

Reaping the Whirlwind

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Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be;
They are but broken lights of thee,
And Thou, O Lord, art more than they.
(Tennyson "In Memoriam")

I don't see it as an act of God;
I see it as something no one saw coming.
(Donald J. Trump, March 19, 2020)

The lingering impact of the virus has summoned our best science to respond to human emergency. That lingering impact has also invited fresh theological consideration. In what follows I will explore some complex interpretive options in the Old Testament concerning the coming of the "plague" that in some way or another, in biblical horizon, is inflected by the reality of God. It is possible to trace out in the Old Testament at least three (maybe more!) interpretive options for such a God-linked reality of the plague.

I.

The first and most obvious interpretive possibility is the transactional mode of covenant. That transactional mode is based on the simple premise that in a tightly ordered world, "good people prosper" and "evil people suffer." Covenant requires obedience to commandments. Obedience is rewarded; disobedience is punished. This calculus is readily articulated in Psalm 1:

The Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Psalm 1:6)

We can trace that reasoning in the two great recitals of blessing and curse in the Torah:

If in spite of these punishments you have not turned back to me, but continue hostile to me, then I too will continue hostile to you. I myself will strike you sevenfold for your sins. I will bring the sword against you, executing vengeance for the covenant; and if you withdraw within your cities, I will send pestilence among you, and you shall be delivered into enemy hands. When I break your staff of bread, ten women shall bake your bread in a single oven, and they shall dole out your bread by weight; and though you eat, you shall not be satisfied.
(Leviticus 26:23-26)

The phrasing is exactly symmetrical: you are hostile; I will be hostile! Divine hostility takes the form of a sword of vengeance; upon retreat from battle there comes pestilence; and the result of

pestilence is famine. Thus we get the great triad of divine response. That triad, moreover, is readily seen in sequence. From war there may come pestilence, and from pestilence there may come famine. This is the outcome, described in advance, for violation of Torah. There is no uncertainty. These curses are not a natural threat. They are simply statement of the future Israel may choose by the way it orders its life. We are able to see this same triad in play in the narrative of David (II Samuel 24:12-13) in the divine response to the royal census. It is noteworthy that David chooses pestilence in order to submit to direct divine action rather than suffer from the “human hands” of the sword. David trusts that even in this divine response, he may find “mercy” that he will not find in human interaction. In II Chronicles 20:9, moreover, prayer in the temple is offered as the one and only antidote to this triad of divine judgment. The same triad shows up as “the horsemen of the Apocalypse” (Revelation 6:8). The matter is tightly transactional with no slippage: a pure “quid pro quo.”

The same reasoning is voiced in the second recital of curses, though with expansive exposition:

The Lord will make the pestilence cling to you until it has consumed you off the land that you are entering to possess. The Lord will afflict you with consumption, fever, inflammation, with fiery heat, and drought, and with blight and mildew....The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies....A people whom you do not know will eat up the fruit of your ground and of all your labors; you shall be continually abused and crushed, and driven mad by the sight that your eyes shall see. (Deuteronomy 28:21-34)

The cause of such trouble is that “You have forsaken me” (v. 20). After pestilence in verse 21, the sword is signaled in v. 25, and in verses 30-33, there will be famine because of the seizure of all food by the enemy. This is the same as Leviticus 26; again, there is no slippage in the transaction.

In a general way the prophetic “lawsuits” share the premise of obedience/disobedience and blessing/curse. In prophetic rhetoric, covenantal commandment issues in indictment for disobedience and curse becomes prophetic judgment. The logic is the same. That logic is pervasive in prophetic discourse. It is most intense and acute in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, likely because these particular traditions are closest to the final demise of contrary Israel. Thus Jeremiah’s concern for false prophets, surely informed and shaped by the tradition of Deuteronomy:

Here are the prophets saying to them, “You shall not see the sword, nor shall you see famine, but I will give you true peace in this place. (14:13)

In 15:3, Jeremiah reiterates the triad and adds a fourth element, captivity; but the pattern is the same:

Those destined for pestilence, to pestilence,
and those destined for the sword, to the sword;

those destined for famine, to famine,
and those destined for captivity, to captivity.

