

LET JUSTICE ROLL!

An Occasional Newsletter Produced & Distributed
by the "Social Justice & Action Group" (SJAG)
at St. John the Divine Anglican Church - Victoria, B.C.

SPECIAL ISSUE #9: "FAITH & COVID 19" - May 2020 -



EDITOR'S NOTE: With the current Corona pandemic in full swing, and with St. John's normal activities presently curtailed, SJAG is, for the first time, opting for an on-line version of the LJR newsletter. This special 9th issue deals almost exclusively with COVID-19. We trust you will be comforted and challenged by the articles we have chosen. ML

"But let justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like a never failing stream." - Amos 5:24 (NIV)

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COVID 19 PANDEMIC ISSUE - MAY 2020

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Feedback on ***Let Justice Roll #9*** can be e-mailed to either of the following SJAG members:

Murray Luft
John McLaren

murrayrae@yahoo.com
jpsmamclaren@gmail.com>

I.

The Roll of Justice at St. John's **An Editorial by John McLaren - Interim Chair of SJAG**

During past weeks of social distancing and lock down, we have had plenty of time, whilst keeping minds and bodies occupied in various creative ways, to reflect on the situation we find ourselves in with the Covid-19 pandemic. This, the ninth issue of “**Let Justice Roll**”, again reflecting the creative erudition and editing of Murray Luft, seeks to address three general questions:

- 1. How did we get here?**
- 2. How are we dealing with the present serious situation?**
- 3. How do we see the future and wish it to unfold?**

Issue #9 of LJR is designed to help us focus on those questions from theological, spiritual, ethical and socio-economic perspectives by highlighting the opinions, analyses and reflections of people of faith and hope, be they scholars, pastors, community advocates and activists, environmentalists, social commentators or poets. Collectively, the opinions and critiques that follow are designed to put the events and dangers swirling round us in their spiritual, scientific, ecological, social, as well as their personal contexts.

Understanding How We Got Here.

Several reflections in these pages relate to our unfortunate capacity to close our minds to the realities of God's creation and what it demands of us in terms of care and nurture and respect for nature, and that we need to take responsibility for our actions and neglect as opposed to ascribing the problems and prescriptions for their solution to God. They point to the hubris of denying that pollution and its adverse effects are costs of production, and that we all have an investment in protecting our biospheres, watersheds, and natural amenities. Others point to the often unthinking investment in an economic system, especially in this neo-liberal era, that consigns our individual and collective fate to the “*invisible hand*” and the operation of the market. They also point to: the excesses of wealth accumulation; concentrations of corporate power and influence; the manipulation of financial markets; the growing disparity in income distribution; the non-existent or shrinking social safety nets in many countries; the ravages of poverty; the neglect of public health, preventative health care, mental health and addiction services; and the corrosive effects across the globe of rampant consumerism on both producers and consumers of goods and services. In our reflection, we hear the voices of those who have been and continue to be the prophetic voices of our era, committed to working change in our minds, souls and actions to take on systems that contribute to environmental abuse, social and economic inequality, injustice, and widespread indifference towards the world around us.

Assessing How We Are Dealing With The Present Situation.

Several of the pieces in this number provide valuable testimony to the compassion and commitment of a range of people who are giving their all to stem the tide of this dangerous pandemic, seeking ways of preventing a recurrence, and enabling the rest of us to reorder our lives during the pandemic. The pieces reflect a strong commitment to religious and spiritual values and how they inform and inspire those front line people in the invaluable work they do. In reading these pieces, which are largely from a Christian perspective, it is important to recognize that among those on the front lines, there are those who are inspired by other faith traditions, and others motivated by strong humanitarian impulses. Behind the stories of heroism lies the uncomfortable fact, that as countries and societies, we have in so many instances ignored or dropped the ball on the value of robust public health systems

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and preventative medicine – another example of how “other priorities” have gotten in the way of endeavouring to ensure that contagion does not take root and spread.

The sad reality is there for all of us to see and ponder – the lack of cohesive strategies, the thoroughly inadequate provisioning of material resources to deal with the adverse effects of the pandemic, and not least, the high price in mortality and isolation of the ageing population (particularly those in care homes), as well as other vulnerable populations (like those lacking homes), are paying for public neglect by politicians and their electorates. On the positive side, we are witnessing the recognition that it is our public health officials, and the science supporting them, who have been able to come to the fore and provide us with honest assessments of the nature of the pandemic, the means of containing it, and the uncertainties in tracking and controlling it in the future. In the main in Canada (and in B.C.), they are being listened to by politicians of various stripes as to the dramatic measures that need to be followed to prevent the pandemic’s spread and recurrence.

Imagining the Future And How It Might Unfold at St. John's.

In comment and discussion (in both the media and within and between social justice and action communities), there is enhanced examination of ways and means of contributing to the rehabilitation of nature, an expanded and meaningful social welfare net, realistic and sensitive approaches to economic recovery, as well as future economic policy, food security and greater community self-sufficiency. Some of these possibilities are canvassed in **Issue #9 of LJR**. In the abstract, this is a daunting prospect. Despite the reference by some politicians to “*a return to normality*”, writers appearing here make it clear that what is ahead will not, and cannot, be a return to a pre-Covid19 world. They remind us that there are powerful economic forces that will be lobbying for a “business as usual” approach – i.e., to an economy which embodies the values of profit maximization, corporate neglect of ecological and social values, extreme inequality, minimal regulation, low corporate tax structures, and *gig* employment, phenomena with which we are all too familiar.

In these pages you may discover what theologian Walter Brueggeman calls the *prophetic imagination* – i.e., the ways in which national, regional and local communities can react to, and combat, those pressures and assist in envisaging a much more just and caring world. As a faith community, we should inform ourselves, make our voices heard in the debates on these matters, and support efforts to prevent us as a society from sinking back into the dysfunctional ways of the past. At the same time, we have to realize that our resources are limited. Creating impressive wish lists and shouting messages of hope from St. John's spire and bell tower are not sufficient for effective social, political change to materialize.

Here's what we in SJAG think is both urgent and possible for St. John's to pursue:

(a) Re-evaluating the ways in which we as a community practice our faith, organize our affairs and interact with each other. Are we sufficiently cognisant of the needs (spiritual, physical and mental, and social) of those in this community of St. John the Divine, and making sure they are met with understanding and compassion? Are our policies and actions in running and sustaining our property in tune with reducing our carbon foot print? Are we doing enough to reach out to the vulnerable in our neighbourhood?

(b) Considering what other ways there might be for us as a community to practice what we preach in praise of God's creation and the natural world. Are there, for instance, local projects or environmental stewardship and ecological projects to which we as a community or individuals could contribute, or do so more actively?

