things. Finally, they settled on the Greek alphabet for simplicity. I liked that because I happen to know the Greek alphabet. [alpha beta delta...omicron] Omicron, is our the latest variant. The next letter in the alphabet is Pi. That will be very popular because everyone likes pie.

Lately, the news about Covid-19 has focused on delta and omicron. But what happened to the other letters—alpha, beta, gamma, etc. Well, alpha was that UK variant that I mentioned, beta was found in South Africa, gamma was found in Brazil. And so on. Most of these strains have been supplanted by the delta variant which became globally dominant back in September. Interestingly, the World Health Organization chose not to use two letters of the Greek alphabet, Nu and Xi.

They chose to skip Nu because it sounds like the English word new and that could be confusing. “Is this the old variant?” “Yes, it's new.” That’s like Abbott and Costello asking “World Health Organization’s on first?” The other letter they skipped is Xi which is commonly spelled x-i which is also the name of the leader of China, President Xi (shee). We really couldn’t have a variant associated with the Chinese president.<sup>1</sup>

So, now, a year later, when we thought this virus would be licked, we are looking at possibly more closings and shutdowns in the new year. The Nashville Predators have cancelled their next three games. In New York City, many Broadway shows have closed. Restaurants in Philadelphia have shut down temporarily. In the Netherlands, starting today, all non-essential shops, restaurants, bars, cinemas, museums, and theaters must stay shut until January 14. They are worried about omicron.

It was just two years ago this week, that a cluster of patients in Wuhan, China, began to experience fever and shortness of breath. By January, the cause was identified as a novel coronavirus which they named COVID-19. By January 13th, the virus was reported in Thailand. Two days later, it was found in Japan. Pretty soon it was global. On March 15, with the virus firmly established across this country, we closed this church for in-person worship. The following Sunday, we began streaming our worship over the Internet. Since then, we've been learning to adapt and cope.

Without a doubt, people have been affected by this virus, not just physically, but mentally, as well. I strongly believe that we will have a generation of people whose lives have been affected in the same way that people were affected by the Great Depression, and by the World Wars. I am especially worried about the long-term mental health of our young people. I've observed this in my own daughter who had the last two years of her college career turned upside down. She spent two semesters at home with mom and dad taking classes on zoom. While mom and dad enjoyed our extra time with our child, we recognized that this was not the best situation. She had a summer internship in Washington, D.C., all arranged but that got downgraded to working remotely from home, with mom and dad. She was lucky because most of her friends' internships and summer jobs were canceled altogether.

I worry about all the children in K through 12 who were unable to attend school and hang out with their friends. I believe that mental health professionals are going to be dealing with the fallout of COVID for a very long time. A study by the CDC shows that as of June (six months ago), 140,000 children in this country had lost a parent or grandparent caregiver to Covid. That is a wound that will never heal.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/14/greek-alphabet-covid-variant/>

What I observed in my daughter and in so many other people was the detrimental effects of isolation—isolation forced on us by the pandemic. For so long, we were cut off from one another. Yes, we could talk on the phone or video chat, but we quickly realized that that is not the same thing as being together in person. We couldn't gather at church, for sporting events, for concerts, for meals, for holidays. We couldn't travel. Families were cut apart. Because my own mother lives in a retirement community, her children could not visit her for a number of months. I've heard story after story of how you were also isolated from your loved ones.

For human beings, isolation is a terrible thing. In addition to its emotional cost, there are physical ramifications as well. It's no coincidence that prisons use solitary confinement as a form of punishment. Human beings are social creatures. We thrive on contact and community. We wither in isolation. Socially isolated adults are at higher risk of premature death.

Our word isolation comes to us from the French word *insolé* which itself comes from the Latin word *insula* which means island. Isolation is an island alone in an endless sea.

Isolation from our own fellow human beings is a terrible thing. But far worse is isolation from our God. Tragically, too many people feel such a disconnect from God that for them God ceases to exist. However, it is the recurring promise of our holy scriptures that, in truth, we are never alone or isolated from God. God is, in fact, always present with us.

Our scriptures are filled with numerous accounts of people who felt lost or isolated from God, and yet God remained with them, even tracking them down when they've run away.

**Moses**, after killing the Egyptian, flees the city and settles in the land of Midian. God finds him and speaks to him from the burning bush.

**Noah** and his family, isolated in the ark, when God sends them a message through a dove.

**Jacob**, alone and on the run, encounters God who wrestles with him and gives him a blessing.

**Joseph**, sold by his brothers into slavery, is saved by God and in turn Joseph becomes the instrument of salvation for his people.

**Elijah**, on the run from the murderous Queen Jezebel, hiding in a cave on a mountain, is approached by God in the still small voice despite the chaos of wind and fire and earthquake.

**Hannah**, childless and cruelly mocked by her husband's other wife Peninnah, in her feeling of isolation prays to God who sends her a son. The son would become the prophet, Samuel.

Each of these persons, in one way or another, cries out the words that we find in Psalm 22: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from*

*helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.* These are the agonizing words of those who feel cut off from God.

Our scriptures begin in Genesis with the story of creation and the subsequent sin of the people who disobeyed God. But God did not throw in the towel; God remained with us. The covenant with Abraham and Sarah was the start of God's promise to stay with his people always. And we've seen time and again when God made himself known to those who felt that God was gone.

Finally, in the ultimate act of love, God came to us in human form, to be with us and to teach us how to be with God. This is the story of Christ, born of a woman, fully human and yet fully God. This is the story of our faith, the story we celebrate at Christmas, that God came to us, to be with us as Jesus the Savior, born of Mary, fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, *Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, God is with us.*

The Season of Advent is a time of hoping, and waiting, and anticipation, all for the birth of "*God with us.*" But that child has already been born; that child has come into our world. This time of Advent is the time for us all to reflect upon what that means, to ponder the promise that we are never alone, that we are never isolated, never apart from our God. We are not islands in a sea of pain. Advent is a time of joy to celebrate that no, we have not been forsaken, but that we are loved and cherished by our creator. God is with us.

The words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm speak of God as being a shepherd, one who always watches over and protects the flock. And no matter how isolated we may feel, we can rejoice in the promise of this psalm: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.* The prophet Isaiah wrote these words to the Jews in Exile, *Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God... He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.*

In this season of Advent, let us give thanks for our shepherd, our savior, the one who comes so that we will never have to be alone.