The prophetic tradition regularly and frequently reiterates the triad of coming trouble for the city (21:9, 24:10, 29:18, 32:36, 34:17, 38:2, 42:17, 22, 44:13). (It will be noted that most of these uses are in prose that no doubt reflect subsequent editing). It is clear that in this important covenantal trajectory of interpretation, the transactional assumptions of covenant are in full play. The same reiteration is evident in the nearest contemporary of Jeremiah, namely, Ezekiel (Ezekiel 6:11, 7:15, 12:16).

This quid pro quo calculus in the Deuteronomy-covenantal tradition employed by the prophets becomes the ground for the judgment that Jerusalem was destroyed by YHWH for covenantal violation. Thus “the plague” (along with sword and famine) is an instrument of divine punishment against those who violate the covenantal order of creation willed by God.

Such reasoning may indeed strike us as brutalizing and repulsive, given what we would regard as more “reasonable” interpretive categories. We may, however, linger over this reasoning for two reasons. First this calculus is grounded in the conviction that God’s creation is ordered according to a reliable moral intention that is non-negotiable. This most elemental conviction about reliability is not, in my judgment, to be dismissed lightly, because such reliability does not yield to relativity or situational nuance. It leaves for us a chance for wonderment: Is there indeed a line in the sand? A second reason for attending to this calculus is that it is the uncritical assumption of many very well-intended serious people. It is that same “base line” into which we inculcate our children from early on. We do believe and trust that there are non-negotiable givens of moral coherence in the world, even though their exact content is not clear or readily agreed upon. Indeed it is the critical work of science to continue to probe such matters.

II.

A second interpretive trajectory exhibits YHWH’s purposeful enactment of force in order to implement the specific purpose of YHWH. This trajectory is different from that of the transactive mode traced above because there is in this exhibit of force no explicit quid pro quo. A quid pro quo may sometimes be tacit and inferred, but is not expressed. The accent is on the purposeful resolve of YHWH’s force.

The normative exhibit of this trajectory, of course, is the sequence of “plagues” (smitings) in the Exodus narrative. This sequence of ten episodes features destructive actions against Pharaoh’s Egypt in order that the slave community of Hebrews may be liberated from the brutality of Pharaoh. That sequence of ten episodes constitutes ten mighty exhibits of power in order that Pharaoh may discern the power and wonder of YHWH. It is proper to term these dramatic narrative encounters “miracles” as long as the term is understood (not as “a violation of natural order”) as an exhibit of holy, divine power. (Attempts have been made to “explain” the sequence of plagues as a chain of natural cause-and-effect events whereby one natural event triggers the next. That, however, is to miss the point of the narrative. The aim is to exhibit the capacity of the creator God to mobilize the various elements of creation in the service of divine intentionality.

That divine intentionality in the Exodus narrative is precisely that the community of Hebrew slaves may be emancipated:

I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. (Exodus 6:6)

The outcome of the deliverance is the making of a covenant bond with the emancipated community:

I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians. (6:7)

The concluding formula of Exodus 14:30 echoes the same intentionality:

Alternatively the Priestly tradition sees the Exodus as a means whereby YHWH is enhanced:

I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, so that I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord. (Exodus 14: 4, 17)

Taken together these two accents assert that YHWH's enhancement is accomplished by acts of emancipation that require purposeful action against Pharaoh. The two aims cannot be separated. On the one hand, this exhibit of YHWH's force is in order that Israel may know that YHWH is God (Exodus 6:7, 7:17, 10:2, 11:7). On the other hand, it is in order that Egypt may know that YHWH is God (Exodus 7:5, 8:10, 22, 9:29-30, 14:18). Israel and Egypt together are instructed through this exhibit of divine power that takes violent form.