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(c) **Making active, common cause with a range of social justice and action organizations in the community of greater Victoria in order to research, identify, and develop prescriptions to address sensitively and effectively the social problems that afflict our region, and to do this cooperatively with others committed to solutions for these ills.** The objective here is to use the combined power of a range of civil-society organizations within our community (faith-based or not), representing a significant slice of the local population, to make the voice of social justice and action in this community heard by politicians and other decision makers in ways that make them understand that we are allied, informed, active and serious.

It is this last point that we have purposely emphasized in LJR #9. **Greater Victoria Acting Together (GVAT)** embodies the vision laid out in the previous paragraph. It is an inspired initiative that from early days has been supported from within, and by, St. John the Divine. The organization is getting ready to take on the task of presenting its projects (specifically on homelessness, mental health and addictions, and the climate crisis) to its broad-based, civil society membership, and to Victoria's political representatives. Meanwhile, it has been active in mobilizing support for vulnerable populations during the Covid-19 pandemic, pressuring both municipal and provincial governments to extend support to those populations, and commit to longer term solutions to the problems identified. We have thought it important to give some account of this work to which St. John's, as a faith community, is committed, as a basis of information and discussion of how we may play our part in pressing these issues and solutions to them. In the process, we move from reflection and critique to suggestions for action. Finally, I trust that this issue of LJR #9 will edify, engage and motivate you to *Let Justice Roll* in Victoria and in the larger post-Covid19 world,

Poem From Covid Response Team - Belfast, Northern Ireland *

*When you go out and see the empty streets,
the empty stadiums, the empty train platforms,
don't say to yourself, "It looks like the end of the world."
What you're seeing is love in action.
What you're seeing, in that negative space, is how much we do care for each other,
for our grandparents, our parents, our brothers and sisters,
for people we will never meet.
People will lose jobs over this.
Some will lose their businesses.
And some will lose their lives.
All the more reason to take a moment, when you're out on your walk,
or on your way to the store, or just watching the news,
to look into the emptiness and marvel at all of that love.
Let it fill you and sustain you.
It isn't the end of the world,
It is the most remarkable act of global solidarity we may ever witness.*

*** Special thanks to our neighbours at First Met United Church for providing this poem!**

II.

LJR Line Up: Pandemic Issue #9

AN INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy - "The Pandemic is a Portal" *

What is this thing that has happened to us? It's a virus, yes. In and of itself, it holds no moral brief. But it is definitely more than a virus. . . Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. But it is definitely more than a virus. Some believe it's God's way of bringing us to our senses. Others that it's a Chinese conspiracy to take over the world.

Whatever it is, corona-virus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to "normality", trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture.

But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it

Arundhati Roy is an Indian intellectual, social critic, writer and environmentalist. Her full article appeared in The Financial Times (London, UK) on Apr. 3, 2020. This is an excerpt of her essay called "*Pandemic Is a Portal*," a selection from the author's forthcoming book: Azadi: Freedom, Fascism, Fiction (Haymarket, September 2020). Her latest novel is entitled: The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, © Arundhati Roy 2020.

III.

Christianity Offers No Answers About the Coronavirus -- N.T. Wright*

For many Christians, the coronavirus-induced limitations on life have arrived at the same time as Lent, the traditional season of doing without. But the sharp new regulations—no theatre, schools shutting, virtual house arrest for us over-70s—make a mockery of our little Lenten disciplines. Doing without whiskey, or chocolate, is child's play compared with not seeing friends or grandchildren, or going to the pub, the library or church. There is a reason we normally try to meet in the flesh. There is a reason solitary confinement is such a severe punishment. And this Lent has no fixed Easter to look forward to. We can't tick off the days. This is a stillness, not of rest, but of poised, anxious sorrow.

No doubt the usual silly suspects will tell us why God is doing this to us. A punishment? A warning? A sign? These are knee-jerk would-be Christian reactions in a culture which, generations back, embraced rationalism: everything must have an explanation. But supposing it doesn't? Supposing real human wisdom doesn't mean being able to string together some dodgy speculations and say, "So that's all right then?" What if, after all, there are moments such as T. S. Eliot recognized in the early 1940s, when the only advice is to wait without hope, because we'd be hoping for the wrong thing?

Rationalists (including Christian rationalists) want explanations; Romantics (including Christian romantics) want to be given a sigh of relief. But perhaps what we need more than either is to recover the biblical tradition of lament. Lament is what happens when people ask, "Why?" and don't get an answer. It's where we get to when we move beyond our self-centred worry about our sins and failings and look more broadly at the suffering of the world. It's bad enough facing a pandemic in New York City or London. What about a crowded refugee camp on a Greek island? What about Gaza? Or South Sudan?

At this point the Psalms, the Bible's own hymnbook, come back into their own, just when some churches seem to have given them up. "Be gracious to me, Lord," prays the sixth Psalm, "for I am languishing; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror." "Why do you stand far off, O Lord?" asks the 10th Psalm plaintively. "Why do you hide yourself in time of trouble?" And so it goes on: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" (Psalm 13). And, all the more terrifying because Jesus himself quoted it in his agony on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22).

Yes, these poems often come out into the light by the end, with a fresh sense of God's presence and hope, not to explain the trouble but to provide reassurance within it. But sometimes they go the other way. Psalm 89 starts off by celebrating God's goodness and promises, and then suddenly switches and declares that it's all gone horribly wrong. And Psalm 88 starts in misery and ends in darkness: "You have caused friend and neighbour to shun me; my companions are in darkness." A word for our self-isolated times. The point of lament, woven thus into the fabric of the biblical tradition, is not just that it's an outlet for our frustration, sorrow, loneliness and sheer inability to understand what is happening or why. The mystery of the biblical story is that God also laments. Some Christians like to think of God as above all that, knowing everything, in charge of everything, calm and unaffected by the troubles in his world. That's not the picture we get in the Bible.

God was grieved to his heart, Genesis declares, over the violent wickedness of his human creatures. He was devastated when his own bride, the people of Israel, turned away from him. And when God came back to his people in person—the story of Jesus is meaningless unless that's what it's about—he wept at the tomb of his friend. St. Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit "groaning" within us, as we our-selves groan within the pain of the whole creation. The ancient doctrine of the Trinity teaches us to recognize the One God in the tears of Jesus and the anguish of the Spirit.

It is no part of the Christian vocation, then, to be able to explain what's happening and why. In fact, it is part of the Christian vocation not to be able to explain—and to lament instead. As the Spirit laments within us, so we become, even in our self-isolation, small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell. And out of that there can emerge new possibilities, new acts of kindness, new scientific understanding, new hope. New wisdom for our leaders? Now there's a thought.

* **Time/March 30, 2020** - TIME Ideas hosts the world's leading voices, providing commentary on events in news, society, and culture. We welcome outside contributions. Opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of TIME editors. NT Wright is a writer, former Church of England Bishop and professor at Oxford...

IV.

