

How Martin and Katy Luther Faced, Overcame a Deadly Virus Pandemic

We are not the first people to have to deal with a deadly pandemic. The Black Death killed millions in 14th-century Europe. And in the 16th century, Martin Luther and his wife, Katharina, whom he called Katy, faced a deadly viral pandemic that ravaged much of Europe.

When the deadly bubonic plague came to their hometown of Wittenberg in August of 1527, Luther and Katy responded with faith and some of the same procedures being implemented today to combat the coronavirus. These included social distancing, prayer and medical treatment.

We know that Katy, a former nun, was very involved in laying out the response to the pandemic, for she managed the Lutheran estate while her husband was occupied with teaching, preaching and writing. A contemporary described her as “healthy, strong, frank, intelligent and high-minded.” Luther often referred to her as “Herr (Master) Katy.” (see “Finding a Wife in a Barrel” at)

The plague was spread by fleas, carried by rodents. The infected fleas passed it to humans who passed it through the air and by contact. It was a nasty disease with symptoms of fever, speech disorders, large boils that infected the bloodstream and loss of consciousness. A healthy individual could die within 10 days or less after contracting the disease.

Many panicked and fled Wittenberg to escape the plague. Luther and Katy chose to remain and minister to the sick. They did not condemn those who left but insisted that no one should leave his/her sick neighbor unless there was someone to care

for them in their stead. Martin said, “In such cases we must respect the word of Christ, ‘I was sick and you did not visit me ...’” (Matt. 25:41–46).

Their approach was one of fearless faith, compassion for the sick and good common sense. On their decision to remain and minister to the sick, Martin wrote,

Therefore I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me, and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely, as stated above. See, this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God (Luther’s Works, v. 43, p. 132).

Even though their medical knowledge and treatments were simple, their faith was deep and strong. Neither Luther nor Katy contracted the disease, and three months later, the plague was over.

We should follow the Luthers’ example by heeding the advice of the medical professionals and our government officials. Like Martin and Katy, we should give no place to fear. Our faith in God should be a shining light in this moment of darkness. We must also pray fervently, as Jesus taught in the Lord’s Prayer, that we will be delivered from this coronavirus evil (Matt. 6:13).

The bubonic plague passed away, and Martin and Katy had many more years of fruitful service. In the same way, this coronavirus pandemic will pass, and I expect to see, in the

days ahead, greater displays of God's grace and goodness than we have ever seen before.

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