The purposefulness of YHWH's mobilization of destructive power set loose in Pharaoh's domain, moreover, is honed with precision. This is evident in the affirmation that YHWH makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel, so that the utilization of destructive power has a specific identifiable historical target:

But the Lord will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, so that nothing shall die of all that belongs to the Israelites. (9:4)

And the Lord rained hail on the land of Egypt; there was hail with fire flashing continually in the midst of it, such heavy hail as had never fallen in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation. The hail struck down everything that was in the open field throughout all the land of Egypt, both human and animal; the hail also struck down all the plants of the field, and shattered every tree in the field. Only in the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were, there was no hail. (9: 23-26)

Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the livestock. Then there will be a loud cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again. But not a dog shall growl at any of the Israelites—not at people, not at animals—so that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. (11:5-7)

The narrative is at pains to assert that this wild destructive “force of nature” is not random or indifferent to historical distinction. This claim of intention in the exhibit of force goes with the awareness that the destructive action is not any “natural event”; it is the accomplishment of an intentional agent who has a specific historical intent. This historical intentionality is further elucidated in the doxological rendition of the plagues in Psalm 105:26-36. The destruction is portrayed as wholesale in Egypt. The adversative conjunction of verse 37 marks the contrast between devastated Egypt and emancipated Israel:

Then he brought Israel out with silver and gold,
And there was no one among their tribes who stumbled. (v. 37)

Amid the devastation, Israel is unscathed! It is impossible to read the Exodus narrative without recognition that the destructive plagues are purposeful, propelled by intentional agency, and aimed at a particular historical circumstance, namely, the emergence of a new historical people Israel. (see Exodus 4:22)

A second such show of destructive force is articulated in the remarkable poem of Isaiah 2:12-17, a poem that is dominated by the word against that YHWH executes. These verses are framed in verses 10 and 19 by a warning to flee into hiding before the terror of YHWH. That warning, moreover, is laden with the further awareness that there will be nowhere to hide from the divine terror.

The target of the terror of YHWH is identified only by poetic allusion: “proud, lofty, lifted up, high, cedars of Lebanon, oaks of Bashan, high mountains, lofty hills, high tower, fortified wall, ships of Tarshish, beautiful craft, haughtiness.” The imagery tumbles out! None of it is precise, until we refer to the context of Isaiah. Then we can notice that the allusions are to commercial and military matters. In context, of course, the poetry refers to the royal-temple establishment in Jerusalem that the prophet takes as a visible, historical, political enactment of God-defying hubris. The mode of assault and attack against that establishment is left unnamed. The imagery could suggest a mighty wind—a force of nature—that will blow down the great trees. In context, however, it is likely that the threat is the mobilization of Assyria (and later the threat of Babylon). The prophet is here not concerned with secondary causes. It is not “the day of the wind or of Assyria or of Babylon. It is “the day of YHWH”! YHWH will mobilize force that will terrorize the commercial, military establishment the prophet has in purview. Chapter 2 ends with an imperative to turn away from “The Man” (v. 22). “The Man” has only breath that is the gift of the creator, and merits no regard. “The Man” in context surely refers to the “royal man” who presides in Jerusalem but who turns out to be quite penultimate. He is incapable of

withstanding the mighty force of the creator God who decisively impinges upon the security system of “The Man.”

These verses themselves suggest no quid pro quo that would evoke the devastation. It is enough to see that the terror of YHWH is mobilized in order to preserve and enhance the rule of YHWH against usurpatious pride. It is evident that earlier verses in the chapter provide ground for a quid pro quo as Jerusalem is

Full of diviners and soothsayers;
Full of silver and gold,
Full of horses and chariots,
Full of idols. (vv. 6-8)

The idols will not save; Israel will throw them away in order to travel lightly into the caves. The security system of “The Man” is impotent and irrelevant before the terror of YHWH!

These two texts taken together, from Exodus and Isaiah, bespeak the capacity and resolve of YHWH to act in massively destructive ways against any historical ordering that contradicts the intent of YHWH. YHWH, it turns out, has many tools of sovereignty beyond the force of love. We may refer to David’s conviction in II Samuel 24 that even the “pestilence” of YHWH may have a dimension of mercy to it. That dimension, however, was not made available to Pharaoh or to the targets of the poem of Isaiah. Only belatedly, long after the Exodus memory, it is allowed that even Egypt may be heard and healed:

The Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their supplication and heal them. (Isaiah 19:22)

That however will happen only after much smiting, and after an abrupt “turn to the Lord.”

III.