Coronavirus Prayer

A pandemic That Won't Last Forever and Ever ... Amen! *

Dear Lord,

In this our hour of doorknobs and droplets,
when masks have cancelled our personalities;
in this our hour of prickling perimeters, sinister surfaces,
defeated bodies, and victorious abstractions,
when some of us are stepping into rooms humid with contagion,
and some of us are standing in the pasta aisle;
in this our hour of vacant parks and boarded-up hoops,
when we miss the sky-high roar of the city
and hear instead the tarp that flaps on the unfinished roof,
the squirrel giving his hinge-like cry, and the siren constantly passing,
to You we send up our prayer, as follows:

Let not heebie-jeebies become our religion,
our new ideology, with its own jargon.
Fortify us, Lord. Show us how.
What would your saints be doing now?
Saint Francis, he was a fan of the human.
He'd be rolling naked on Boston Common.
He'd be sharing a bottle. No mask, no gloves,
shielded only by burning love.

But I don't think we're in the mood
for feats of antic beatitude.
In New York City, and in Madrid,
the saints maintain the rumbling grid.
Bless the mailman, and equally bless
the bus driver, vector of steadfastness.
Protect the bravest, the best we've got.
Protect the rest of us, why not?

And if the virus that took John Prine comes,
As it may, for me and mine,
although we've mostly stayed indoors,
well—then, as ever,
we're all Yours,
Until further notice.

* BY JAMES PARKER - [The Atlantic](#) - April 19, 2020

V.

THE COMPANY OF THE UNAFRAID

TEN WAYS GOD'S PECULIAR HOPE KEEPS FEAR FROM OVERPOWERING US. BY WALTER BRUEGGEMANN -- SOJOURNERS / JULY 2019 *

WHEN WE ARE contained in the world that is immediately in front of us, we will inescapably end in despair. The inventory of despair-producers is well known: The failure of public institutions; the collapse of moral consensus; the failure of political nerve; growing economic inequity; and the pervasiveness of top-down violence against the vulnerable. The good news of the gospel is that we need not be contained within that immediate world, and "*hoppers*" refuse to be so contained: Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). That chapter in the Bible provides a roster of Jewish hoppers who refused resignation to what was in front of them. What these *hoppers* have in common is that they knew and trusted that God's alternative world is crowding in on the dominant world of despair and will—soon or late—overcome it. The good world of God's promise is marked by restorative justice, compassion, and mercy. *Hoppers* who trust in this coming world refuse despair, trust the promises of God, and actively engage in the performance of that new world. Against such resolve, despair has no chance in the long run! God's peculiar hope is reliable ground for not allowing the fears of the present to define or overpower us.

1. Hope depends solely on God and on God's faithful freedom.

As it is affirmed in the great hymn of John Calvin: "*Our hope is in no other save in thee; our faith is built upon thy promise free.*" Only God! Not our ideologies, pet projects, or our deep biases. But then we must be clear on who God is. The God of the Bible is not a First Cause or an Unmoved Mover or even the Ground of Being. Rather the God witnessed there is a real character who plays an active role in the life of the world. This God, more-over, is a lively agent who has purposes and resolves, who will and does enact those purposes with active, effective verbs. This God, moreover, is characterized by faithfulness. This is a God who does not quit but who persists in said purposes through thick and thin. But this divine faithfulness is not automatic. Rather God's faithfulness is exercised in freedom, not limited to the reality of the world, not boxed in by ideology, not confined by our "laws" of reality.

2. In free faithfulness, God makes promises about a world arrangement congruent with God's own person.

We know about God's own person because God has, in the Bible, disclosed God's own self. This is a God marked by relational qualities of constancy for which the preferred biblical terms are "*justice, righteousness, faithfulness, steadfast love, and mercy*" (see Exodus 34:6-7, Hosea 2:19-20, Lamentations 3:22-23). This is who God is. For that reason this is what God wants and to which God is committed for the future. As a result, the Bible witnesses to this God making promises about a future that will be decisively marked by well-being in terms of the relational marks of "justice, righteousness, faithfulness, steadfast love, and mercy." It is not thinkable that God would be at work creating a world that is marked by injustice, brutality, alienation, or violence. Where such social circumstances emerge, we may be sure that they contradict God's intention for the world. Thus in Ezekiel 34 God is said to chastise the powerful for being exploitative and self-serving. In response to that sorry circumstance, God resolves to act alternatively in the world (see Ezekiel 34:15-16). God undertakes the work of restoration, the very work of restoration we see in the ministry of Jesus.

3. God's promises well up powerfully in contexts of urgent need, defying despair and making a way out.

We may easily identify three historical crises in the Bible, each of which is marked by despair into which God's promises come as an alternative future. First, in Genesis, Abraham and Sarah are without an heir and so with no future (11:30). In that circumstance God declares, against all biological odds, that an heir will be given that will open a future for this chosen family (18:10-14). Second, in the Babylonian exile the displacement seemed to be a dead end for the Jews. In that context of despair, there is an explosion of prophetic promises that assert a new future beyond

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Babylonian control (Isaiah 40-55, Jeremiah 30-33, Ezekiel 33-37). Third, in Luke 1:46-56, Mary sings a song of defiance against the predatory economy and anticipates that Jesus will enact a new social life that restores economic viability to the left-behind. No explanation is offered for any of these promises; there is only anticipation. God's promises do not depend on optimistic circumstance but only upon the resolve of God. Hope is trust in the promises against the evidence of circumstance.

4. God's promises characteristically concern social, bodily, this-worldly well-being, the emergence of a viable neighbourhood.

There is nothing like "generic religion" to distort our understanding of biblical hope. In generic religion ("*thoughts and prayers*"!), it is supposed that "faith" concerns the well-being of our "souls" and that we are at best headed for "*heaven*" as a land of eternity. None of that, however, is central to biblical hope. Indeed, biblical hope contradicts all of that popular assumption. Instead the promises of God speak of the "kingdom of God," which means the world arranged according to the purposes of God. That is why we pray that God's kingdom will come "on earth as it is in heaven."

That promised coming arrangement of the world is:

- **Social:** it concerns the common good of the community and all creatures.
- **Bodily:** it concerns the material security and viability of all creatures, notably the vulnerable, left-behind, lame, blind, and poor.
- **This-worldly:** that is, the daily life of folk here and now, not a never-never land of "souls."
A social community organized by God's hope is indeed a neighbourhood in which all of the neighbours are bound in common well-being.

5. God fulfills God's promises in two modes, both directly and indirectly.

Indirectly God fulfills promises by summoning, empowering, and dispatching human agents to act out God's futures for neighbourliness. Thus, in the prophetic tradition (that for Christians culminates in Jesus), God is known to call human persons to do the work of neighbourly justice. Alternatively, in the apocalyptic tradition (also arriving at Jesus), the issues are too large and demanding to be enacted by human agents. In such circumstances God is seen to act directly and dramatically to end what is old and failed, and to initiate new creaturely possibility. It is likely that many people committed to social justice would opt for the indirect mode, because we understand ourselves to be part of that called company dispatched to enact God's future. It is, however, not an either/or. In biblical faith it is a both/and, both indirect and direct, as evidenced in the prophetic and apocalyptic traditions. When we are affluent and intellectually sophisticated, we will likely see that God acts through human agents. When we are desperate, we are more likely to hope and pray for God to act directly. In both modes, it is affirmed that new possibilities are underway through God's faithfulness.

