

# *A Film and Its Message of Suffering and Hope in a Pandemic*

Thomas A. Summers  
Columbia, South Carolina

Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.  
Desmond Tutu

In its cinematic portrayal of a fictional pandemic, the ten-year-old *Contagion* delivers a *déjà vu* experience to us veterans of the real COVID-19 menace. It's as if we are taken back in time to the yet uncertain journey that we currently are traveling. William Faulkner once put it this way: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."<sup>1</sup> As a Lenten Season reminds us of the suffering of Jesus and our own soul searching, an exploration of this particular movie can offer a vital resource for ministry during pandemic times.

The film's screenwriter held a long-time interest in how viruses are transmitted. With *Contagion*, he wanted to develop a medical thriller that "felt like what could really happen."<sup>2</sup> Apparently an avalanche of viewers ten years after the inception of the film felt that Burns achieved what he was seeking. *Contagion* was listed as the number two catalog on Warner Brothers in March, 2020, compared to its number 270 rank the previous December, 2019.<sup>3</sup>

A major factor that contributed to the film's conveying a stark realism and actuality was the thorough consultation received by the screenwriter and director from experts in the field of epidemiology. For example, the nation's own Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) provided invaluable time. These accurate insights about critical pandemic matters are put into the fabric of the film. The film's brilliance was not harmed either by its all-star cast of such acting notables as Gwyneth Paltrow, Matt Damon, Jude Law, Kate Winslet, Laurence Fishburne, and Marion Cotillard.

If there is one encompassing issue that is seen in *Contagion*, it is that we humans are so interconnected with one another. The lightening-fast spread of a pandemic illustrates how we are so deeply and extensively linked. At the outset of the movie, this hidden speed is demonstrated. Beth Emhoff (Gwyneth Paltrow) is spending her last night in Hong Kong before returning to Minneapolis. She is enjoying the revelry with a celebrating crowd in a bar that includes casino games and a restaurant. Assuredly the most critical moment in the film occurs when she shakes hands with an apron-wearing chef. Little did each know that earlier he had handled some faulty pork that had been infected by a bat. From then and until her death several days later, there was left behind the hidden imprint of a new life-destroying MEV-1 virus radiating itself out to the whole world.

These overall ties with each other were described by Martin Luther King, Jr. in the following manner: "All life is interrelated. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."<sup>4</sup>

It is through such an interwoven network that major themes emerge from the movie. This human connectedness provides the grounding out of which they grew. Following is a retrospective look at some of them.

A most critical issue is that of the transmissible assault that a deadly virus can make on the individual *person's usual resources* as connections are sought with others. For example, the human touch is considered to be one of the most nurturing aspects in human relations. Cindy Lamonthe attests to this need: "A hug from a close friend isn't only comforting; it also produces hormones in the brain like serotonin, dopamine, and oxytocin—all of which help boost the immune system and ward off illness. But it does more than just make you feel good; it can accurately communicate emotions like gratitude, love, and sympathy."<sup>5</sup>

The writers of the New Testament include versions of how important Jesus's touch was to persons in their search for health. Many of the sufferers felt that if they only could touch the hem of his garment, that even there healing would be found (Matthew 9:21). But paradoxically—rather than knowing the closeness of a human touch—social distancing becomes a necessity in preventing the dangers of a viral spread in a pandemic.

A similar vulnerability is evident in being near space where breath is being expelled by another person. Should you not be wearing a mask, there could be exposure to potential droplets of the virus lingering in the air. Also objects that have received a touch by an infected person provide a risk should someone else later touch the same object—a glass, hymnal, dollar bill, or any "fomite" (an object touched by an infected person). Today's exile of quarantined distance from such perils has resonance with the experience of the psalmist: "How can we sing the Lord's song while in a *foreign land*?" (Psalm 137:4).

However, if evil can be interpreted through the lens of human intent, society may long discuss the blameworthy results from the huge gatherings of persons in this pandemic era. These "super spreaders" include such places as political rallies, houses of worship, beaches, and other locales where the necessary practice of social distancing and the wearing of masks was avoided.

Another theme seen in this film is the matter of *governance*. The movie's emphasis on the process of governing wisely was focused on the presumed Executive Branch's allowing the designated experts in the fields of epidemiology, public health, and medical research to lead the way forward. *Contagion*'s constant utilization of these scientific resources such as those in the nation's Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) was the empowering factor in the fictional pandemic's fade within four and a half months.

