March 31, 2020

Greetings, Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It is beyond dispute that the entire world is in the throes of a crisis unprecedented in living memory. In the enormity of what is happening all around us, I have been struggling to consider what I could possibly say to you that wouldn’t sound trite or pedantic. Finally, I have decided to simply “let ‘er rip” in the hope that something I say will resonate with you.

Until very recently, my response to recent occurrences has been relatively emotionless. That has been my typical pattern in other crisis situations that I have been in; detached and methodical in dealing with what presents. There is, however, always a reckoning that catches up to me later. That is what happened a few days ago.

I was watching a movie on TV, and in the final scene an underdog musical group defied all the odds by giving a triumphant performance before a large and enthusiastic crowd of people from every race and continent. Under normal circumstances, it would have been an uplifting scene, but ours are anything but ordinary circumstances. As I watched, I found myself becoming quite emotional.

My reaction puzzled me until I subsequently happened upon an episode from the PBS channel show *Amanpour and Company* (<https://www.pbs.org/video/grief-expert-we-are-grieving-world-we-have-now-lost-hpbtkk/>) that placed things in context. In the segment, David Kessler - one of the world’s foremost experts on loss and healing - was being interviewed. Kessler’s main point was that, apart from the discomfort and disruption this pandemic has imposed upon us all, is a heavy burden of deep sadness that is best described as grief. Bingo!

The sight of a celebratory crowd in the movie triggered an emotional response in me because it made me wonder when I might ever again see or be part of one. Perhaps you are similarly finding triggers. Grief is a natural response to change, which always involves loss, and the more profound the change, the deeper the grief. And things have changed quite profoundly indeed. I wish I could say to you that once we are past this, life will return to “normal,” but that would be untrue. We must face the reality that the familiar world of a few weeks ago is now every bit as gone as the fabled Atlantis, and is not coming back.

Perhaps you already have some familiarity with the ground-breaking work of the late Elisabeth Kübler-Ross who identified five stages of grieving (denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance). [[1]](#footnote-1) It must be stressed that everyone’s experience is unique and people who are grieving do not necessarily go these stages in the same order or experience them all. However, if you look around and within, I am sure you will notice all of these stages in play.

Recognizing and claiming that things have irrevocably changed, is neither comfortable nor easy, but it is the necessary first step to healing. If we want to embrace the fullness of life, we must also embrace the chaos and find meaning in it. Holocaust survivor and psychologist Viktor Frankl noted that: *“In times of crisis, people reach for meaning. Meaning is strength. Our survival may depend on our seeking and finding it.”*

This quest for meaning is reflected in a question that has been posed to me multiple times recently, asking if God is sending us a message in all of this. In response, let me say that God is *always* sending us messages, but we aren’t always listening. However, I completely reject the idea that God inflicts suffering and death, either to get our attention or to punish us for some shortcoming. Such a thought is incompatible with the God revealed in Christ. Rather, I believe that we need to be able to see that deep within every crisis, God offers us an opportunity for something unexpectedly beautiful. [[2]](#footnote-2)

President John F. Kennedy once made an observation that, given recent events, seems particularly apt. He noted that the Chinese use two brush strokes for the word “crisis.” One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. The danger aspect is presently in our faces, and even now we are witnessing scenes of human devastation that we could have scarce imagined a few short weeks ago.

In troubled times, it is natural for us to feel powerless and perhaps even victimized. Yet, as is eloquently displayed in the Book of Job, platitudes about why things have gone wrong are an exercise in missing the point because they only anchor us to the problem and give us an excuse to remain passive and victimized. In other words, we cannot be part of the cure if we remain mired in the symptom.

It is important to realize that our present situation is not only a public health crisis filled with anxiety and worry; it is also a moral crisis presenting us with the opportunity of making choices for good or for ill. Our true character is revealed by the choices we make under pressure; the greater the crisis, the deeper the revelation and the truer the choice is to the character’s essential nature. [[3]](#footnote-3) It is a hard fact of life that we cannot fully discover our strengths and shortcomings unless we are tested by adversity and temptation.

Crises, whether that of a nation or an individual, are only resolved through the discovery of a new identity and purpose. [[4]](#footnote-4) Two biblical stories come to mind that illustrate this. The first is that of Jacob, who finds himself isolated and no longer able to control his circumstances through trickery and deceit. [[5]](#footnote-5) At his lowest point, Jacob a mysterious stranger appears and wrestles with Jacob. I like to think that Jacob is contending not only with God, but also with himself. Even though wounded in the struggle, Jacob receives the blessing of a new identity (as Israel) which shapes the purpose of his existence thereafter.

Even more poignant is the example of Jesus being sent by the Spirit into the Wilderness to be tempted by Satan. [[6]](#footnote-6) Even as this testing shaped Jesus’ identity and confirmed his mission, so too do times of crisis change us into something else; we either rise to the occasion or sink beneath it; evolve or devolve. What our faith says to us is that the only way to face a crisis that makes any sense at all is together. And the only direction to face is up. [[7]](#footnote-7)

1. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, ***On Death and Dying*** [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Adaptation of quote by Kate McGahan [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Paraphrase of quote by Robert McKee [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rebecca Solnit [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Genesis 32:22-31 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Paraphrase of quote by Phil Callaway [↑](#footnote-ref-7)