6. Hope is the unblinking conviction that God's promises are relentlessly underway toward fulfilment.

God's promises contradict much of the way the world is, because much of the world is out of sync with God's purposes. Hope is the conviction that this out-of-sync world will not last and cannot finally refuse God's intent. Hebrews 11 offers a great articulation of hope; that inventory of hopers shows that the biblical tradition consists in those who have lived according to God's promises. Their names are legion, consisting in "prophets and apostles, saints and martyrs." For all of them, faith is "the conviction of things not seen" (11:1). What we see in the world is quite otherwise. For Abraham saw barrenness; for Moses it was bondage. For Samuel it was the Philistines. For those addressed in Hebrews 11, it was the brutality of the Roman Empire. For us now it is variously the predatory economy that systemically excludes more and more people as "left-behind," or it is a diminished environment that will not be sustained. The news is that this world will not finally stand as it is. We belong to the company of those who have not blinked!

7. Hope in God's promises is not passive but demandingly active; it is a resolve to live in God's future as though it were already here.

Hope is not optimism or a wish or a good idea. It is a way of living differently in the world. Jesus declared that "the kingdom of God has come near" (or "is at hand," Mark 1:15). As anyone can see, it is not here yet. But it is about to be. It is always about to be, always "almost." Jesus summoned those who became his disciples to live differently, as though the new kingdom arrangement were already in effect, and so to live in contradiction to the way the world

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seems to be. We are not under any illusion. We can see how the world is. But hope is the refusal to let our lives be defined by that present world arrangement. Thus:

- **We refuse** the exclusionary practices and policies of the present world, and enact hospitality that is a mark of the new kingdom.
- **We refuse** the fearful parsimony of the present world, and enact generosity that is a mark of the coming world.
- **We refuse** the thirst for vengeance that is all around us, and enact forgiveness that is a mark of the coming kingdom of God.

Hope is spirit-led imagination that refuses what we can see for the sake of what is as sure as God's faithfulness.

8. Hope is inescapably inconvenient and eventually dangerous.

Because hope contradicts the present world, it is inconvenient. Thus Abraham had to depart his home country to receive God's promise. The first disciples of Jesus "*left everything*" to follow. The *hoppers* of faith have understood that God's newness disrupts a comfortable life. That newness summons us out of our comfort zone to be with folk we might not prefer, doing tasks and taking risks we might not easily choose. Soon or late, hope brings us into conflict with the forceful powers that defend the status quo—that will go to great violent ends to protect that status quo. Thus Moses finally had to confront Pharaoh. Esther risked her life to confront the king. Jesus had to face the violent power of Rome. And we know about Bonhoeffer and King, Romero and the missionaries killed in El Salvador, and so many others. Most of us will not go so far as such danger. All of us, however, are invited to the inconvenience of God's newness. And once we go there, who knows what risks may follow?

9. Hope is the emancipatory alternative to resignation, despair, or self-sufficiency.

A world out of sync is demanding and fatiguing. It requires a great deal to live in long-term alienation. When we are fully aware of our present world, we may indeed settle for resignation, believing that it will always be this way. When we inhale resignation long enough, we may end in despair, because the present world arrangement cannot and will not generate anything genuinely new. Or if we are able we may be propelled to self-sufficiency, believing that if we hustle and are smart enough, we can make ourselves okay in this costly world. So imagine us—almost all of us—variously caught in resignation, despair, or self-sufficiency. These however, are all less than satisfying traps, for we are not, in our God-given creatureliness, intended to live this way. Hope is a refusal of resignation because we know about God's newness. Hope is a rejection of despair, because God has made and keeps promises. Hope is a liberation from self-sufficiency, because we are able to live by God's generosity. Hope is a transformative alternative to what is on offer by our weary world.

10. Hope is the ground for courage, freedom, and joy.

The present world arrangement is governed by fear and imagined fear. We know, moreover, that perfect fear casts out love. It also casts out courage, freedom, and joy. Perfect fear casts out all of the qualities and practices of our best humanness. We are led then to ask about an effective antidote to fear that so diminishes us. Hope is reliable ground for not allowing the fears of the present to define or overpower us. Hope refuses fear because we know that God's good future is surely coming that will displace all present threats. As we live into that sure future, present fears lose their authority over us. As a consequence, those who hope find the courage—which fear has robbed us of—to act against the expectations of the present. Those who hope find freedom to enact agency for our lives and the lives of our neighbours, freedom that has cowered before fear. Those who hope find joy that is impossible when we are paralyzed by fear. We are in the company of the unafraid, full of courage, freedom, and joy.

* Walter Brueggemann, a *Sojourners* contributing editor, is professor emeritus at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia.

VI.

COVID-19 “Just Recovery” Principles *

In March, on the occasion of the 50th Annual Earth Day, hundreds of environmental and human service/development NGOs around the world signed the following **Open Letter** to world governments and policy makers:

The COVID-19 pandemic demands swift and bold action from national governments and the international community. Choices being made right now will shape our society, health, climate and economy for decades to come. We, the people of the world, call for a united global response to this COVID-19 pandemic that ensures a just recovery and transition to a better future for those most in need in the wake of this crisis. This is a time to be decisive in saving lives and bold in charting a path to a genuinely healthier and more equitable future through a “Just Recovery”.

Open Letter

The COVID-19 pandemic demands swift and unprecedented action from national governments and the international community. Choices being made right now will shape our society for years, if not decades to come. As decision-makers take steps to ensure immediate relief and long-term recovery, it is imperative that they consider the interrelated crises of wealth inequality, racism, and ecological decline – notably the climate crisis, which were in place long before COVID-19, and now risk being intensified. This is a time to be decisive in saving lives, and bold in charting a path to a genuinely healthier and more equitable future through a “Just Recovery”.

We, the undersigned organizations, call for a global response to COVID-19 to contribute to a just recovery. Responses at every level must uphold these five principles:

1. Put people’s health first, no exceptions.

Resource health services everywhere; ensure access for all.

2. Provide economic relief directly to the people.

Focus on people and workers – particularly those marginalized in existing systems – our short-term needs and long-term conditions.

3. Help workers and communities, not corporate executives.

Assistance directed at specific industries must be channelled to communities and workers, not shareholders or corporate executives & never to corporations that don’t commit to tackling the climate crisis.

4. Create resilience for future crises.

We must create millions of decent jobs that will help power a just recovery and transition for workers and communities to the zero-carbon future we need.