Beyond any tight quid pro quo and beyond the purposeful mobilization of violent force in the service of sovereignty, we may identify a third interpretive possibility concerning the destructive action of God. This third possibility concerns the sheer holiness of God that God can enact in utter freedom without reason, explanation, or accountability, seemingly beyond any purpose at all. The classic textual example is in the whirlwind speeches in the Book of Job, where God declares that God’s forceful creative actions are beyond any capacity of Job to master, explain, or comprehend. God, moreover, intends that God’s actions should expose Job’s anemic capacity for understanding. One can cite almost any text from those speeches:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone

when the morning stars sang together
 and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?
 Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?—
 when I made the clouds its garment,
 and thick darkness its swaddling band,
 and prescribed bounds for it,
 and set bars and doors,
 and said, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther;
 and here shall your proud waves be stopped”? (Job 38:4-11 see vv. 31-33, 39:1-2,
 9-12, 41:1-7)

God addresses Job with questions. God probes Job to see how far Job is able to engage the wonder of God’s performance. Thus the questions posed by God to Job are acts of defiance and put down; Job cannot answer. God knows very well that God’s own wondrous work is fully beyond the ken of Job. God appeals to Job’s competence and then arrives at a triumphant, “then” asserting that Job can never replicate the lordly action of God. Job will have no victory over the bottomless capacity of God!

Then I will also acknowledge to you
 that your own right hand can give you victory. (40:14)

Job cannot answer because Job has no capacity for answer. YHWH’s defiant questions have put Job in his proper place as a dependent creature with clear limitations that he is wont to deny. He cannot ever catch up to God’s glorious sovereignty that is cast in holiness. In the rhetoric of dismissive questions, God is exhibited as “wholly other,” as completely unlike Job and not at all subject to Job’s mode of knowledge or categories of explanation. Job is brought to an awareness that he stands before a sovereignty he cannot penetrate:

See, I am of small account;
 what shall I answer you? (40:4)

Job’s final response is an acknowledgement of God’s capacity for freedom that need not answer to Job’s small insistent probes:

I know that you can do all things,
 and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. (42:2)

Job’s final utterance in 42:6 is inescapably ambiguous. That ambiguity however can only follow Job’s admission of his own limit.

It was Tod Linafelt who first suggested to me that The Idea of the Holy by Rudolf Otto is a useful reference point for reading the poetry of Job. It will be remembered from Otto that the tremendum of God’s holiness is both fascinating and threatening. That is how God is presented in the Book of Job. There is a compelling freshness about God who is offered with artistic style

in Job. At the same time, however, there is a dangerousness that the God before whom Job must stand does not offer closeness, intimacy, or fidelity. This God has no obligation for such availability. Otto's "sublime" concerns greatness that is beyond calculation that evokes awe but at the same time off-putting distance. It is no wonder that the Priestly interpreters in ancient Israel and in the ancient world generally attempted to corral holiness into manageable administratable categories. (See for example Deuteronomy 14: 1-21). The early narrative of I Samuel 6:19-20 and II Samuel 6:6-11, concerning the ark, however, attest an awareness that the holiness of God cannot be presumed upon. That dangerous holiness of God defies the domesticating efforts of the ancient priests even as it escapes the efforts of modern science.

The outcome of this trajectory concerning God's holiness is the recognition that God will not be entrapped in our best efforts. God may and will do wild things beyond our hopes or expectations. Thus the "wonders" that God performs in creation and in history are beyond expectation or administration. Both Job and his friends sought to reduce God to their quid pro quo explanations. But the God who emerges in the whirlwind will do otherwise, and their reasoning is ineffective before God.

We can identify subsequent echoes of this strange outcome of the poem of Job. While the poem of Job remains in the sphere of creation, Israel's tradition boldly carries the same affirmation into the sphere of history. Thus concerning God's demolition of Assyria, there is nothing Assyria can do against such divine resolve. The prophetic poem ends in this defiant declaration:

For the Lord of hosts has planned, and who can annul it?
His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back? (Isaiah 14:27)

The answer is, "No one will annul; no one will turn it back!" No one can annul or turn it back because the holy one of Israel has declared that purpose. Such a claim renders penultimate all of our best management of the historical process. In like manner, concerning YHWH's dealing with and through Babylon, the prophet dismisses those in Israel who question God's intent:

