



COVID-19 (Coronavirus)

How Will You Choose to Respond to Crisis?

By Steve Carter

Backstory

In rabbinic culture, Scriptures were seen like a diamond that would reveal new intricacies as the stone was turned. The rabbis would call this Midrash, as one story could offer up various compelling storylines that could help people get a better sense of God, others, themselves, and the world.

In John 6, we learn that the Jewish Passover Festival is near and Jesus feeds five thousand—which causes the people who just experienced this miracle to believe Jesus will be the one to liberate the Hebrew people from Roman occupation. They intend to make him King by

Opening

If someone would have told me that in the first few months of 2020, the Houston Astros' 2017 World Series would be questioned due to cheating, Prince Harry and Meghan Markle would exit the monarchy, NBA legend Kobe Bryant would be killed along with his daughter and seven others in a tragic helicopter crash, the world would be facing a global pandemic with over a million affected, churches would not be able to gather in buildings for Easter, every sporting event would get canceled for the foreseeable future, and a financial recession would begin after monthly gains in the stock market over the past few years, I would have thought that person was crazy. I had great expectations for what 2020 was supposed to be, and I'm finding that it has been way, way off from reality.

Anyone else relate?

Today we are going to look at a very familiar passage; but how it was understood back then and the storylines that emerge from this text will help us move forward with wisdom and discernment in these very interesting days.

Storyline #1—the Creation story

Genesis 1 starts off like this: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters."

In Hebrew, "formless and empty" is *tohu wa-bohu*, which can be translated as "absolute chaos." The water has always been associated with chaos to the Hebrew

force and so Jesus escapes to a mountainside. The disciples get into a boat and begin heading across when a mighty storm takes place. Jesus walks out toward the disciples, and it brings to the forefront three compelling storylines:

1. Creation story
2. Exodus story
3. People's story

These will help prepare our hearts and minds for Palm Sunday and Holy Week.

If you have a Bible, turn with me to John 6:16-21 which says:

"When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them. A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were frightened. But he said to them, 'It is I; don't be afraid.' Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading."

At first glance this feels like a story about Jesus walking on water; but there is so much more going on; or in the words of Transformers, "more than meets the eye." Like the rabbis, let's consider this diamond and turn it to reveal new intricacies. That's the power of the Bible, this inspired Word that continues to inspire today. So let's unpack three storylines from John 6.

people. Luke even refers to it as "the abyss." Water was considered a gateway to the underworld and a symbol of something wild and completely out of control. But if you look closely at this passage in comparison to John 6, the waves and wind are building, darkness is everywhere, and as the Spirit of God was hovering over the chaos—now Jesus is walking on the chaos.

Genesis 1:3 says, "Then God says, 'Let there be light.'"

God speaks and brings order to the chaos. Jesus walking on the water speaks simply, “It is I, don’t be afraid,” and brings calm to the chaos.

Quick side note: this is the power of a spoken word. It can bring order to the chaos. It can help someone move forward in their story; but we all have probably experienced a word that someone has spoken into our life that has brought deep, deep pain. When someone gossips, slanders, or verbally assaults another, it can have the power to actually move someone to go backward in their story, not to a life of order but chaos.

Storyline #2—the Exodus story

As COVID-19 continues to keep us at home, I don’t know about you but the silver lining in the midst of this global pandemic has been the amount of time our family has spent around the dinner table.

The Jewish people for thousands of years have put a high value on eating together because it was where they believed the best spiritual formation for their children took place. Each week the parents highlighted three stories—not by talking about them as past events but literally writing themselves into the story as if it were taking place right now. So it wasn’t “when the people were enslaved in Egypt” but “when we were enslaved in Egypt.” The three stories were:

1. The Exodus story where God is the great rescuer
2. The Sinai story where God instills His values upon us
3. The Jordan crossing where God is our waymaker

Why is this important?

John 6 lets us know in verses 3-4 that the Jewish Passover Festival is near. The writer wants to frame this story with Passover as a backdrop. Passover was the final plague against the Egyptians that led the Hebrew people to be rescued by God, leaving the land of slavery and crossing the Red Sea. In John 6:20, Jesus says a phrase, “It is I.” In Greek it is ego eimi. When God called Moses at the burning bush, Moses asked God what his name was; God responded, “Ego eimi.”

As the wild squall takes place on the sea, the disciples are filled with fright, wondering if they will ever get to

As we all face this global pandemic head on, if you’re like me there have been many areas of delayed grief. Words, moments, seasons of pain and loss that I had yet to grieve properly; for whatever reason, this season is bringing it all up to the surface. What about for you? Are there any words that someone spoke into your life that were untrue, unkind, and unfair that you are holding onto? Any words that have held you stuck in the middle of a storm or feeling like you’re actually going backward in your story? Where do you need God to speak life and bring order to the chaos within you?

the other side, Jesus calmly walks up and reminds them of a familiar story that they’ve known since they were little kids. The great I Am has you. Do not be afraid.