In sharp contrast, the current COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. yet continues. By the middle of September 2020, the number of deaths due to the virus increased to 200,000 persons. This figure exceeded more than any other country in the world. (This article was completed in early October, 2020.)

Very disturbingly, the U.S. President failed to demonstrate the kind of early governing leadership needed in response to the coronavirus as it erupted throughout the nation and world. His was a constant media presence that inferred his taking the leading role in commenting about the pandemic. Also he showed publicly in his governance a propensity to dispel science by downgrading the seriousness of this particular virus. He downplayed the wearing of masks as recommended. Later, tapes

revealed that he indeed did know its grave consequences but that he did not want “to create panic in the nation.” In early October 2020, he himself became inflicted with the COVID-19.

The failure seen in this kind of governmental leadership is summarized in the following statement: “The tragedy is that if science and common sense solutions were united in a national, coordinated response, the U.S. would have avoided many thousands more deaths this (past) summer.”<sup>6</sup>

I would prefer the joining of another issue to those profound values of “science and common sense.” And that would be the addition of “moral wisdom.” Such a combination is a reminder to the governing parties that policies (e.g., face masks) need to be developed for the care and safety of all persons. Without it, you are left to the whims and lack of knowledge expressed by a governing leader.

An obvious matter that emerges in the film is that of the historical relationship between *individual rights and the common good*. This sometimes strained issue between the person and some sense of moral order for all persons aptly illustrates King’s earlier perspective; that is, we all are embedded “in an inescapable network of mutuality.”

As of September 2020, the ongoing damage yet done to the U.S. by the COVID-19 crisis showed, in an up-and-down fashion, the national fragility of these two poles. Very notably, the effects of the earlier Memorial Day and July Fourth celebrations brought great harm to the nation’s journey toward recovery. For instance, the aftermath of the Memorial Day weekend eventually saw the 7-day average rise to an astonishing 83% increase in the number of COVID-19 cases.<sup>7</sup> Prior to the weekend, the national mood tended to contain elements of hopefulness due to the gradual receding of viral transmissions. But without much attention to social distancing, extremely large crowds flooded into dangerous venues like beaches and other hot spots. Cautionary restraints had been thrown into the winds of self-centered energy.

*Contagion*’s emphasis between individual rights and the welfare of the larger society was focused in a slightly different way. It portrayed what can happen when a pandemic plays a major role in the rapid disintegration of society. As an example, a scene showed a grocery store being overrun and looted by hunger-driven persons. Another representation in the film depicted a break-in that occurred at the home of the CDC director (Laurence Fishburne). This frightening event followed the news that a vaccine had been fast-tracked for approval.

A spreading pandemic reaches deep into the human soul and brings right before our eyes the tension between our individual claims and the larger society. Eleanor Roosevelt once commented about this tightrope on which we tread: “Freedom makes a requirement of every human being. With freedom comes responsibility.”<sup>8</sup>

As a pandemic crashes into our lives, this social trauma provides fertile ground on which the distortion of *untruths and conspiracy theories* soon appear. These kinds of interpretations invariably defy consensus and cannot be proven using the historical or scientific method. Yet, they feed into the frightened thoughts of persons already bewildered by a pandemic.

Abraham Maslow, a noted psychologist, indicates that one of the earliest and most basic human needs in our personality development is the need for safety. This implies such primary wants as avoiding pain, being free of chaos, and the possession of shelter.<sup>9</sup> An untruth—false as it is—gives the susceptible person a safe narrative or

reason for why one is feeling so threatened.

As COVID-19 quickly made its way into the U.S., two writers observed the relationship between a quarantined nation and the influence of emerging untruths and conspiracy theories. They listed the five top ones receiving major attention: the virus as a bioweapon, use of the pandemic by Bill Gates to install human trackers, the blame of 5G cell towers for the virus, and the ushering in of a new “World Order.”<sup>10</sup>

The most permeating and often seen character in *Contagion* is Alan Krumwiede (Jude Law). He is a journalist and a blogging conspiracy theorist. In taking advantage of the nation’s panic, his videotaped cable program attracts twelve million listeners. His overall activity has accumulated for him over four and a half million dollars.

The movie leaves you with the impression that the screenwriter and director had a strong priority in spotlighting this dangerous role. That is, Krumwiede’s constant drumbeat of deceptive information can undermine science and epidemiology in the unified attempt to combat a pandemic.