Woe to you who strive with your Maker,
earthen vessels with the potter!
Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, "What are you making?"
or "Your work has no handles?"
Woe to anyone who says to a father, "What are you begetting?"
or to a woman, "With what are you in labor?" (Isaiah 45:9-10)

Israel has no warrant to question YHWH; YHWH acts freely and need not give account. Belatedly even Nebuchadnezzar learned the hard way:

All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,
and he does what he wills with the host of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth.
There is no one who can stay his hand
or say to him, "What are you doing?" (Daniel 4:35)

No one! No one can question. And even such an innocent looking text as the Book of Proverbs allows, as Gerhard von Rad has seen, that in the end, God acts inscrutably, human intent notwithstanding:

The human mind may devise many plans,
but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established. (Proverbs 19:21; see
16:2, 9, 20: 24, 21:2, 30-31)

YHWH does not offer explanation as both Israel and Nebuchadnezzar learned. Life lived in God's world requires coming to terms with the inscrutability of God that defies all limitation and all efforts at domestication.

In light of this exposition we may recognize in biblical testimony three angels of vision for our interpretive work concerning the onslaught of a plague:

- A transactional quid pro quo that issues in punishment for violators;
- A purposeful mobilization of negative force in order to effect God's own intent, and
- A raw holiness that refuses and defies our best explanations, so that God's force is an irreducible reality in the world.

IV.

None of these interpretive options is of much use or interest in the midst of the virus. We do not have energy or inclination for such matters when more closely we are preoccupied with germs, infections, contagion, pandemic, and a general sense of jeopardy. In a word, we want science that can be effectively administered through responsible political channels. We want experts who can be trusted and who will provide relief from both threat and anxiety. And we want political administrators who have the courage and honesty to make effective antidotes available to us without deception or denial.

That is what we want and must have, and nothing more. And of course biblical faith is not in any way inimical to such science that probes into what seems ahead of time as the inscrutability of creation. Sometimes the church has been fearful of science (Galileo!); that however is not the case for the Bible. (We can recognize that the Bible is indeed inimical to scientism of the kind fostered by some of the neo-atheists. Such scientism seeks to make the work of science into the master-narrative of worldly reality, a claim that it cannot sustain.)

But while being fully appreciative of responsible scientific work, the Bible at the same time is fully cognizant of the limitation of such work. In the singular poem of Job 28, the poem endorses human exploration of the earth and gladly affirms gains made by such probes:

The sources of the rivers they [miners] probe;
Hidden things they bring to light. (vv. 11)
But then the poem reverses field to ask:
But where shall wisdom be found?
And where is the place of understanding? (vv. 12, 20)

And then comes answer:

God understands the way to it,
and he knows its place.
For he looks to the end of the earth,
and sees everything under the heavens.
When he gave to the wind its weight,
and apportioned out the waters by measure;
when he made a decree for the rain,
and a way for the thunderbolt;
then he saw it, and declared it;
he established it, and searched it out. (vv. 23-27)

God knows! And then the poet draws a conclusion concerning human engagement with the mystery of creation:

Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom;
and to depart from evil is understanding. (v. 28)

True knowledge is finally not in scientific exploration but in the fear of YHWH and the shunning of evil. Important as it surely is, scientific exploration has its limits.

More directly a proverb makes a categoric distinction between the inscrutability of the creator God and the work of human investigation:

It is the glory of God to conceal things,
but the glory of kings to search things out. (Proverbs 25:2)

Human investigation (characteristically funded by governments, often in the service of the military) seeks to “search things out.” That is the proper work of human curiosity and, as with the virus, an urgent human need. The second line in the proverb, however, is matched by the first line concerning God’s proper work. Thus human searching out and God’s concealment are the endless riddling process concerning the wonder of creation. There are limits to seeking things out, not in the form of prohibition, but in the endless capacity of God to conceal. The claim of the proverb, however, is that divine concealment will always run beyond human searching out, so that science will always have more work to do, but will not finally, according to the proverb, master the mystery of creation. The enterprise is an on-going cat and mouse game. The cat will prevail, but the game requires energetic and brave mice as well. Sometimes a wily mouse may outwit the cat for an instant! The human scientific enterprise is indeed to search things out; that enterprise does not and need not linger too much over the three trajectories of faith that I have explicated. And in the midst of a pandemic, we surely will not linger there.