5. Build solidarity & community across borders – don’t empower authoritarians.

Transfer technology and finance to lower-income countries and communities to allow them to respond using these principles and share solutions across borders and communities. Do not use the crisis as an excuse to trample on human rights, civil liberties, and democracy.

* Further information on the “Just Recovery Principles/Campaign” can be obtained from www.350.org

VII.

WHEN CLIMATE MET COVID - By Guy Dauncey *

<https://thepracticalutopian.ca/2020/04/07/when-climate-met-covid/>

We face not one but three simultaneous inter-connected crises: the COVID-19 Emergency, the Climate and Biodiversity Emergency, and the Crisis of Capitalism.

We urgently need connected constructive responses.

We've Got Time - Let's Use It To Make Plans!

More than a million people are struggling in their beds with the coronavirus, but most people are not: they are hunkered down at home, looking for ways to fill the hours. At the same time, we face three urgent challenges: (1) To tackle the climate emergency, (2) To tackle the biodiversity emergency, and (3) To design a new global economy based not on capitalist selfishness but on compassion, entrepreneurial brilliance, and the economics of kindness.

We should use this time to plan – to share ideas and work out the details of how we can tackle the three challenges, combining your compassion and instinct for cooperation to survive the COVID-19 crisis with my need for policies and programs that will both end the climate and biodiversity crises and build us a new economy based not on greed but kindness, and respect for Nature, communities and workers.

As soon as the COVID-19 crisis begins to be over, whether in two months or two years, governments will need to rebuild their economies. They will want shovel-ready projects through which they can inject money into the economy. Being shovel-ready requires detailed planning and budgeting – and *now* is the time that we must be doing this. If we wait until the crisis is over, institutional laziness will mean that our governments' economic stimulus programs are directed to restoring business-as-usual, and we will have missed the most important opportunity of our lives.

What does being “shovel-ready” look like? Let me offer some random examples for each of our three challenges:

The Climate Challenge

- Being ready for the nationwide roll-out of a program of mass deep home retrofits, to eliminate the use of fossil fuels for home heating by 2030.
- Being ready for a nationwide solar roll-out, such that every unshaded south-facing roof is solar-clad by 2030.
- Being ready for neighbourhood climate action in every community, with paid Climate Action Coordinators who have been trained in how to get neighbours together to plan how they can retrofit their homes, switch to cycling, transit or electric vehicles, grow more food, plant trees, embrace the goal of zero-waste, adopt a climate-friendly diet with less meat and dairy, switch to climate-friendly banking and investment, and so on.

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The Biodiversity Challenge

- Being ready for a nationwide shift to nature-friendly agro-ecological farming, phasing out the use of the pesticides and fertilizers that are causing so much harm to insects, pollinators, birds, and other wildlife.
- Being ready with programs and regulations that can transform our economy into a fully circular economy in which there is no such thing as waste, in which every product we consume contributes to the regeneration of nature, rather than its destruction.
- Being ready with local ecological restoration maps, and plans for how each critical area can be restored over the next several years, by whom, and at what cost.

The New Economy Challenge

- Being ready to roll out a new legal foundation for all businesses and banks, after reaching agreement with many partners, setting them on a path that will increase wellbeing for all stakeholders, including Nature, workers, communities, customers and suppliers, not just for shareholders and CEOs.
- Being ready to roll out a new foundation for education, work, income and welfare that will end poverty, debt and financial insecurity, helping people to find work that enables them to fulfil their highest sense of purpose while supporting the formation of cooperatives and worker-owned businesses.
- Being ready to roll out a new foundation for global trade in which terms and tariffs are used to raise nations' commitments to human rights, workers' rights, climate action, ecological restoration and regional resilience, rather than lowering them, thereby accelerating the race to the bottom through the exploitation of workers, communities, animals and Nature.

We can't wait for governments to do these things for us: their hands are full, and they haven't got time to think about the bigger picture. It is ordinary people, activists, business leaders, non-profits, labour unions, universities and foundations that need to take the lead, just as they have done for all major social change breakthroughs in the past, from ending slavery and winning workers' rights to winning public healthcare and civil rights.

My Concluding Argument

Some people say that now is *not* the time to be talking about the climate emergency because people are feeling anxious, afraid and overwhelmed. I suspect that those saying this never took the climate and biodiversity emergencies seriously in the first place, and they don't understand that just as the causes of our troubles are linked, our solutions must also be linked. So let's build a better world together.

* Guy Dauncey is an author, organizer, and a huge believer in the need for a better world. He is the author of 10 books, including *The Climate Challenge: 101 Solutions to Global Warming* and *Journey to the Future: A Better World Is Possible*. He lives on Vancouver Island, in Canada. You can follow his work at www.thepracticalutopian.ca. In March of 2020, he published *50 Ways to Stay SANE – Strong, Active, Neighborly and Energetic – During the Corona-virus Epidemic* (President, Yellow Point Ecological Society Ladysmith, BC, 250-924-1445). This is an excerpt from Dauncey's longer article. Thanks to Ruth Turner and Sara Chu for providing this piece to LJR.

VIII.

"GOD WHOSE WILL IS HEALTH AND WHOLENESS" **"LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOUR IN A TIME OF CORONAVIRUS"**

A HYMN BY CAROLYN WINFREY GILLETTE – MAR. 9, 2020 – Sojo.net *

1. God whose will is health and wholeness, hear your people as we pray
Many now are facing illness; more face sickness every day.
As we lift our song toward heaven, may we use the gifts you give—
science, justice, and compassion— to help others safely live.
2. Jesus taught that your commandments call for us to use the mind.
May we use the gifts of science to seek health for humankind.
Bless the ones who work for healing; bless the ones who seek to be
Builders of a health care system that protects society.
3. God, you call for love and justice, yet our laws are far from wise:
Many don't have good insurance; lack of health care threatens lives.
Many workers must keep working, sick or not, to pay the bills.
Turn us round when we have sanctioned greed that leads to greater ills.
4. Loving God, we ask your blessing on the sick and those they love,
And we pray for those now grieving as they lift their cries above.
There is trouble all around us; illness causes pain and fear.
Give compassion, love and kindness as we serve your people here.

Tune: Traditional Dutch melody ("There's a Wideness in God's Mercy")
Text: Copyright © 2020 by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. All rights reserved.

* Carolyn Winfrey Gillette is the author of over 400 hymns that have been sung by thousands of congregations around the world, and are found in 20 books and thousands of web site. She and her husband Bruce are Presbyterian ministers who have served congregations in Pennsylvania, Delaware, New York, and New Jersey.

Instructions for living a life: Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it. Sometimes.

Mary Oliver

IX.

Op-Ed: Times-Colonist (Victoria, B.C.)

