

## **Reflections on the Pandemic**

### **John Marshall**

Most of us come to a point in life when we face the fact that we are going to die one day. It's the "one day" perspective that makes the thought bearable—a day much later than today, we expect. If we are engaged in ordinary pursuits and are relatively young and healthy, that perspective is easier to maintain. Yes, there is the occasional car accident or plane crash, the occasional mass shooting. But we manage to come to terms with the fact of death for others while still expecting to avoid it for ourselves. For those in extraordinary circumstances, however, such as soldiers in frontline combat positions, one's own death is no mere abstraction.

A pandemic is an extraordinary occurrence. So extraordinary we don't count on such a thing happening in our lifetime, if ever. The bubonic plague was in the middle ages and the late seventeenth century. The Spanish flu was a hundred years ago. And yet here we are, upended by a disease that a few months ago nobody even knew existed. While the elderly are especially vulnerable, it can strike and kill anyone. There are two extreme ways people respond.

Some go about life with a kind of defiant attitude. They mingle in public without considering the consequences to others, refusing to wear a mask for example. Few people are this irresponsible, however, and all stores in my area that are allowed to remain open require everyone to wear a mask and abide by social distancing rules.

Others are fear-stricken. I read of one woman who lashed out at another because the other's child got too close to the first woman's. Others confine themselves in their homes and seldom go out even for walks. The shutdown of businesses has added another layer of fear—that of economic ruin. And that can lead to deaths of despair—suicide or drug overdose.

What should our attitude be? Psalm 46 gives it to us straight. "God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the seas, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging" (Psalm. 46:1-3, NIV). The earth giving way and the mountains falling and quaking can mean certain death. Yet we are told not to fear. Easier said than done? No doubt. Yet we are called to remember the one who went through death for us, so that we have special reason not to be afraid. God has said, "'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man [or nature] do to me?'" (Hebrews 13:5-6, NIV).