

Dear friends,

As we close in on four months since our country's first diagnosed coronavirus case, we find things are very different in our world, our country, our communities, and our homes. As North Carolina begins re-opening and I see many people yearning to be free of restrictions, I can't help but think about the story of Noah. He was working on building the ark long before the flood came, going against the partying environment of the times and surely getting some odd looks at least. What we need most right now is unity, understanding, and cooperation, so I thought this would be a good time to dispel some myths floating around.

“The quarantine is ending so we're safe now.” FALSE! The original purpose for social distancing was not so the virus would go away or to give time to find a cure – honestly – it was to make sure we had room in the ICU. Flattening the curve means knowingly spreading out the disease cases to avoid overwhelming medical resources – smaller numbers of cases over a longer period of time – and it has worked well in some places like Charlotte, while others like New York and New Jersey were not so lucky. Please don't be misled – this virus is still out there and will be with us in some fashion probably through next flu season.

“I don't feel sick so I don't need a mask.” Mostly false. While it is true there isn't much evidence that large communities of people wearing masks can prevent spread of disease, a recent article in a respected medical journal points out that absence of evidence does not equal ineffectiveness. Most previous research on masks was looking at protection of a healthcare worker as the mask-wearer. We've never had studies on the effects of transmission and mask-wearing by large populations because we haven't had the opportunity in recent years or enough people following the rules to make a reasonable conclusion. But there are basic public health principles at work here that make such a low-cost, simple intervention worthwhile – cover your face so respiratory droplets won't spread out onto others. In short, you wear a mask not to protect yourself, but to protect others. If everyone does it, we all benefit. Just put it on when you must go out – it's not that bad.

“This was all overblown anyway – it's no different than the flu or a bad cold.” FALSE! Although seasonal flu, cold viruses, and COVID-19 are all spread in similar ways, there are some very important differences. First, the incubation time (time from infection to start of symptoms) is 2-3 days with flu, but 5-6 days with COVID-19. This means people are likely to have asymptomatic spread longer, meaning more people get infected. COVID-19 is 2-3 times more contagious than flu, and is suspected to affect some 50-80% of the population before it is all over, much less than the average 8% who catch seasonal flu. And while 80% of cases are mild or asymptomatic, the 20% that are severe or deadly encompasses a much larger portion of the population because of it. Finally, let's keep in mind that COVID-19 has killed over 80,000 Americans in about 3 months. Our worst seasonal flu in decades killed only 61,000 and took 8 months to do it.

“I'm not high-risk so I'm ok to go out.” – Mostly false. Again, it's true that around 80% of cases seem to be mild or asymptomatic, but this goes back to Public Health 101 – sick people begat more sick people. Isolating only the “high-risk” in quarantine would be nearly impossible, and we've all seen in recent weeks how many points of contact a person has even when at home. The more asymptomatic or mild cases that are out and about, the more infected surfaces and points of exposure there are for everyone. In short, it's not about you. It's about all of us doing this *together*. Go out if you must for food, work, or necessities (and wear a mask when you do), but as much as you are able – keep to yourself. Just because we are allowed to do a thing doesn't mean it's a good idea.

“We will have a cure or a vaccine soon.” This answer is relative. One of the things that makes vaccines relatively safe and trustworthy is the rigor with which they are tested before being released for use. The standard process involves at least 5 structured stages that take place over many years, making sure they actually do what we want them to do and don't make people worse off, so “soon” is a relative term. The fastest we have ever developed a vaccine was about 7 months, during the 2015 Zika virus outbreak, but then the epidemic fizzled out before it was ready. Some experts are suggesting a vaccine could be ready by early 2021. Many drugs have been touted as treatments or cures, but then failed to perform or worse, caused harm when tested in a controlled, observable fashion. There are current clinical trials underway, including locally at Atrium Health in Charlotte, for remdesivir which has shown some promise, but it needs more study to ensure safety and account for potential adverse reactions. What we don't want is a rush job that isn't properly vetted and could cause more harm than good. Until then, wash your hands, don't touch your face, wear a mask, and stay home when you are able.

These are unsettling times causing a wide array of emotions – fear, anger, frustration, desperation, loneliness – but they can also be a time of hope, peace, and encouragement. It is true we are all in the same storm, but not all in the same boat. Some families struggle to pay bills as they are furloughed while others have secure homes and jobs. Some are finding time to bond with loved ones as never before while others are living alone and separated from contact. Working from home can be frustrating, but others would love the opportunity to have a job at all. In uncertain times, we must look toward Scriptures like James chapter 3: *Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the trust...the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.*

Let us run this race together, in humility being considerate of others above ourselves. Let us look for ways to be helpers to those in need when we are able, and accepting of help when offered to us by others. Look out for your own mental and physical health, and reach out to others as peace-loving, considerate, sincere members of society for we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, and together we will survive to thrive again.

Peace be with you,
Aaron Lambert, M.D.