History Repeats Itself

Parallels Between the Black Death and COVID-19

   
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The entire world is living in an insane time right now. We are living in history as it is being made. In 2019 the world was swept off its feet by COVID-19 and has yet to been put back down. Millions of people's lives were changed in an instant. We had quarantines, mandates, mad spread panic, and hysteria. How prepared were we for such a pandemic to occur? Has the world ever dealt with something similar? If so, at what scale? Virus and disease are not anything this world has not seen before. The world has seen handfuls of diseases as well as handfuls of change due to disease. Examples of these are the bubonic plague, smallpox, flu, and measles. But have we learned from the past? Has history repeated itself through the spread of disease and virus?

A historical event that parallels the COVID-19 pandemic is the blanket of the Black Death that covered Asia, the Middle East and Europe. What was the Black Death? The Black Death was an epidemic of the bubonic plague from 1346 – 1353. The plague was terribly dangerous and “*would kill more than 20 million people in Europe—almost one-third of the continent’s population.*” It was dangerously transmittable, being in close vicinity of someone with the plague put you at an elevated risk of transmitting the deadly disease.

This plague had vast effects on people and communities through its killing. Since this disease attacked everyone, including men women and children, the people of the 14th5 century went through many rapid changes. It caused the death of workers which led to salaries going up. It also led to the rise of Guildsman, a change in woman status, population densities, living conditions, in the church and made people quarantine. This completely changed the way of life of several million people.

One thing the Black Death is known for today besides its vast killing was the protocol doctors took to help people who succumbed to the disease. The most noticeable thing was the large masks doctors wore with their iconic beaks. These masks were used to avoid direct contact with plague patients, but more surprisingly were also used to block smell. The beaks were stuffed with herbs to block the smell of deterioration of dying patients. Besides the mask, doctors covered themselves head to toe to prevent any sort of contact with the disease and the human body. “*He described an outfit that included a coat covered in scented wax, breeches connected to boots, a tucked-in shirt, and a hat and gloves made of goat leather. Plague doctors also carried a rod that allowed them to poke (or fend off) victims.*”

With the increase of death came the decrease of workers. With the decrease in workers came the increase in pay and the increase in jobs. Landowners had to do something to attract people to work for them over other lords and one thing is the increase in pay. Another was “L*ords had to make conditions better and more attractive...*” to persuade capable men to leave their home, risk getting the disease, and work to provide. This relates to the better, more clean-living conditions people had to create to stay safe from the plague.

In the 14th century church was a part of everyone’s life. The Black Death changed that. People stayed home to take care of their sick family members instead of going to church. Therefore, less people attended church on top of the people that died and could not. In this time, people’s eyes were also starting to open pertaining to the church. “*...people realized that religion could do nothing to stop the spread of the disease and their family's suffering.*” This even led to services being “ceased.”

A protocol many people took to lower the risk of transmission was to stay home and quarantining. This relates to people not going to church, Lords losing their workers, and the change in the status of women. “*The history of quarantine dates back to the time of the Black Death (Plague) when medicine was incapable to fight the disease.*” Staying home just decreased the odds of transmission of the disease. The change in women status started with the loss of workers. This created jobs that women could take to support their families in this challenging time. It was said that “*Women’s increased economic power, it has been argued, temporarily afforded them greater social and political autonomy.*” Women of course still made less money than men still.

This historical event caught my attention because I cannot imagine how terrified people were at such a deadly time. Imagine always having the thought that you or a loved one could get this plague in the morning and die by the end of the night. It is almost unfathomable and a horror to even think about. Another thing is the way plague doctors looked. It is a very iconic look and gives off an atmosphere of despair. If doctors still had to use that attire today, I most definitely would never go to the doctor. I chose this event because since the recent COVID-19 pandemic, I could instantly see parallels. Both not only killed people but changed the way people lived in every single aspect. The parallels include quarantining, living habits and changes in employment. And the similarities are crazily close.

