The coronavirus pandemic’s unequal burden on African Americans

A plague is being visited on all of us, but not evenly.

by Dorothy Sanders Wells in the May 20, 2020 issue

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Earlier this month it was reported that 42 percent of the COVID-19 deaths in Wisconsin were African Americans—a group that constitutes just 6 percent of the state’s overall population. Chicago is 30 percent black; 72 percent of its pandemic deaths have been African Americans. In Michigan, 40 percent of the dead are black, although African Americans make up only 14 percent of the population. Other states and communities have reported similar disparities.

Health officials tell us that this novel coronavirus attacks those with comorbidities the hardest, and African Americans are far more likely to have underlying conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and asthma. This makes them both highly susceptible to COVID-19 and more likely to die from it if they do get infected.

But why are there so many comorbidities among African Americans? One word may explain: *poverty*.

African Americans are, too often, poor—the lingering effect of slavery and systemic racism that have left our neighborhoods stripped of businesses and opportunities and filled with underperforming schools. Elena Delavega's research finds that before the pandemic, African Americans in my own city—Memphis, Tennessee—were nearly three times more likely to be poor than white residents and more than twice as likely to be unemployed. Being poor limits one's access to health care. In a country in which health insurance depends largely on employment, being unemployed or employed as a part-time or seasonal worker reduces the likelihood that one has access to preventive care. And those living in poverty are more likely to have inadequate housing, to reside in food deserts, to suffer from poor nutrition, and to be unable to afford prescription medications.

The result? Poverty itself helps give rise to the very comorbidities that leave a person vulnerable to COVID-19.

And there's even more to the story. The "essential businesses" that remain open during the pandemic—like food supplies and groceries, logistics, transit, personal care, restaurants, and janitorial services—are staffed by low-income workers. They are often on the front lines, in jobs where they are more likely to be exposed, while others are sheltering in place. Many poor workers are still making use of public transportation, even as such services are being curtailed (in part because so many transit workers have fallen prey to the virus)—making public transportation more crowded and thus riskier.

Once these essential workers arrive at work, their jobs don't necessarily allow for social distancing. Nor are there always enough masks and gloves to help protect them and others from the spread of the virus. And if they are exposed, there might not be enough testing available for them to find out quickly and quarantine themselves to protect others.

We are left with the sad conclusion that to be poor is to be at risk. We're far too often concerned with profits over people.

This year, while Christians were observing Holy Week and Easter Day, Jews were observing Passover. In the Passover story from Exodus, the day arrives when the new Pharaoh no longer remembers the prosperity Egypt has known because of Joseph—who devised the plan to amass sufficient food for Egypt's people to thrive in a time of famine—and Joseph's God. Pharaoh enslaves the Israelites—who have

become numerous on this foreign soil, realizing the covenant God made with Abraham generations before—and subjects them to harsh labor and cruel treatment.

Only the civil disobedience of two Hebrew midwives who fear God more than Pharaoh prevents him from killing all of the infant Hebrew boys. Among the boys who survive is Moses, who grows up in Pharaoh's palace but with a heart for his own people. And though he tries to flee Egypt, God calls him to lead the Israelites out of their bondage.

Pharaoh, however, is unpersuaded. He repeatedly refuses to let the Israelites go. And he and the Egyptians are not spared the consequences of their sin. A series of plagues is visited upon them. When the Israelites are spared from the final plague, this marks the beginning of their journey toward freedom from their bondage at the hands of the Egyptians.

Today, as our world is facing a wave of not only sickness and death but also economic upheaval, are we all the ancient Egyptians—placing profits over people, demanding more and more of our poor essential workers to satiate our collective greed? And in this pandemic, are we now all suffering the consequences of our own sins against God, neighbor, and creation? We might interpret COVID-19 as a plague that is being visited on all of us, revealing to us our collective sins in abandoning the neighbors upon whose backs our communities have been built.

If so, can we face this moment not by hardening our hearts but by seeing it as a salvific moment? Can we turn our attention to our poor and most vulnerable communities that are being ravaged by sickness—tending to the suffering, working together to lift these communities and the working and living conditions of the poor?

Could this plague being visited upon our world offer us an opportunity to begin to right some wrongs?

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "A plague's unequal toll."