Greater Victoria Acting Together (GVAT) Supports the City of Victoria's Call for Emergency Powers to Requisition Hotel or Motel Units to House the Homeless in the COVID-19 Emergency

By Chester F. Phillips, GVAT Lead Organizer

April 21, 2020

Doctors and nurses are warning us that the homeless camps at Topaz Park and on Pandora are COVID-19 outbreaks waiting to happen. If they do, the health of all is at risk and the sacrifices we have all made in the past six weeks might be in vain. The tent city at Topaz Park was never meant to be more than a temporary solution while indoor accommodations were arranged. Meanwhile, there are thousands of local hotel and motel rooms sitting empty in facilities currently closed to the public. We have the ability and the responsibility to protect all of our people during this crisis.

Greater Victoria Acting Together (GVAT) is a diverse, nonpartisan alliance of 32 organizations that together represent some 70,000 people living in this region. Our organizations are committed to standing with and advocating for the people of Greater Victoria in this time of crisis and beyond. Several of our member organizations provide direct support for the homeless. They know first-hand the risks this population faces with COVID-19 and how that risk could easily become a growing risk to us all. GVAT's member organizations also include unionized workers in the hospitality and hotel industry. Any plan put in place will also need to protect their health and livelihoods.

GVAT supports Victoria City Council's motion urging the province to provide immediate shelter by requisitioning rooms in hotels and motels currently closed to the public. We appreciate the heroic efforts made to date to find enough indoor shelter through voluntary measures. This has not worked. People without homes simply cannot follow the recommendations of Island Health and the Provincial Health Officer's orders. Should the virus spread to these communities, the health impacts will be deadly, and the crisis affecting all of us will be worse and prolonged.

We recognize that some hotel and motel owners may have difficulty supporting the requisition of rooms. It will be critical to the effort's success that supportive and supervisory services including mental health, addiction, and food support accompany room use. Rooms must then be brought back to their original condition before the general public stays there.

GVAT also understands that hotel and hospitality workers are vulnerable, both to virus exposure and financial loss. In order to protect the health and safety of workers and the public, unionized hotels and support services should be prioritized. If and when non-unionized hotels must be utilized, unions should be brought to the table to ensure rigorous health protection standards are followed.

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Our governments have been proactive and have acted quickly under duress to try to protect us from the worst outcomes of the pandemic, and we are grateful. Yet in a robust democracy, it is also our duty to point out where further government investment can create a more just and equitable society as we emerge from crisis. We must seize the opportunity to end homelessness in Greater Victoria and see short-term shelter now as a path to transitioning everyone who needs it into longer-term housing. We will need a coordinated strategy to re-purpose existing facilities, build appropriate new shelters bundled with health and wellness services, and increase affordable housing supply. Simply put, no one should be put back on the streets as this crisis subsides.

We, the 70,000 members of GVAT's 32 organizations call on our municipal and provincial governments to first, and quickly, get everyone sheltered, and then to join our frontline service providers, unions, local businesses, conservation and climate groups, and faith communities in acting together to end the moral and public health catastrophe of homelessness. GVAT is here, on behalf of our member organizations, to help furnish the political will.

Over the coming days, GVAT will announce more campaigns to advance the common good and fight for a greener and more equitable economy. This is the first, because it is also perhaps the most urgently needed to protect public health for some of our most vulnerable citizens and everyone else.

MEDIA CONTACT: Chet Phillips, (250) 880-1204; chet@gvat.ca

Greater Victoria Acting Together (GVAT) is an alliance of 32 member organizations made up of unions, congregations, environmental, educational, local business, and front-line service organizations. We understand the incredible power of civic organizations working together for the common good.



A New Bottom Line is one that judges the success of every sector, system, and institution of our society by whether or not it promotes a world of love and generosity.

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The Meaning of Life *

Rabbi Michael Lerner imagines an education for the future where students would learn to engage in studies that would prepare them for spiritual transformation. In alignment with our consideration of “*incarnation*,” one of the topics students would explore is “*Meaning of Life*.” Lerner explains this below:

In this stream, students would learn about the various ways people have sought to discover a framework of meaning for life. Students would study art and poetry, music and dance, world literature and philosophy, religions and forms of spirituality. They would be encouraged to consider their own paths for finding meaning, and to develop rituals, poetry, music, and dance that fit the lives they are shaping for themselves or as part of ongoing communities of meaning.

Students would also be exposed to the range of human suffering, projects and strategies for ameliorating or reducing suffering, and the range of responses and attempts to give meaning to the suffering and the attempts to be with suffering without giving it any larger meaning. They would also be exposed to the ways people have sought to find meaning through community action, mutual support, and love. Many students will have already had their own exposure to suffering in their families and communities, but the school situation will give them a different take: an opportunity to reflect on suffering and its meaning. So, too, students will explore experiences of unity, mystical luminosity and joy that are as much dimensions of life as suffering and cruelty.

Finally, students would be encouraged to prepare a rite of passage that they, together with parents and teachers as advisors, devised for themselves: a kind of “*hero’s quest*” in which they were initiated into the realities of some aspect of adult life. Adapting from suggestions made by [Zen Roshi] Joan Halifax, I suggest that such a rite of passage would involve going through a process that would include:

- 1. Plunging into some (carefully discerned) arena of activity - allowing oneself to separate from familiar paths and ways of coping so that one can “*not know*”.**
- 2. Allowing oneself to experience confusion, fear, and disorientation without jumping into denial or easy resolution of conflict.**
- 3. Healing oneself and incorporating into one’s being the knowledge learned as part of this process.**
- 4. Ending with a firm determination to liberate oneself and the world from suffering.**
- 5. Commitment to healing oneself and making a commitment to liberation for self, others, and the world is an essential part of spiritual transformation.**

While it could be argued that many students have already gone through stages “1.” through “3.,” few get to “4.” or “5.”

* From: Richard Rohr's daily on-line meditation (CAC - Dec. 28/19). Rohr notes: “*Michael Lerner is an American rabbi at Beyt Tikkun Synagogue in Berkeley, a political activist, and the editor of Tikkun, a Jewish inter-faith magazine. Lerner has shared my own work with his audiences, noting the message of love and justice that flows through all the Abrahamic faiths and touches on all the great religious and spiritual traditions.* [Michael Lerner, Spirit Matters (Hampton Roads Publishing Company, Inc.: 2002).

XI.

Ten Thoughts on the Power of Pandemics

Andrew Nikiforuk - 17 Mar 2020 - TheTyee.ca *

They disrupt, reveal, renew. They give opportunity to rethink what we've come to believe is normal.

"It is the microbes who will have the last word!" — Louis Pasteur

In 2016 the Commission on Creating a Global Health Risk Framework for the Future, a U.S. panel of health experts, warned that "the conditions for infectious disease emergence and contagion are more dangerous than ever" due to overpopulation, urbanization, industrial livestock crowds and mobility. The panel estimated that there was a 20 per cent chance that four pandemics could unsettle the globe over the next century.

