Who is sacrificed, and who benefits?

Approaching Holy Week in the wake of a half million COVID-19 deaths

From the Editors in the March 24, 2021 issue

(Photo © Eugene Yaresik / iStock / Getty)

By the first week of Lent, more than 500,000 people were known to have died of COVID-19 in the United States. One of them was Gabby Hernandez, who worked at a nonprofit organization serving low-income New Yorkers. Another was Army reservist Calvin Ogletree III, a veteran of the Iraq War, who died in Florida at age 45. Andrea Bowman, who died in Washington State early in the pandemic, was an Episcopal priest with an interest in feminist theology. Queens taxi driver Yves Dandin, who immigrated decades ago from Haiti, was a whiz at checkers.

These are just four of the dead. To include a sentence about each of the others would take up 18,600 pages of this magazine. Those pages would fill up 400 issues; you'd have to subscribe for 15 1/2 years to read them all.

Viruses always run their course without regard for human life. But the United States has 4 percent of the world's population and nearly 20 percent of its COVID-19 deaths. The Trump administration's pandemic management failures are largely to blame for this disparity—but they're not the only cause. Health outcomes are influenced by social and economic determinants, and a country structured around extreme inequalities is susceptible to high death rates. COVID-19 shows that being Black, Latino, Indigenous, or poor in the United States is a preexisting condition, a risk factor for a short lifespan.

This reality is worth pondering as Holy Week approaches. Christians seek redemption in the short lifespan of a first-century man who lacked social or economic privilege. Some believe that Jesus' death saves us specifically by paying the price of our sins. But does that belief make it easier for us to justify other people's suffering when it benefits us? Does it allow us to disregard the value of those who make great sacrifices—sometimes unwillingly—for our comfort and well-being?

In this issue, Martha Tatarnic considers these questions as she examines her complicated relationship with substitutionary atonement theory. "We know that those systems of injustice that most dramatically reveal the depth of our human brokenness are propagated by the enforced sacrifice of others," she writes. Still, many Christians are attracted to the idea that one person's sacrifice can benefit another. This is dangerous ground in a world built on inequality.

But perhaps it can also be fertile ground for living faithfully. One of the benefits of Jesus' sacrifice is that it stirs us to repentance, which Tatarnic describes as "hearing and heeding the call to look again and to turn toward another way." Our repentance won't bring back Gabby, Calvin, Andrea, Yves, or any of the others who have died. But it might help us more carefully measure the cost of a human life, the value of a vaccine's patent, or the relative priority of open businesses and churches. It might help us put ourselves in the position of the one who pays a cost so that others might be saved.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The wages of sacrifice."