Fast forward to the present time, the pandemic that is currently cursing the world is the COVID-19 virus. Quite like the Black Death, COVID-19 has affected millions of people and has completely changed the entire world. Also just like the Black Death, COVID-19 is highly transmittable. It has affected employment and business, nations, and churches. What is crazy is that how similar COVID-19 is to the Black Death and how it is currently happening.

Beginning with the introduction of masks. Mask mandates became widespread shortly after the introduction of COVID-19. This virus was so highly transmittable that everything following the introduction of it happened so quickly, as the same with the Black Death. Not only were regular citizens required to start wearing masks in public spaces but also employees and healthcare workers. “.*..healthcare workers who care for patients with COVID-19 include an appropriate use of personal protective equipment (PPE);*” In relation to the Black Death, plague doctors used their beak shaped masks and attire to protect themselves and other from the disease.

Widespread panic and new health precautions completely changed the way the world revolved. Businesses started suffering because people were afraid to leave their houses. So, businesses were losing employees and revenue. They knew they needed to find a way to solve this issue, so they changed just how landowners changed their working conditions back in the 14th century. Working conditions changed for the protection of their employees and to stop the spread of the virus. And a lot of these businesses have kept this same motto throughout the whole pandemic and will keep them for good. We saw a lot of businesses become short staffed due to quarantining which led to an increase in pay. We also saw a lot of business owners move their businesses online to keep their livelihood. This also decreased the amount of face-to-face contact. On top of workplace conditions being changed people also changed their living conditions in general. Mostly for the better, people started being more cleanly in fear of contracting or transmitting COVID-19.

just like businesses, churches were closed widespread. Especially because the older populations were more at risk of dying from the virus. We saw a shift from in person church services to online church services and no church services at all for some churches.

The pandemic also brought changes in the status of women just as the Black Death did. Although some of the changes for women during the Black Death were good, a lot of them during COVID-19 were not. “*COVID-19 is hard on women because the U.S. economy is hard on women, and this virus excels at taking existing tensions and ratcheting them up.*” This is said because historically women are known to take care of their family. During a pandemic like this people were being let go by their workplace left and right, so women had to find ways to support their family, especially for working women. Furthermore, during the pandemic many businesses/schools closed and made it tough for working families with children. “But more than 10 million (17% of all working women) rely on childcare and schools to keep their children safe while they work.” Leading to some women having to leave their job to take care of their family.

Not only were people staying home to take care of their family, but people were also staying home to quarantine. Like stated above quarantining even dated back to the times of the Black Death. Due to quarantining we saw people leaving their jobs or being let go, cleaner living and the change in women status.

There are so many comparisons between the Black Death and COVID-19. Firstly, and most iconic is the use of masks. Plague doctors used iconic beak masks during the plague and in the modern-day people were mandated to wear masks in any public setting. Secondly, there were plenty of changes in places of work and employment. During the 14th century workers died so there were labor shortages with an increase in pay. In the modern day, businesses saw a loss in revenue which led to people being let go of their jobs. Thirdly, the status of women changed. During the plague places of work became open to hiring women, giving them more power. During COVID-19 women, whom the economy is already rough on, saw harder times. Fourthly, better living conditions were made normal. The Black Death made people realize their dirty living habits as well as during modern times people started living cleaner. Next, churches started to close. Churches closed during the 14th century because of the death of priests and the distrust of the church. Churches closed during COVID-19 because it helped lessen the spread of the virus to the older populations. Lastly, families started to quarantine to protect themselves and family members from infection and even death in both the 14th century and modern times.

COVID-19 wasn’t nearly as deadly as the Black Death. Not only because the virus itself wasn’t as deadly compared to the bubonic plague but safety precautions were made and created much quicker than they were in the 14th century. An example of this is knowing how rapidly transmittable COVID-19 is and creating mandates of social distancing, quarantines and masks. One thing humanity didn’t learn from the Black Death is to be clean. Further, the Black Death started because of unclean living conditions and COVID-19 began because of unclean eating decisions. As a society we can prevent an event like this from happening again by being smarter and cleaner.

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