As the film’s version of the viral outbreak begins in the U.S., he is seen discussing his notion that the worldwide mercury poisoning of fish is the likely reason behind this oncoming dilemma. Later, an accusation is made by him that a conspiracy scheme has been developed between the government and drug companies in a clandestine profit-making venture. He further blames the CDC and WHO of collusion with drug companies. Due to his sponsorship of a homeopathic remedy in Forsythia, the demand for it becomes so strained that a public riot occurs.

*Contagion*’s strong emphasis on the danger of spreading untruths has much resonance with the message of the New Testament. Especially in times of peril, the words of Jesus often call for vigilance: “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed...” (Luke 12:15).

Greed invariably arrives in many ways. Krumwiede packages his greediness with a reckless sense of needing power over others and also profit-making. As we take precautions against power-driven fabrications during a pandemic, these words give us courage: “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). Reliance on scientific information accompanied by the strength of one’s own spiritual quest and moral wisdom can be safeguards against the likes of a Krumwiede.

Another critical theme that is seen from a pandemic’s path of wreckage is that of *social marginalization*. Sometimes the onslaught of a pandemic is thought of as a “great equalizer.” But the social devastation created by such a plague offers anything but parity. A pandemic tears the scab from a society’s exterior and shines a spotlight on the disproportions that already existed there on the excluding margins. These include the homeless, communities of color, incarcerated persons, those having little accessibility to proper healthcare, and other vulnerable groups.

An early April 2020 study indicated that African American persons in Chicago comprised 30% of the city’s population, yet they totaled 52% of the city’s COVID-19 infections.<sup>11</sup> Another example of extreme social vulnerability is that of elderly persons living in nursing homes. They total 42% of all the COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. These sometimes silent deaths are occurring in locations that house 0.62% of the U.S. population.<sup>12</sup>

In late spring 2020, my wife and I received a phone call from two of the adult children whose mother earlier had died. We had known her and the family for 50 years as special friends in our neighborhood. She was 85 years old, and her health steadily

declined before she was placed in a nursing home. Later she became afflicted with COVID-19. Thereafter the children were not able to enter the room for an embrace or to hold her hand. The only contact that they were allowed was to stand, agonizingly so, outside of the building. In that location they could look through a window and see their mother slowly ebb away.

Practicing social distance and wearing masks, my wife and I met with our friends. Without being able to hug them, we listened to their grief. Our foursome shared nurturing stories and memories about this beloved woman. The accompanying tears became like ointments of care. These small waters built a bridge on which our common pain traveled. Ours had a grief-bearing commonality with countless families, friends, ministers, grief counselors, and so many others.

*Contagion* explores this theme of the social margins through a dramatic episode of kidnapping. After a week of the viral outbreak, Dr. Leonora Orentes (Marion Cottle), a WHO staff member, is sent to Hong Kong. Her main objective was to engage in some contact tracing. Her assessment concluded that the first viral transmissions for the whole pandemic had originated there in a casino restaurant. A businesswoman from Minneapolis had become identified as being the “Patient Zero” via a review of the security cameras.

Soon this WHO representative was kidnapped by persons related to a nearby poverty-stricken locale. Many of the villagers had become quickly infected with the spreading virus. One of the residents in the village happened to have been a waiter at the casino. Dr. Orentes was held for ransom at the village until the new vaccine could be delivered.

There is human agony already existing on the social margins. And there is unbelievable magnification as a death-producing pandemic appears and rampages through lives. Shakespeare’s words reflect such an invasion: “When sorrows come, they come not in single spies, but in battalions.”<sup>13</sup>

As a pandemic endures for these many months, we sometimes lose our grip on *hope* and begin wondering if the scourge of this pestilence will ever end. There is much about which to be despondent during these times of angst. There is the despair of losing friends and loved ones to a viral death. The COVID-19 era has scattered widely its harmful effects on commerce, healthcare, educational systems, and nearly every aspect of our lives. Recent reports indicate that military suicide has risen as much as 20% during the 2020 year.<sup>14</sup>

Yet amid our times of feeling low in spirit, there are inspiring moments that cross our daily paths; for example, the heroism seen in those front-line healthcare workers who courageously risk their own lives in caring for victims of COVID-19. Their service to others can fill our own hearts with thanks and hope. The film depicts the courageous qualities of Dr. Erin Mears (Kate Winslet) of the CDC. At the beginning of the pandemic in the U.S., she is sent to Minneapolis to give consultation to public healthcare officials there. Very soon, she is overwhelmed by the virus herself and dies in a makeshift holding area for dying persons.

