

March 8, 2020  
The Second Sunday in Lent, Year A  
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert  
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Genesis 12:1-4a  
Psalm 121  
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17  
John 3:1-17

Because I am *not* doing a social media fast for Lent, on Friday I saw my first Coronavirus meme on Facebook. It featured on one side a cartoon image of a blue bird wearing a face mask, and on the other side these words:

Coronavirus has killed  
about 3,000 people.  
It has crashed financial markets  
and gets 24/7 news coverage.

9 million people die per year  
from starvation.  
25,000 deaths per day.  
The media never mentions it.

The difference?  
Coronavirus affects the rich,  
starvation doesn't."<sup>1</sup>

The average daily number of deaths due to starvation is in fact 25,000.<sup>2</sup> That number is so horrifying that you'd think I would know it offhand, but I had to look it up, which confirms that one symptom of privilege is cluelessness. On the other hand, at least I'm clued in enough to know that, while wealth never seems to trickle down, travail surely does. Therefore, if COVID-19 continues to spread, the poor will almost certainly end up suffering the most.

At least some acknowledgment of this is turning up in the news media. This week *The New York Times* ran an article titled "Avoiding Coronavirus May Be a Luxury Some Workers Can't Afford." It began with this:

Stay home from work if you get sick. See a doctor. Use a separate bathroom from the people you live with. Prepare for schools to close, and to work from home. These are measures the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recommended to slow a coronavirus outbreak in the United States.

Yet these are much easier to do for certain people — in particular, high-earning professionals. Service industry workers, like those in restaurants, retail, child care and the gig economy, are much less likely to have paid sick days, the ability to work remotely or employer-provided health insurance.

The disparity could make the new coronavirus ... harder to contain in the United States than in other rich countries that have universal benefits like health care and sick leave, experts say. A large segment of workers are not able to stay home, and many of them work in jobs that include high contact with other people. It could also mean that low-income workers are hit harder by the virus.

“Very quickly, it’s going to circulate a lot faster in the poorer communities than the wealthiest ones,” said Dr. James Hadler, Connecticut’s former state epidemiologist and now a consultant to the state. His work has found that influenza infections tend to strike low-income neighborhoods more aggressively than affluent ones, and that poor families are more likely to live in close quarters with others, and to share bathrooms.

Unequal access to precautionary measures cuts along the same lines that divide the United States in other ways: income, education and race.<sup>3</sup>

Those dividing lines seem only to be getting deeper. On Friday another article ran in *The New York Times* titled “Could a College Degree Save Your Life?” It said this:

When the economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton first published their research on “deaths of despair” five years ago, they focused on middle-aged whites. So many white working-class Americans in their 40s and 50s were dying of suicide, alcoholism and drug abuse that the overall mortality rate for the age group was no longer falling—a rare and shocking pattern in a modern society.

But as Case and Deaton continued digging into the data, it became clear that the grim trends didn’t apply only to middle-aged whites. Up and down the age spectrum, deaths of despair have been surging for people without a four-year college degree ...

Case and Deaton — a married couple who are both economists at Princeton — try to explain the causes in a new book, “Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism.” Their basic answer is that working-class life in the United States is more difficult than it is in any other high-income country. “European countries have faced the same kind of technological change we have, and they’re not seeing the people killing themselves with guns or drugs or alcohol,” Case says. “There is something unique about the way the U.S. is handling this.”<sup>4</sup>

If you’re a regular reader of *The New York Times*, you may be familiar with Yamhill, Oregon. That’s the hometown of *Times* Opinion writer Nicholas Kristoff. He has written quite eloquently about the alarming fates of the people he grew up with, the ones who stayed behind in Yamhill. In doing so, he has illustrated exactly what those researchers have discovered. His most recent piece in the *Times* about Yamhill was extracted from a book he and his wife wrote together. Published in January, the article is titled “Who Killed the Knapp Family?” It opened with this:

Chaos reigned daily on the No. 6 school bus, with working-class boys and girls flirting and gossiping and dreaming, brimming with mischief, bravado and optimism. Nick rode it every day in the 1970s with neighbors here in rural Oregon, neighbors like Farlan, Zealan, Rogena, Nathan and Keylan Knapp.

They were bright, rambunctious, upwardly mobile youngsters whose father had a good job installing pipes. The Knapps were thrilled to have just bought their own home, and everyone oohed and aahed when Farlan received a Ford Mustang for his 16th birthday.

Yet today about one-quarter of the children on that No. 6 bus are dead, mostly from drugs, suicide, alcohol or reckless accidents. Of the five Knapp kids who had once been so cheery, Farlan died of liver failure from drink and drugs, Zealan burned to death in a house fire while passed out drunk, Rogena died from hepatitis linked to drug use and Nathan blew himself up cooking meth. Keylan survived partly because he spent 13 years in a state penitentiary.

