Columns
Coronavirus
Spirituality



"A Carthusian Saint Visiting the Plague Stricken," drawing by Andrea Sacchi, ca. 1599–1661, Rome (Metropolitan Museum of Art)



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"Where were you when the coronavirus hit?" A question we often ask ourselves as we recall a major incident (often tragic) that has occurred in our life. Perhaps when we recall the coronavirus the better question will be: "What did you learn from the coronavirus pandemic?"

As I write this, we are in the middle of trying to figure out how is it spread and what we have to do to control the infection. Members of the medical profession are working around the clock to figure this out and to attend to everyone who has been infected with this disease.

The rest of us are being asked to stay inside and practice "social distancing" for an unknown period of time.

It is hard to gain a perspective when you are in the middle of such uncertainty; to make sense of what is going on and how the future will emerge.

Following my contemplative sitting I found myself drawn to the Psalms. The Psalms capture so many emotions, offer poetic ways to interpret what we are experiencing, and help us see the divine presence in it all. As I reflected on all that is going on and how to enter it from a contemplative space, I found Psalm 18 very helpful, and so offer a few reflections on facing this crisis. I will be quoting from Nan Merrill's translation, *Psalms for Praying*:

> You delivered me from prejudice and intolerance;
>
> You opened my heart to all nations;
>
> People whom I had not known befriended me.

I was on a pilgrimage in Greece with FutureChurch when the concern about the coronavirus got escalated for President Donald Trump. Before our departure many countries were beginning to take measures to contain the virus, but President Trump did not yet believe that this virus was a major national threat. So we were able to go

on the trip and return home safely prior to U.S. policy restricting travel.

The coronavirus became "real" to me toward the end of the pilgrimage. Our group of 29 had gone from being strangers to a real community. We were careful and sanitized our hands all the time. We felt safe and tried to keep things in perspective. As we travelled from Thessaloniki to Athens, we were often the only ones at the hotels we stayed in at the restaurants and at the various archeological sites.

When we arrived at the hotel in Athens and went to dinner, things changed. When I entered a very full restaurant, I was caught off guard. All of a sudden looking at these "others" from various countries, I realized the implications of what had now been called a pandemic. For a moment I felt all these "others" were the potential carriers of the virus. Certainly not our group of 29.

I became aware of how very quickly a group can become a tribe and the "others" become those from whom you need to protect yourself and your group. The "others" might even become the cause of whatever bad is happening and become the scapegoat.

However, as I began to reflect on the reality of such a virus and trying to contain it, it became clear that no matter what my group and I might be doing to stay healthy, it wasn't enough. I had to trust that everyone else in the restaurant was also committed to washing their hands and the other preventive measures we were asked to practice. For if anyone of us were to have the virus, we would all be quarantined.

I could feel the web that was woven around everyone in the dining room. We were all interconnected and on this journey together. The feeling was quite visceral and continues in me while I complete my self-imposed quarantine back home.

It is too easy to fall into unconscious patterns of blaming the "other" — the "Kung Flu " virus, the "Chinese" virus — it is their fault. Contemplation invites you into a spaciousness to stay awake and alert to reactions that are intolerant or prejudicial. It invites you to be open to the unexpected stranger who offers you compassion.

> For I pursued my fears and faced them;
>
> And did not run back until I was free.

I saw each one through, so that they were not able to rise;

They were transformed by love.

Fears abound. Such uncertainty. How long will it last? Will I be able to pay my bills? What if I get sick? How long will I be separated from the people I love, especially the elders? Will there be enough food and other essentials? Will I have a job? Will I have my business? What about my future income or my savings? What will the future be for my children and grandchildren?

Other emotions: resentment, anger, deep sadness, frustration rise up as we face weddings that are — after months in planning — being disrupted; diplomas for graduating college and high school seniors awarded through the mail; trips saved for over the years canceled; birthdays, anniversaries, sporting events, concerts, plays, conferences and meetings — so many events that enrich our lives … not happening.

The Psalmist says for us to pursue our fears and face them. Great advice as we know that negative emotions cause stress and illness if they are not acknowledged. As counterintuitive as it seems, to face into those emotions and fears, actually embrace them, helps release their power over you and their negative effect on you.

It is useless to try to stop feeling such emotions or to feel you shouldn't have them for all sorts of reasons. Repressing or rejecting them often keeps them simmering just below the surface. Contemplative practices in both the East and the West invite us to intentionally lean into the feeling, even intensify it and transform it with a loving heart. Tonglen from the Buddhist tradition and the welcoming practice, which is part of centering prayer, are worth trying to see if they might help at this time. The links take you to past reflections that explain these practices.

Yet there was no safe haven, no hiding place from fear.

Then the channels of the sea were seen,

And the foundations of the world laid bare,

The earth gave a mighty shudder

Then settled down to heal in the Silence.

It seems as if our earth is giving a mighty shudder. We know that our economic and political systems have become dysfunctional. As a people, too many of us in industrialized countries consume far more than is necessary. Individualism has dwarfed concern for the common good. The climate crisis continues to intensify. The old ways do not work anymore. We need a new consciousness to imagine new ways of responding to the crises we are experiencing.

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As the Earth settles down to heal in "the Silence," perhaps we can come together across the ideological divide to sit together in silence. In that space we would begin to share our deepest longings and hopes for how to be an Earth community for this millennium. Having stopped doing so much of what we take for granted, we may be willing to emerge from our healing in new ways — creating structures to provide a more equitable distribution of revenue and resources for all.

I abandon myself to You, O Living Presence,

My strength. You are my rock, my stronghold,

My freedom. …

I call upon You, Heart of my heart,

Singing praises to your Name,

And fear no longer holds me.

Contemplation is setting the intention to be open to the workings of the divine within oneself. During this time of crisis let us enter into contemplative sitting. Let us pray that we learn through this pandemic the stark realization that we are all connected; that when we face into our fears, we can transform them through love; and that we emerge from it all committed to a new way of being and acting.

In the years to come, that is what I hope to respond when asked: "What did you learn from the coronavirus pandemic?"

[Nancy Sylvester is founder and director of the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue. She served in leadership of her own religious community, the Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, Michigan, as well as in the presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Prior to that she was national coordinator of Network, the national Catholic social justice lobby. You may be interested in the current ICCD program, Enter the Chaos: Engage the Differences to Make a Difference.]