

The Artists' Almanac – March 2020

Beware the Ides of March

Shakespeare – *Julius Caesar*

Who amongst us needs reminding of this quote, by our best-known playwright about this climactic event in the public life of Rome? It happened on the ides (middle) of March and made such a lasting mark of a season of such ill omen that my late grandfather declined even to get his hair cut during the entire month of March.



Caesar had crossed the Rubicon with his victorious army after defeating the barbarian enemies of the north, to become the sole ruler of Rome. Rome now looked to be on top of the world, spreading its legal system and Pax Romano around the then-known world. But success invariably breeds envy, and envy, enmity. Sixty Roman senators, including his best friend, Brutus, collaborated to assassinate him on the ides of March and restore the democratic republic that had once been before Caesar came to power as a dictator. What they wrought instead was not a democracy,



but a civil war, one faction led by Caesar's adopted son, Caesar Augustus.

March is known as a turbulent month, with not just the first flowers of spring, but wind, storms, snow, floods, tornadoes, and today, pestilence and swooning markets - for us, a double ides.

White swans are beautiful birds, rarely do we see a black one, then thought a



bird of ill omen. Turkeys which grow fatter, day after day, on grain brought by their generous owner, come to expect the same daily, until one Thursday morning in late November he comes with an axe in his hand.

A black swan as a metaphor for an event that comes as a surprise, has a major effect, and is often inappropriately rationalized after the fact with the benefit of hindsight. The term is based on a common supposition that black swans do not exist – until they do.

We had a *pair* of black swans this March: first a deadly tornado that sliced through Middle Tennessee, destroying all in its path and claiming dozens of lives; then a deadly corona virus that not only killed people but destroyed jobs and entire companies. And it's not over yet.

March is named for Mars, the god of war, and is a turbulent month at best. We think of plagues, bubonic, typhus and yellow fever, as being something that happened a long time ago and now no longer do, due to modern medical science, that today either prevents or cures them. Yet some of us do remember the plague of polio in the 1940s which crippled many of our friends, even our president, the most powerful man in the world. The Spanish Flu erupted only a hundred years ago and killed more

than died in World War I. Today we can only avoid crowds, wash hands, be thankful for hot Tennessee summers, and pray for deliverance.

We can learn from history:

- In 541 the Justinian Pandemic that began in 541 killed 10,000 per day and weakened the Eastern Roman Empire so much that it fell to its regional enemies, the Berbers and Muslims of Africa, who occupied all of Turkey, the Middle East, and all of North Africa
- In 1629 the Black Death or Bubonic Plague reached its calamitous peak after recurring periodically in Europe for several centuries.
- In 1665-1666 the London Plague killed 8,000 per week.
- In 1720 The Great Plague of Marseille was transmitted by rats and fleas.
- Smallpox wiped out entire tribes of Native Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Taking the long view, over the history of humankind plagues or pandemics have been the rule, not the exception, Modern vaccines for smallpox, polio, measles, and shingles have been very useful to mankind in sparing us the ravages of these would-be plagues.

But as medicines develop, viruses mutate in reaction, becoming a new generation of penetration and lead to diseases that we can neither anticipate nor understand and which take us a long time to learn how to avoid. Our temptation is complacency, and just as 9/11 taught us there is still evil in our world today and that we must build our military defenses, not all invaders are human, and microbes can be evil, too.

Yet for all this evil, we live amid a generation of heroes. Who can forget that mob of wide-eyed, panicked mob fleeing the burning twin towers on 9/11, while weaving between them, *towards* the burning towers, marches a column of sturdy firemen in helmets and full battle gear? Many of them would be dead within the hour in smoky stairwells or toppling wreckage -sacrificing their lives to save those of others.

In this time of invasion by an unfamiliar enemy, millions of gloved and masked healthcare workers and first responders risk their own lives to save those of strangers. Hail to each one of you! We are thankful to you all.

And a special shout-out to my grandson, George Weber, who, after a year of study, rigorous testing, and EMT training, reported yesterday for his first day of duty with The Gallatin Fire Department.