Among other kids on the bus, Mike died from suicide, Steve from the aftermath of a motorcycle accident, Cindy from depression and a heart attack, Jeff from a daredevil car crash, Billy from diabetes in prison, Kevin from obesity-related ailments, Tim from a construction accident, Sue from undetermined causes. And then there's Chris, who is presumed dead after years of alcoholism and homelessness. At least one more is in prison, and another is homeless.<sup>5</sup>

That brings us to the question of whether and how all this relates to church. That relationship is the very point of our Lenten book read, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove's *Revolution of Values: Reclaiming Public Faith for the Common Good*. Note that your Racial Justice and Reconciliation Group chose the book, each chapter of which focuses on a particular subject and representative person. Wilson-Hartgrove amplifies voices that we don't often hear. In the "Introduction," Wilson-Hartgrove opens with this:

Since the late 1970s in America, political operatives have invested money and energy in framing the cultural concerns of conservative white Christians as the moral issues in our public life. This framing was the explicit agenda of many of the organizations that built the religious right, but it has become commonplace across political and religious divides in America's public square. Whether you agree with them or not, conservative white evangelicals serve as the spokespersons for morality on the evening news.<sup>6</sup>

He continues:

... this is a book about how the religious right taught America to misread the Bible. It's also an introduction to the people who can teach us to hear God's Word anew. Each chapter tells the story of someone who has been directly harmed by the policy agenda of politicians who promised to stand for "biblical" and traditional values. Each, in real and painful ways, is a victim of the culture war. But these individuals are more than that. They have been my teachers, and my account of their stories here is the result of interviews I have conducted with them for this book, conversations we have shared over years, and background research into their context and the broader forces that shape their individual biographies. In the light of God's plan to bring justice and mercy through marginalized people, these women and men are prophets who show us a better way. They are heralds of an America that has never yet been.<sup>7</sup>

Wilson-Hartgrove argues that a small group of people have used Christianity to attain success in the political arena, in order to attain success in the economic arena. He constructs a different Christian narrative, one that he hopes will shift the broader national conversation.

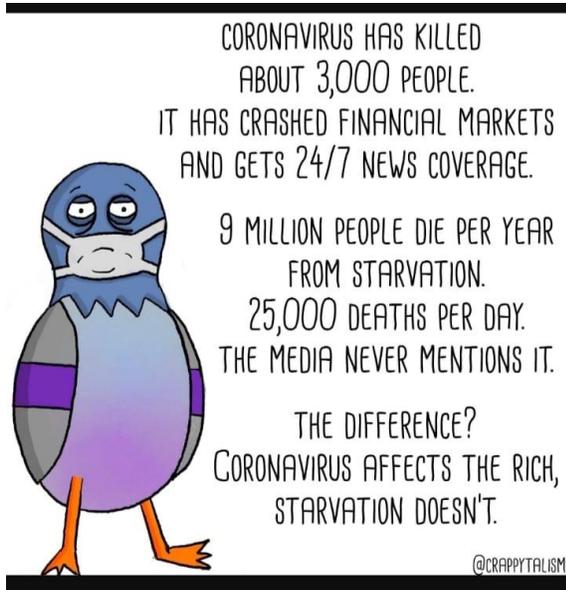
Each of us must construct our own Christian narrative; hopefully it is always growing with us. In that, we might get some instruction from the inquiring Nicodemus. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus is a person of relative privilege and at least a bit of a political operative. In the story, Nicodemus approaches Jesus in darkness both metaphorical and literal. It's metaphorical in that he doesn't know Jesus or what it means to follow him; it's literal because he holds a certain status and doesn't want to risk losing that status. Here at the beginning of John, Nicodemus doesn't seem to get what Jesus is saying. At the end of the Gospel, Nicodemus helps prepare Jesus' body for burial. Does Nicodemus eventually figure it out? Does he simply feel an outpouring of empathy? Or how about this: maybe figuring it all out *is* that outpouring of empathy.

Some say that the sin of Adam—and therefore the central sin of humankind—is disobedience. I'm not so sure. I wonder whether the central sin of humankind is a deficit of empathy. Let's go back to last Sunday and “the fall.” Having attained the knowledge of good and evil, humans are then compelled to act on that knowledge. But doing so requires a whole lot of empathy, and humans always seem to come up short. In response, to reconcile it all, God performed an astounding act of empathy, joining us where we are and as we are. This empathy is not just for Christians or even just for humans: God sent Jesus into the cosmos to save the *cosmos*; the *cosmos* will ultimately be saved.

Privilege is so often maintained with darkness metaphorical and literal. Claiming God's blessing as the source of privilege makes it easy to blame others for the unfortunate stations they occupy. We Americans especially seem to favor justice over empathy, but the Gospel of John seems to favor empathy over justice. The ultimate is yet to be reached, but the kingdom of God is here, now. Today's reading says that we enter it by being “born again” or “born from above.” “Again” and “from above” are actually two different translations of the same Greek word, and John would have used it here quite intentionally. John frequently uses the words *life* and *light*, which are only sprinkled through the other gospels. Through God's grace, it is our privilege to be born, both “another time” and “from on high,” into the life and light of Jesus, which we are privileged to carry for others.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Here is the meme that was posted on Facebook:



<sup>2</sup> I found this statistic on the website of Mercy Corps, on the page titled “Quick Facts: What You Need to Know About Global Hunger,” available at <https://www.mercycorps.org/blog/quick-facts-global-hunger> (accessed March 8, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Claire Cain Miller, Sarah Kliff, and Margot Sanger-Katz, “Avoiding Coronavirus May Be a Luxury Some Workers Can’t Afford,” *The New York Times*, March 1, 2020, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/01/upshot/coronavirus-sick-days-service-workers.html> (accessed March 8, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> David Leonhardt and Stuart A. Thompson, “How Working-Class Life Is Killing Americans, in Charts,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 2020, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/06/opinion/working-class-death-rate.html> (accessed March 8, 2020). By the time I re-accessed the article to link it here, the title online had changed.”

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, “Who Killed the Knapp Family?,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 2020, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/09/opinion/sunday/deaths-despair-poverty.html?searchResultPosition=1> (accessed March 8, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Revolution of Values: Reclaiming Public Faith for the Common Good* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2019), 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.