The late Joshua Lederberg, a Nobel Prize winning biologist, warned more than a decade ago that the world had entered a disquieting era of plague making. *"We have crowded together a hotbed of opportunity for infectious agents to spread over a significant part of the population. Affluent and mobile people are ready and willing and able to carry affliction all over the world within 24 hours' notice. This condensation, stratification and mobility is unique, defining us as a very different species from what we were 100 years ago,"* he wrote. As dramatic agents of biological change pandemics resemble tsunamis or bombs. They can wash over continents changing political arrangements, religious beliefs, artistic endeavours and economic habits. Or they can blow up fossilized institutions and destabilize political dynasties.

In the past they have stopped wars and started them. Pandemics have the energy to rattle and even collapse civilizations. Think of them as mighty and uncertain biological recalibrations. As COVID-19 provokes the usual spate of plague behaviours (fear, dread, generosity and compassion) it is worth remembering that pandemics remain critical and immutable social forces that shape our lives. They paralyze and disrupt. They reveal and renew. Here then are 10 characteristics that the global economy and its elites have mostly ignored about the energy of pandemics:

1. Pandemics are one of four biblical horsemen that give meaning to our lives and shape human history.

The White Horse represents the word of God or truth. The Red Horse symbolizes the power of the state over peace and war. The Black Horse, for good and ill, commands the busts and booms of economics and famines. Last but not least, comes the Fourth Horseman. It represents the disquieting influence of microbial life and pestilence. As I noted in my book *The Fourth Horseman* nearly 30 years ago, we don't like to think that we are a part of history anymore, but we are walking memories of past plagues.

2. Pandemics may appear as random events, but are really the product of cultivated vulnerabilities by different civilizations at different times.

Homo sapiens have a long history of provoking plagues with overcrowding, dirty water, deforestation, poor nutrition, ruinous poverty, soil erosion and novel agricultural practices. Influenza, for example,

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started to unsettle the globe when Chinese farmers added ducks to rice paddies to control insects in the 16th century. That single change put avian viruses in close proximity to pigs, which helped the virus jump to humans.

3. So-called “non-pharmaceutical interventions” such as hand washing, social isolation and the banning of crowds can dramatically slow the spread of a viral plague.

In contrast vaccines and drugs rarely arrive on the scene until the pandemic has waned. In fact material changes in human behaviour, housing, nutrition and hygiene have always had the most impact on slowing or stopping plagues. The experiences of COVID-19 in South Korea and Italy illustrates how rapid changes in human behaviour can alter outcomes. South Korea, a neighbour of China, tested early, traced down the infected, isolated them in their homes and generally restricted travel. Italy did not test or contain aggressively. While Korea tested 240,000 to find and isolate nearly 8,000 cases, Italy tested but 97,000 citizens and watched infections explode to nearly 20,000. As of March 14 South Korea had 67 deaths. Meanwhile Italy has lost more than 1,266 citizens, a death rate of seven per cent for those known infected, much higher than South Korea's.

4. Pandemics invite a rude parade of blame, conspiracies and religious zealotry.

As waves of plague undid Europe fearful authorities scapegoated Jews for spreading the Black Death. (They practiced better hygiene and therefore were suspect by the afflicted.) During the industrial revolution working people thought that the rich had invented cholera to murder the poor. In scores of riots they attacked the rich, hospitals and doctors. When the Spanish flu pandemic hit Africa, white South Africans blamed blacks for the mounting death toll because blacks worked in the most crowded and appalling work places. That blame eventually morphed into a noxious political policy: apartheid. COVID-19, of course, initially directed a surge of racism against Chinese citizens even though the virus probably did not originate in Wuhan's wet market as widely reported. The market merely spread the virus.

5. Global trade has always played a formidable role in disease exchanges.

The Silk Road brought rats and fleas to 13th-century Europe resulting in a demographic collapse in which one in four people died. The slave trade bombarded two continents with epidemics. Waves of cholera epidemics followed European trade routes from the Ganges Delta to the slums of major cities. Global steamship traffic dutifully carried influenza around the world and played a key role in spreading the deadly Spanish flu pandemic.

6. Each and every pandemic leaves a unique and unpredictable legacy.

The Black Death killed so many people that feudal landlords were forced to increase wages and decrease rents to keep labour. The die-off also changed humankind's relationship with God and nature. In the 17th century syphilis changed sexual politics between men and women and public baths fell out of fashion. Tuberculosis epidemics illuminated the perils of homeless and forced migrations. And so on.

7. As great disturbances in human affairs, pandemics invariably unsettle and change economies.

Smallpox emptied the Americas and allowed Spain to loot the region of its gold and silver. Smallpox

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also played a major role in shaping the ebb and flow of Canada's bloody fur trade by dramatically killing off entire First Nations on the plains. The Spanish Flu of 1918 to 1919 killed at least 50 million people and erased five per cent of global gross domestic production. Ebola ate up 10 per cent of the GDP of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea in 2014 and 2015. COVID-19 likely will be the costliest pandemic due to the complexity and fragility of globalization. Some pandemics undo economies with mass die-offs but in most modern cases it is the fear of infection that bleeds financial systems.

8. Pandemics rudely outline weaknesses and faults in political leadership. Good leaders lessen their impacts, while incompetent leaders add to the gravity.

President Woodrow Wilson was so focused on the First World War that he ignored repeated warnings about influenza and its impact on Atlantic troop movements to the Western Front. At the end of the war Canadian and U.S. authorities knowingly put sick troops on cramped ships with poor ventilation. As a result the flu killed 675,000 Americans while the trench warfare claimed but 53,000 U.S. soldiers. President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa didn't think HIV was caused by a virus and thousands died. President Donald Trump, who initially accused his political rivals of perpetrating a "hoax" when they warned his administration wasn't doing enough about COVID-19, failed to prepare the United States with adequate testing and containment. Then, saying "I take no responsibility at all," he falsely blamed the Obama administration for inadequate testing kits.

9. Pandemics are rarely equal opportunity events.

They might scare everyone but they don't kill everyone: They tend to target the poor, the vulnerable and those wounded by bad health. The Black Death struck down both rich and poor but really focused on the malnourished and the frail. Smallpox became a terror for Indigenous Peoples because they had no immunity to this novel Old World virus. During the Spanish flu members of First Nations died at rates seven times higher than British Columbia's provincial average. Cholera primarily dogged the working class. HIV initially targeted marginalized communities: gay men and drug users. Ebola has affected the poorest of the poor. To date COVID-19 seems to affect the elderly and unwell disproportionately.

10. Ultimately, pandemics invite us to question disturbances in the human family.

COVID-19, for example, could provoke challenges to the unsustainable complexity of technological life as well as the deadly biological traffic in all living organisms on a planet now crowded by eight billion people. We might, after the storm has passed, question the vulnerability of mono-cultures and the globalization of everything. Long after the monotony of deprivation and separation, the survivors of pandemics will kiss and hold their loved ones with a new appreciation. They might light candles, true plague light, and offer prayers of thanksgiving. The humbled will be thankful, as author of *The Plague* Albert Camus once was, for what pandemics have always taught those receptive to biological instruction: "There are more things to admire in men than to despise."

