Columns
Coronavirus
Spirituality



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Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,

Nobody knows my sorrow.

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,

Nobody knows but Jesus.

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,

Glory hallelujah!

According to James Cone in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, spirituals like "Nobody Knows," sung by African Americans throughout their time in slavery and especially during the horrific lynching period of 1880-1940, reveal the dialectic of despair and hope that permeated their life and their faith. They sang of their pain and yet end their lament with "hallelujah."

This dialectic spoke to me as an insight to reflect on this Holy Week as we continue to become more aware of the duration and the unfolding implications of the coronavirus pandemic.

I know that as I complete three weeks in quarantine (I live with two sisters who have the virus and amazingly two of us do not) I feel quite overwhelmed by what I hear on the news every day. Although my world has been circumscribed by my immediate surroundings, I experience in microcosm what is happening.

I live on the campus of our former college, which now houses a new Detroit public high school which opened successfully in September. Everyone anticipated maintaining sufficient enrollment for this and the subsequent years; the school is now standing empty. New construction of a state-of-the-art preschool was in full swing, and now machinery frozen in place is idle for who knows how long.

The various spaces rented out for gatherings of much greater than two or 10 remain closed. Only a very slim security and maintenance crew remain employed. A dream

launched in 2019 is threatened by our unknown future.

This is just one small snapshot of a neighborhood in a city that has recently turned the corner economically and now has been brought to a standstill. Keep moving beyond my neighborhood and we are faced with our very fine health care systems being overwhelmed as all the frontline nurses, doctors and aides risk their own health and life every day. The city's major industries are laying off people; a few are retooling to provide ventilators or personal protective equipment materials for not only the city, but the nation.

The buses still running are the only transportation for those — often low-income workers — who are deemed essential in this crisis. And the number of COVID-19 cases continue to increase, as well as the death toll.

Almost every state, every nation is experiencing similar things. The suffering, fear and anxiety is heart-rending. Parents who have died with no one able to be with them at their moment of death. Single-parent families unsure how they can make it through this month's bills. Essential workers without sufficient protection or adequate pay. The homeless who seek both shelter and food at this time. And the fear millions of refugees are experiencing, not knowing when the virus will hit as they have no clean water or space to maintain physical distancing. Finally, those who have the virus and suffer a variety of symptoms, and, of course, those who fail to recover and die from the virus.

And we have no idea when it will end!

We are troubled and despair is not too far away.

Cone writes that through the poetry of the blues and the power of religion, African Americans found their resistance to the oppression they suffered.

> Jesus achieved salvation for the least through his *solidarity* with them even unto death. ... In the mystery of God's revelation, black Christians believed that just knowing that Jesus went through an experience of suffering in a manner similar to theirs gave them faith that God was with them, even in suffering on lynching trees, just as God was present with Jesus in suffering on the cross. ...The more black people struggled against white supremacy,

> the more they found in the cross the spiritual power to resist the violence they so often suffered.

It was their belief that the loving and liberating presence of God was *in* the very contradictions of their lives. They believed "they would not be defeated by the 'troubles of this world,' no matter how great and painful their suffering."

This spirituality did not foster passivity. Cone asserts that "the spirituals and the church, with Jesus' cross at the heart of its faith, gave birth to the black freedom movement that reached its peak in the civil rights era during the 1950s and 1960s."

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I want to be clear that I am not trying to equate the suffering of slavery and the still ongoing oppression of white racism with what we are experiencing today. Nor am I implying that we are victims of what is both a "man"-made and natural crisis. What I want to raise up is that the way they understood the love of God in their experience of such suffering invites us into a much different and I would suggest deeper reflection on what we are experiencing in light of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus this Holy Week.

For probably the first time in history, the entire planet is experiencing the same things at the same time. We might be able to say that no one is going to escape the consequences of this pandemic, although those with fewer resources will feel it to a greater degree. It is a moment when the "I" is becoming a "we" as we are dependent on each other and on nature to go forward together. It is going to be painful and we will suffer. But how we understand and experience that suffering is critical to how we emerge from this.

Good Friday and Holy Saturday are opportunities to take the time to be quiet. To reflect on how we see the presence of God in what is being experienced. To open ourselves to the paradox of holding both despair and hope as part of our life. To sink deeper into understanding that in the incarnation of Jesus, God reveals God's self precisely through Jesus' life, suffering and death.

In her book *The Wisdom Jesus*, Cynthia Bourgeault clarifies this. "I am not saying that suffering exists in order for God to reveal himself. I am only saying that *where* suffering exists and is consciously accepted, *there* divine love shines forth brightly."

In prayer, these days, consciously feel all the emotions stirring within and acknowledge all the fears. Then sit in contemplation. Let go into Divine Love permeating our lives and our Earth. Recognize God becoming human standing in solidarity with our suffering, our joy and all that happens to us on our evolutionary journey.

On Easter Sunday, reflect on the promise of the Resurrection that from suffering and death comes new life. The spirituals became the soil in which the seeds of the black freedom movement were planted. May we pray that this pandemic becomes the soil for a new way of being and doing so a "WE" emerges from this crisis. A "WE" that as it grows moves our planet closer to becoming a "new heaven and a new earth."

[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. For information go to www.iccdinstitute.org.]