

Practice Caring for Others

October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. This year it is being celebrated under the theme '**Give Hope. Save Lives.**' Men and women locally and overseas are being asked to show care and support for breast cancer survivors and those battling the disease. It is recommended that care and support can be demonstrated by wearing pink ribbons or clothing. Pink symbolizes breast cancer awareness and the quest to find a cure for the disease. While we await a cure for this deadly disease practices of care and support go a far way to put a human face to the disease and provide a gospel imperative for hope in the fight against this dreaded disease.

Care and hope are key virtues in the narrative of the book of Exodus and chapter 20 in particular. Commands such as "honour your father and mother, you shall not murder and you shall not steal" etc (Exodus 20:12-13) are designed to strengthen a community's resolve to practice as well as maintain the focus on the benefits of care and hope. These virtues, viewed as vital for the sustainability of the community of Israel, especially as they prepared to cross over into the Promised Land, are also godly disciplines for the health of the community. Like

cancer awareness, living in community shows our dependence on God and on each other and this is especially so in times of crisis. In addition, since the book of Exodus was written during the Babylonian exile in the 5th century BC, long after the Israelites crossed into the Promised Land, the book of Exodus is a narrative lesson on what it means to depend on God.

A choice to depend on God and care for others forms the basis of Christian hope. According to the catechism, to hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life (BCP 413; John 10:10). In the passage from Exodus 20 Moses speaks of hope as being fearless. He says, “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin” (Exodus 20:20). To hope in God is to dependence on God. We show our dependence on God by the way we care for and support others. For this reason the commandments are given on two tablets. The first tablet focuses on our dependence on God and the second focuses on our dependence on each other.

Fearlessness or courage is the word Moses offers to the people of Israel as they come to terms with their new destiny and identity in God. Moses enjoins the people not to be afraid. At the same time he notes that God will put his fear upon

them so that they may not sin or rebel against God. How should we understand these two approaches to fear? The answer in part resides in a comment by Amy Erickson, Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible, Illiff School of Theology, Denver, Colo. who says Moses' words emphasize "the ways communities of God might imagine themselves in new and fresh terms." In other words, a new people, Israel, in a new land, Canaan must learn a new way of living. At its base, this new way of living is courage born out of absolute and total dependence on God.

Do not be afraid is another way of saying be courageous. To be courageous is a way of looking back and looking forward. Israel was mindful that God was with them in the past and God will not abandon them in the present or the future. We too can learn from this movement and God in the life of the nation of Israel and trust God in the midst of our challenges, be they cancer or COVID-19. Radical commitment is the way Professor Erickson describes courage in the midst of challenges in Exodus 20. She says,

Within the frame of the text, which begins "I am Yahweh your god" and ends with "your neighbor," it is revealed that life according to the commandments is fundamentally about radical commitment to God and compassion for the neighbor. The Commandments are intended to form the character of this community by cultivating a deep and enduring love for and loyalty to God, which then extends out to all creation.

Professor Erickson reminds us of the value of commitment in relationship with God and with each other. Relationship with God grounds us in a life of courage or commitment to a God who will not abandon us. Similarly, relationship with each other is just as critical hence in contexts of trauma and fear, for example at the onset of a cancer diagnosis, we are invited to turn to God with courage and commitment. Through diagnosis and treatment we are to depend on God for help and we are to support each other through love and hope. This requires dedication to care through prayer and action from family, colleagues and church.

Failure to care for each other is sin. Moses says God put his fear in the people of Israel so they would not sin. To put the fear of God upon the people so they will not sin means living with the constant awareness that our lives are dependent on God and on each other. Professor Amy Erickson speaks of dependence on God in this way.

“The commandments, however, are not simply a list of rules given to whip into shape a stiff-necked people; instead, they are better viewed as a means to form and nurture an alternative community, bound not by common goals of wealth and prestige, but rather by loyalty to a god who has chosen to redeem a group of slaves from a life of bondage. The commandments mean to sketch out a space where human beings can live fruitful, productive, and meaningful lives before God and with one another.”¹

One commentator, making specific reference to this fear in Exodus 20 says,

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1068

be not afraid of God with a slavish fear; be not afraid of the thunders and lightnings, as if they were like one of the plagues of Egypt, which terrified Pharaoh and his people; be not afraid of being consumed by them, they will do you no hurt; be not afraid of dying by the hand of God, at his presence, and through the voice of his words spoken to you; be of good courage, for the design of God is not to destroy you, but to instruct you, and do you good:²

Like Israel, our lives are dependent on God. Like Israel we can trust God in

moments of deep crisis and fear because God is with us and will give us the

strength and courage to go through the challenges (Psalm 46:1).

Just as the people of Israel put their trust in God in times of crisis in the same way

cancer awareness is about being **courageous**. For this reason we can make sense

of the theme for breast cancer awareness this month 'Give Hope. Save Lives.' A

diagnosis of cancer generally and breast cancer in particular gives a feeling of

being thrust into a wilderness of fear, hopelessness, pain and loss. Yet, God comes

to us in the wilderness of our fear and gives us courage to continue the pilgrimage

of life. Care and support are needed from each other to encourage us on the way.

Just as courage is needed for cancer awareness, dependence on God is vital in

COVID-19 as well as with breast cancer awareness. The emptiness and loss we

often experience with a diagnosis of cancer can be cushioned with a word of care

and support. Archbishop Gregory, when he was Bishop of Montego Bay started a

² <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/exodus-20-20.html>

support group for cancer survivors. He did this because he understood the importance of care and support in times of crisis. COVID-19 and breast cancer awareness have one thing in common, they remind us of the importance of care and support as we go through times of crises.

My sisters and brothers let us therefore be agents of God's care and support for each other. Through prayer, a phone call, a note by WhatsApp and email, a support group, whatever it is, let this month of October reshape our love, care and support for each other. As we raise awareness about the reality of cancer and breast cancer in particular, let this month be another opportunity for us to make Jesus real to each other. Through acts of care and support my prayer is that we will Give Hope and Save lives, especially to those living with a diagnosis of cancer or COVID-19. In the name...