Columns
Coronavirus
Spirituality



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Her voice over the phone was insistent. "Quick, take your camera over to the woods. Go. Now."

"Go? You do know there's a pandemic out there!"

"Not in the woods there isn't."

I thought about that a minute and then said, "OK, I'm going."

It was midmorning on a dark day with no sun to be seen and not many people either. And then there were the formidable woods, located, aptly enough, on Woods Road.

With camera swung around my back to free my hands, I approached the silent woods. The climb up from the sidewalk was steep. Once into the woods, I had to negotiate great depressions of earth, ravines filled with old leaves covering who knew what. Roots rose suddenly and twisted in and out of the underbrush. The deeper the woods, the thicker the brambles.

Hand over hand, I climbed, grabbing hold of a bush here, a tree branch there. Of course, I fell, got up and made my slow way, looking for what I had no idea.

I felt like the poet Dante, lost in a "dark wood, a wild and rough and stubborn wood." Which was a fair description of the coronavirus, as well. It is dark, indiscriminate, stubborn, rampant. In front of me, deformed tree trunks hunched over like scarecrows, a reminder of the sick and dying. And I wondered what my friend could be looking at, shut up in her fifth-floor apartment on the other side of the woods.

I thought of Robert Frost, stopping by woods and remarking, *Whose woods these are I think I know.*

I knew as well. The woods I was in were nobody's. They belonged to themselves. And I, with my camera slung over my back, felt like an intruder. Still, when the way back is as difficult as the way forward, you plod on.

In time, I came to a clearing, stopped a minute and caught my breath. Then I looked up. And there it was — the sun — transformed into a host held in a monstrance of tree branches.

I stood still and stared and reminded myself that I was in a forest, not a church. That I was looking at the sun held in tree branches, not at the body of Christ held in a gold monstrance.

And yet I felt blessed. I stood in the middle of a woods not of trees only. Bathed in light not of the sun only. I did not want to come down, even as those Apostles (Matthew 17: 1-8) did not want to leave their mount. They'd rather set up tents!

In a terrible irony, we *were* setting up tents, but they were to house the sick when hospital rooms were full. And I on a mount just stood there and looked and looked and looked. Finally, I asked for a blessing on every last one of us.

Then I slowly turned around and started down the steep hill. I slid, fell, got up, grabbed hold of brush and branches, just as before. But the way down was different. This time, I knew that God had my back. That God had all of our backs, even as we had each other's, for however long this day of reckoning lasts.

[Joan Sauro, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet, publishes widely in the Catholic press. "We were called Sister" (U.S. Catholic) was awarded first place for Best Essay 2014 by the CPA.]

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