The sensitive reinterpreting of some unclear theological issues can have value in creating more hopefulness in pandemic times. For example, apocalyptic thinking often occurs in response to tragedies like pandemics and major floods. The word *apocalypse* is derived from the “revealing” of the end-of-time days in Revelation—the last book of the New Testament. Its underlying belief is that such a mammoth disaster is caused

by unrighteous people and God's judgment. Hence, overly frightened persons might be feeling that today's worldwide pandemic is a sign that the conclusion of all time is not far off.

In his evaluation of apocalypse, Brian Blount suggests that in New Testament days there certainly were issues of hopelessness and unrighteousness. But Jesus came into the world and revealed a sense of hope and care for all persons. Therefore, we today become revealing carriers of that hope for the wholeness of community by our replicating his ministry. Hence, Blount suggests that kind of action is "revelatory apocalyptic," not an "end of times apocalyptic."<sup>15</sup>

The theme of hope is powerfully portrayed near the conclusion of the film. The script displays that its accompanying MEV-1 virus has been brought under control. After more than four months of uncertainty and despair in the U.S., a vaccine is beginning to be distributed. In his Minneapolis home, Mitch Emhoff (Matt Damon) is upstairs getting dressed in his suit. Earlier that day, he had presented a new dress to his high school daughter. He asked her to wear it for a special occasion that evening in the living room.

Before going downstairs to meet with his daughter, Mitch looks at a picture of his wife Beth (Gwyneth Paltrow) and begins to cry. She had made the business trip to Hong Kong four months before and had become the initial conveyer of the worldwide virus before her death. As he meets with his high school daughter, she becomes so surprised and happy with how he had developed the room into a temporary prom setting. Suddenly the doorbell rings, and standing there is her boyfriend Andrew in his tuxedo. He is wearing his new plastic bracelet that indicates he has received the much-prized vaccine. Mitch takes a formal picture of the smiling couple before they dance the night away in their new prom atmosphere.

Emerging from a suffering world, there is indeed hope for the future and its new generations as pictured by *Contagion*! May the Lenten Season of 2021 be a profound aid in helping us, our nation, and the broader world discover that gift too.

### Notes

1 William Faulkner, "Quotes," *goodreads*, accessed August 5, 2020, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/12124-the-past-is-never-present-it-is-not-even-past/>.

2 Edward Douglas, "CS: Contagion Writer Scott Z. Burns," *ComingSoon.net*, September 6, 2011, accessed August 15, 2020, [www.en.wikipedia.org/](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/).

3 Travis Clark, "Pandemic movie 'Contagion' is surging in popularity due to the coronavirus and has hit the No.7 spot on iTunes," *Business Weekly*, March 6, 2011.

4 Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Triumph of Conscience* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1968), 69.

5 Lamonthe, Cindy, "Let's Touch: Why Physical Connection between Human Beings Matter," *The Guardian*, January 3, 2003, 1.

6 Alex Fitzgerald and Elijah Wolfson, "The American Nightmare," *Time*, vol. 196, no. 11-12, September 10, 2020, 24-27.

7 Ibid.

8 Eleanor Roosevelt, "Quotes," *goodreads*, accessed September 5, 2020, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/230160-freedom-makes-a-huge-requirement-of-every-human-being/>.

9 Beth Housekemp, "Maslow, Abraham (1908-70)," *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. Rodney J. Hunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 691.

10 Steven Greenstreet and Suzy Weiss, "Coronavirus conspiracy theories don't stop at Bill Gates and 5G," *New York Post*, <https://nypost.com/2020/04/24/the-top-5-coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-bill-gates-5G-more/>.

11 UIC Jane Addams College of Social Work Website, *Affirmations*, Spring 2020, accessed September 14, 2020.

12 *Psychiatry Research* (Science Direct), “An invisible human rights crisis: The marginalization of older adults during the Covid-19 pandemic—An advocacy review,” vol. 292, October 2020, 11369.

13 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act IV, Scene V.

14 Associated Press, “Military suicides up as much as 20% in COVID era,” *The State*, 3A, September 28, 2020.

15 Sally Sherer, “Scripture in a Time of Pandemic: Where to Find Hope,” *Presbyterian Foundation News*, April 21, 2020, article based on presentation by Dr. Brian Blount, <https://www.presbyterianfoundation.org/scripture-in-a-time-of-pandemic-where-to-find-hope/>.