But take this even further and it sets the table for the disciples, then and today, to start seeing Jesus as the new Moses leading a new Exodus. This exodus will lead people enslaved to sin to new life and freedom in Christ. Just like Moses, Jesus will help people get to the other side. John 6:21 says, “Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.”

Growing up my dad would often say this axiom, “Change adversity into opportunity.” When it was the start of the second half of a game and we were down 10 to our rival, he’d whisper these words in my ear. He always wanted to remind me—adverse conditions create an incredible opportunity for growth, for the new, for innovation, and for surprise. When the disciples were stuck in the middle of a storm, I doubt they could foresee Jesus walking to them, calming the storm, and getting them to the other side. I guarantee they thought they were going to die.

Adversity, crisis, a global pandemic, and uncertainty put so much stress on our emotional health. If you’re like me, this season of crazy has brought you front and center with what Tim Keller refers to as your counterfeit gods—the places you turn in the midst of stress in hopes they will comfort, numb, soothe, or help calm the storm. Maybe it has been Girl Scout Thin Mints, or maybe it’s been harder like alcohol, pills, or pornography, purchasing things you don’t need, hoarding, or escaping

online to emotionally connect with someone else. If we don't handle the inner cries well, they will quickly become a crisis that hurts more than just us.

Storyline #3—the People's story

A number of years ago a buddy of mine invited me to run a 5K with him and his family. Even though I hate running, I did the dumbest thing ever and agreed. They lived a few hours from me, so the day of the race, I woke up early, drove south, and met up with my friend and his family. As we were stretching at the gate, I saw a whole bunch of people using the port-a-potties and decided that was probably a smart pre-race move. As I came out, the race area was packed with people, and I couldn't locate my friend. I got ushered into a group, and I heard the announcer over the speakers: "Alright runners, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1...GO!" I started running, thinking I would find my friend midway through. After running for what seemed like a few miles, an older gentleman was ahead of me, so I asked him, "Hey sir, feels like we've been running for a while, how much longer do we have?" The guy looks down at his watch and says, "We just hit the 5-mile mark, we have 8.1 to go!"

8.1 TO GO?!

I responded, "I thought this was a 5k?" He then chuckled and said, "Sorry dude, you're in the wrong race."

I honestly believed my friend had punked me, so I gritted my teeth, sinned in my mind with thoughts toward this friend, and literally forced my way to the finish line. When I crossed the line, my friend saw me and ran up screaming, "Dude—you ran the wrong race!" Oh, I know I did...

As I drove back home, I reflected on that phrase, "You ran the wrong race." If you're like me, sometimes I can have these expectations that build and build on what should happen or what should take place or how it should go.

In John 6:15, Jesus has just fed five thousand people, and the people's expectations are growing astronomically. Scripture says, "Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself."

As we stand in the middle of COVID-19, what are you turning to? Is it Christ or something else? Or a little of both?

The people were ready to make this miracle worker the new king. They believed Jesus was the one to overthrow Rome and free the people from occupation. The expectations were growing and growing. Fast forward a year or two, and it's the Passover Festival again and Jesus is heading towards Jerusalem. Jesus enters from the east; but He comes riding on a donkey, which was a symbol of peace. A donkey isn't that intimidating! The people are waving palm branches while screaming "Hosanna! Hosanna!" Which literally means "Save us, PLEASE!!"

On the other side of town, the governor Pontius Pilate is arriving on a horse, with armed guards riding in power to ensure that the Jewish people didn't get out of hand. The people waving these palm branches are hoping and expecting a battle royale to take place, rabbi vs Rome. But Jesus comes in peace. A few days later these same people who believed Jesus to be the great liberator are screaming for Pilate to crucify Him.

I heard a leader once tell me, "Pain, sadness, anger, and frustration come in the gap between expectation and reality." However far the distance is between our own personal expectations and what reality actually is will define how great our angst truly is.

I had expectations for 2020 that are far off from reality.

I had expectations for the church in 2020 that are far off from reality.

For my family. For my business. For myself. All far off from reality.

Quick question, "What happens when Jesus doesn't meet your expectations?"

In a few days many Jewish people turned on Jesus because He didn't meet their expectations. Back to John 6, I think this is why Jesus simply says, "It is I, don't be afraid." Don't be afraid when your expectations are not met. The goal is for us to be expectant of Him, not put our expectations on Him.

Storyline #3—the People’s story

Lastly, the great leadership formula is $E + R = O$. Events + Response = Outcome. We do not control the events that take place—2020 has proved that! The only thing that we control is our response. How we choose to respond will determine what the outcome can and will be.

In the face of chaos, crisis, COVID-19—in the face of 2020 not being what we expected—the question we all must wrestle with is:

How will we choose to respond?

Will we turn to counterfeit gods, go backward in our story, and abandon the one who didn’t run away from

the cross but came riding in on a symbol to bring us ultimate peace?

Or will we recognize that Jesus is the one who will bring order to the chaos, the new Moses leading a New Exodus, the one who can lead us to the other side of the storm, the one who can bring true freedom from sin in this life and the life to come, the one who is the great I Am, which means we do not have to be afraid?