

These past few weeks, like many of you, I have been following the course of the coronavirus story, the outbreak in China, the rising infection and death toll, the spread to other parts of the world, stories about government reactions, quarantines, etc. It all seemed rather far away – as news tends to do – somewhere out there. I hoped the poor people involved in China made it – just like I did for the victims in stories about the Syrian Civil War or the fires in Australia.

But there was a small sense of unease about the story. Maybe the best word is “dread.” Because there was a sense of the unavoidable and dangerous about it. It felt rather apocalyptic. It was far away . . . but common sense also told me it was surely coming here – abstractly, I knew that. But there was plenty of time to watch and wait. Besides there was only about a 1% chance of dying from the disease. (I know that number is just a guess at this point, but it’s something like that.) What are the odds of that happening? One in a hundred are good odds.

But one in a hundred are also really bad odds if we're talking about dying. So, it was faintly disturbing to think about. Maybe best not to.

And then yesterday the first American death from coronavirus happened right here in Kirkland at Evergreen Hospital. And there are two other cases at a nursing home just off 116th. In all of America, it's happening right here. What are the odds of that happening? A lot greater than one in a hundred. But it happened. It's real.

That was what I was thinking about when I read this Gospel passage from Matthew. On the first Sunday of Lent we always hear about the Devil tempting Jesus in the desert. Satan gives Jesus the chance to trade with him. In exchange for Jesus' worship of the Evil One, Satan offers Him three things: bread, or material comfort; fame, being recognized by all the world as a wonderworker; and power, "all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence." Satan tempts with the goods of this world – all in exchange for Jesus' dis-obedience to the

Heavenly Father. All Jesus has to do is give up His mission from the Father and He gets the world.

When I read that passage in relation to this time of the coronavirus what came to my mind were two things. First, I thought, my life really is finite and is coming to an end, maybe sooner than I thought. I'll be meeting Jesus or the Devil soon enough. Have you ever thought about the reality of death in relation to the news about the coronavirus in these past weeks? That this thing could get me? This could be the cause of my death?

Now we don't want to panic. The coronavirus is not the bubonic plague, when 50% of Europe died. I would say the fatality rate is low (if I were talking about Syria, that is, and not Kirkland). This will eventually move through and almost all of us will be just fine. But it's real. And the high odds dice-roll can come in. Just look at what the chances are that we, of all places, would be the first city in America facing this. That is just as true of my own death – and yours. It's going to happen, and

perhaps happen when it, at first, seems unlikely. So, the first thing we should think about is death is real for us. And so is judgment on my choices in life.

That is the second thing that came to mind in contemplating these verses. Since my life IS coming to an end in the not so distant future . . . what am I doing with it now? What am I exchanging it for? The Devil tempts all of us the same way he tempted Jesus. He offers us comfort, fame, power, wealth – even if in the rather pathetic, bit-sized pieces most of us are susceptible to. Life is real and finite, so, seriously, let's ask ourselves today, "Up to now, what have I been trading my life for?" What worldly goods have we traded our disobedience to the Heavenly Father for? Are they worth it if we were to die tomorrow?

I pray for the people struck by the virus. May they rest in peace, or may they be healed. But today, in the face of the reality of the coronavirus, I also see a God-given opportunity for us. It's easy for us to kid ourselves in our day-to-day lives. It's easy to think disasters happen

only in far off places. It's also easy to believe death or serious disease only come to other people. Perhaps it's a bit more difficult for us to do that today in light of the virus. And that makes the coronavirus an opportunity – because it's a test. How will we respond to the coming pandemic? With fear, faith, panic, charity – repentance?

That test is the theme of this whole season of Lent we've now entered into. This year, in particular, the question and choices before us should make us do some hard praying and thinking about our own lives. Both Jesus and the Devil remind us today that life is full of choices – or rather, just one choice, really. Do we choose the Father in Heaven, or the world? Life or death? But remember, when making that choice - Jesus has defeated the Devil and death. Jesus is the conquer of the temptations of this world and the Healer of all its pain and death.