V.

So why bother with the interpretive categories of biblical faith when, in fact, our energy and interest are focused on more immediate matters? The answer is simple and obvious. We linger because in the midst of our immediate preoccupation with our felt jeopardy and our hope for relief, our imagination does indeed range beyond the immediate to larger, deeper wonderments. Our free-ranging imagination is not finally or fully contained in the immediacy of our stress, anxiety, and jeopardy. Beyond these demanding immediacies, we have a deep sense that our life is not fully contained in the cause-and-effect reasoning of the Enlightenment that seeks to explain and control. There is more than that and other than that to our life in God's world!

I became acutely aware of that "more and other" when my friend, Peter Block, commented on the virus. Peter is a Jewish secular guy not prone to meta-commentary. Nonetheless he said, "The virus is God's way of ending consumerism; it is the end of the narrative of globalism." Peter's utterance was likely not a sober critical theological judgment. But he said it knowingly, and in his cunning way, he meant exactly that. He meant, I take it, that the narrative of globalism and its conceit that we may master and use up the resources of the earth in our indifferent indulgence will fail. They will fail because such practices contradict the given reality of creation and the will of the creator. To speak of such limit does not make it necessary to render God as a character or an agent. But Peter did! And we do! We do so partly out of tradition, piety, and force of habit. But we also move to name God because we are confronted with mystery that goes deeper than our "searching out." It turns out that such God-talk does not situate God at the edge of our life or as "God of the gaps," but attests God in, with, and under the several processes of creation. This God will not be mocked, not by Pharaoh or by Assyria or by Babylon or by any contemporary embodiment of hubris. Tennyson does not insist that God causes our "little systems" to cease, only that they cease to be. That is what my friend Peter noticed, that our "little systems" are ceasing to be. It is a cessation caused by a will that exceeds our categories. It does not matter if we name such an assault as an "act of God" or, with Trump, name it otherwise. Both Tennyson and Trump recognize, in different idioms, that such an assault is undoubtedly beyond our management or explanation. The reason none saw it coming is because it has come from beyond our world of knowledge or control, from an elsewhere that is laden with inscrutability. We arrive, in our honesty and fear, at the unspeakable for which our faith tradition has provided proximate language.

Thus it is possible, when pressed beyond our explanation, to speak according to our faith tradition about the virus:

-It is possible to think about a transactional quid pro quo; we reap what we sow in a world governed by the creator God. Some practices and policies may evoke wrath. So Job and his friends!

-It is possible to think about the purposeful mobilization of the negative forces of creation to perform the intention of the creator God, plagues that defy every "high tower" and every "fortified wall."



-It is possible to pause before God's raw holiness in a world that is not tamed by our best knowledge.

None of this is possible in the world of modern Enlightenment rationality. The church, however, has long understood that that modernist narrative is not adequate for the mystery of creation. In times of emergency, it is possible (and necessary?) to step outside that modern narrative and to take a peek into the vast claim of creator and creation. It will be only a peek, not a permanent habitation. But the peek might be revelatory and transformative.

The preacher has amazing interpretive resources available for such a season of wonderment. The wonderment does come, perhaps at night, perhaps in the midst of a quarantine. It comes upon us because we are gifted with imagination that will not settle for explanation. We are often, soon or late, pressed to ask about "the fear of the Lord" and "the shunning of evil." In our imagined autonomy we have, in the global narrative, been on a spree of self-indulgence and self-actualization that has exercised little regard for the neighbor. And now we are required to wonder more deeply. It is the work of the preacher to authorize and guide such wonderment. The end of such wonder may happily come in the form of a vaccine. But its beginning is in the fear of the Lord. This is a lesson learned always too late, too late for Pharaoh, too late for Nebuchadnezzar...always too late...or just in time!

Finally this, dear preachers: We preachers are not mandated to live within the confines of modern rationality; we are, rather, called to bear witness to another realm, the vast governance (kingdom!) of God that encompasses our modernist logic. That vast governance, on our lips, may outflank the fearful logic of the Enlightenment, will surely judge it, and may in mercy redeem it.