* Andrew Nikiforuk is an award-winning journalist who has been writing about the energy industry for two decades and is a contributing editor to **The Tyee**. Nikiforuk is the author of two best-selling books on epidemics: *The Fourth Horseman* and *Pandemonium*, both published by Penguin Books.

Poster Created By Miguel Brieva
One of Spain's Most Famous Cartoonists *

A MODEST PROPOSAL

WHAT IF WE USED THIS COMPLEX, EXTRAORDINARY SITUATION TO GAIN CLARITY ON SOME THINGS?

1. TAKE STOCK, SLOW DOWN, THINK, USE OUR IMAGINATIONS

2. SEE HOW QUICK AND EASY REDUCING EMISSIONS CAN BE, AND CLEAN THE AIR IN OUR CITIES

3. PUT AN END TO PREDATORY TOURISM

4. RECOGNIZE OUR VITAL PUBLIC SERVICES

5. SHOW THAT WORKING REMOTELY IS FEASIBLE

6. IT'S A GREAT OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE CARE WORK AND DUTIES

7. SHOW THE POWER OF COMMUNITY VS. MASSIVE SCALE

8. BE CONSCIOUS OF OUR EMPATHIC AND COLLECTIVE POTENTIAL TO PRESERVE LIFE

9. SEE WHAT A DEGROWTH SOCIETY WOULD LOOK LIKE, IF ONLY FOR A WHILE



* Published in The Tyee, 17 March 2020 – Brieva's poster was presented in connection with Andrew Nikiforuk's Tyee article above, entitled: "Ten Thoughts on the Power of Pandemics".

Faith is the power to stand up to the madness and chaos of the physical world, while holding the position that nothing external has any authority over what heaven has in mind for you.

Carolyn Myss, Medical Intuitive

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AN EASTER SERMON FOR CORONAVIRUS - BY JIM WALLIS *

Easter was never meant to go back to normal; but was, and still is, intended to make all things new. For Christians, it means the proclamation of release over suffering, hope over despair, and life over death. Still, there is no special immunity from COVID-19 granted by physically gathering to worship God. You don't love your neighbours by putting their health and their neighbourhoods at risk.

This will be the first Easter in recent memory when Christians across the globe will be unable to join with their fellow believers to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. One biblical text is gaining new meaning in this time is Matthew 18:20, which reads, "for where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

Virtual Easters are taking place today as pastors and lay leaders "minister" to very small groups of believers; parents with their children, other related or closely connected people who are sheltering together, even individuals who are alone but might feel less alone because of the focus on very small groups of people watching intensely from their homes. Two or three, or even one, but no more than ten. Worshipping together, while staying apart, to celebrate the most important day of Christian faith, might bring us even closer in this Easter that nobody will forget.

I know that many pastors around the country are focusing on their Easter sermon more than they have in years past. Many are connecting with each other and finding innovative online channels and resources with social media connectivity that enables them to bring worship, prayer, messages, and even music into the homes of their parishioners. Many people who now live in new places can reconnect with their far away home churches. My wife's parents, now in a clergy retirement community in England, are sharing in the virtual services of every church they have ever served. And even many "former" church people are turning back to virtual spiritual services in this crisis for inspiration, substance, and community. This could change congregations in ways we can't even imagine now.

As pastors and churches are living into these new and difficult realities, here are three practical and vocational roles that faith communities can play right now in this pandemic crisis:

1. Faith communities must put their moral authority behind the doctors and scientists pleading with us to practice and maintain our physical distance from one another as the only way to "flatten the curve" of this pandemic and literally save lives. And when the false ministers who refuse science and disobey their elected officials out of their own egos rather than religious liberty, it must be other clergy and congregations that rebuke them. If the "re-opening" of the economy and society becomes *politicized*, faith communities must stand with public health authorities and their state and local elected leaders closest to the people to determine when it is safe.
2. We must also fulfil our critical role of preventing social distancing from becoming social isolation. Physical distancing must not be allowed to overcome our social *solidarity*, which is a biblical meaning of community. I believe that clear role of faith communities is becoming core to us as we approach this holy weekend. Keeping together while standing apart is a vital skill and practice that faith communities can

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help create and promote — even beyond their doors.

3. Live into and deepen our vocation to focus on the most vulnerable. Jesus specifically says that how we treat the “least of these” is literally how we treat him. And that text of Matthew 25 is the record of the last sermon he gave just before he entered Jerusalem. The least of these are the least important in Washington, D.C., but for followers of Jesus they must be the most important, and Easter is the right time to proclaim that.

This pandemic has become very revealing of the inequities in our society, the gaping holes in our safety net, and the disparities in our health care and other systems, and the reality of our relationships across racial and economic lines. It has shined a light into the darkness of what we have ignored or accepted for far too long. The coronavirus has exposed and laid bare social injustice, which undermines both our common good and our common health.

For example, it has been said that the coronavirus does not discriminate. But that is not true. Especially when poor people and too many black and brown people in America don't have access to safe homes, steady incomes, reliable and healthy food, safe spaces and the prospect of social distancing in their required work and family lives, or access to health and healthy bodies, which makes them more likely to contract and die from this disease.

Poverty and the impacts of structural racism are “*co-morbidities*,” or preconditions that make it more difficult to avoid and/or survive this lethal coronavirus. Some people are asking when we will go back to *normal*. But we won't and we really can't. This historical moment will change us — in ways we can't control or even predict. How we act now, and with whom, and for whom, will shape and even determine who “we” will be when this current health crisis begins to pass.

My dear friend, Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and spiritual teacher, gave me an image this Holy Week of a crucified Christ on the cross this Good Friday with outstretched hands saying to a world of corona-virus suffering, “*I can't stop your suffering, but am with you in it.*”

The celebration of the Resurrection on this Easter Sunday morning may be saying to us in this COVID-19 moment, “I can, and we can make these things that have been revealed — new.” Two women rushed back early that morning from the graveyard with the happy news that everything can be different now. Other disciples ran wide-eyed into an empty tomb and ran out with courage in their hearts. Two men walking in utter despair bumped into a stranger, realized who it was, and found hope again. A movement began whose message was that all things can be made new.

What if all that we are learning about our systems and attitudes and relationships in this modern plague that is wrong, brutal, unjust, and unjustifiable were to be made new? That this public health crisis would prompt a resurrection in our hearts and minds, reminding us that we will not go back to “normal”. In a post-COVID world, we must come together to choose decisions and actions that make things “new.” Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!

* Jim Wallis is president of Sojourners. This article appeared in the on-line daily update service of Sojourners Magazine - Sojo.net - on Apr. 13/20.