March 20, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

What a difference a week makes! We have entered into a strange, new, and rather anxious world. While it was long thought that advancing technology would make ours a ours a “virtual society,” I dare say no one imagined it would happen this hard and fast. The rapidly developing novel coronavirus situation has changed everything and revealed just how fragile our perceptions of the world and ourselves truly are.

As increasingly stringent actions are being taken to reduce the spread of the novel coronavirus infection (COVID-19), I am sure that some of you have found yourselves anxious and even alarmed. This is normal, and even helpful if it makes us more cautious and aware of our surroundings. I wish I could say to you that we will soon be back to “normal,” but this is a time for truth, and not only do I doubt it, but there is every reason to prepare for an escalation of events in the days and weeks to come.

For this reason, most (if not all) of our congregations have suspended activities, including worship, for the duration of this crisis; to safeguard both our folks and those they come in contact with. If, as is quite likely, these closures persist through April, it means that we will be unable to gather even on the holiest week on the Christian calendar. Consequently, I am investigating alternatives for worship that do not require us to physically gather. In the meantime, for those of you with internet access, you can take in a livestream worship service from Southminster Presbyterian Church ([www.spchurch.org](http://www.spchurch.org)) Sundays at 11 AM.

BUPC is maintaining office operations, with as much being done from home as is practical. Calls can be accessed remotely, and if you do not reach a person, please be assured that we will be checking voicemail for your message, should you care to leave one. BUPC will continue to serve as a “grab and go” pre-packaged food box distribution point for the South Hills Interfaith Mission food bank. I am also discussing the advisability of Living Stones continuing their monthly meal service on a similar “grab and go” basis. No other activities or gatherings are authorized at the present time.

Since my last letter, we have established a communication network by telephone to ensure that the members and friends of BUPC are cared for both physically and spiritually. In this regard, I am deeply indebted to Deacon Diane McGreevy who took a bare bones concept and molded it into an executable program. I am also deeply grateful to God for all who have volunteered to do the calling. I will serve as the contact point for resolving needs and concerns.

Those of you who know me, know that I am not usually one for “waxing poetic.” Sometimes however, poetry expresses things at a deeper level than any narrative can. The following abridged poem by Carol Bieleck seems to sum up so much of what most of us are feeling at this time:

*“Breathing Under Water”*

*I built my house by the sea.*

*Not on sands, mind you; not on the shifting sand.*

*And I built it of rock. A strong house. By a strong sea.*

*And we got well acquainted, the sea and I.*

*Good neighbors.*

*Not that we spoke much. We met in silences.*

*Respectful, keeping our distance,*

*But looking our thoughts across a fence of sand.*

*Always, the fence of sand.*

*Always, the fence of sand our barrier, always, the sand between.*

*And then one day, - and I still don’t know how it happened –*

*The sea came. Without warning. Without welcome even.*

*And I thought of flight, and I thought of drowning, and I thought of death.*

*And while I thought the sea crept higher, till it reached my door.*

*And I knew then, there was neither flight nor death, nor drowning.*

*That when the sea comes calling you stop being neighbors*

*Well acquainted, friendly at a distance, neighbors*

*And you give your house for a coral castle,*

*And you learn to breathe underwater.*

It has been said that: *“God comes to us disguised as our life.”* [[1]](#footnote-1)This is easy to accept when things are going well. But, what about those times when we feel tossed about and our best efforts merely stir the already stormy waves? Are we not then like those disciples tossed about in the leaky boat of their own concerns; wondering why God seems to be sound asleep as they cry out: “save me”? We too are in that storm-tossed space between what was, and what will be when this is all over.

As I write this, all “non-life-sustaining businesses” have been ordered to close throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Among the obvious exceptions are workers in the healthcare, food, and critical infrastructure sectors. What may not be so obvious is why religious organizations are also exempted from this order. Of course, one could point to first amendment guarantees on freedom of religion, but I think there has to be *far* more to it than that. Unless religious organizations teach us to breathe underwater*,* when life’s waves threaten to overwhelm us, then they are more a part of the problem than the solution. [[2]](#footnote-2)

The current crisis has thrown the role of the church into stark relief for me – quite beyond our liturgy, sermons, theology, facilities. All of these are necessary and useful, but can also become an anchor that weighs us down if they enable us to hold fast to our own individual desires and pet peeves as we “do church.” Now that we cannot “do church” in the conventional sense, we can see how useless they are unless they take us deeper into our love for God and one another.

And we need to go deeper because pandemics aren’t just physical; they are psychological and spiritual. Never in living history have the applied aspects of our faith been of greater importance to both ourselves and those around us than they are now. The decisions each of us make on a daily basis will have a marked impact on the course of this pandemic and how many lives are lost.

We have all, I am sure, heard the phrase “flattening the curve” as far as pertains to COVID-19 infection rates. The goal is to reduce the chances of a sudden and extreme spike in cases that would overwhelm our healthcare system. What has been less explicit is what this means for the shape of our society. Flattening the curve also means extending the time during which heightened precautions and social distancing must be enacted. It is only by instilling and fostering the faith, hope and love that enable us to accept and adapt for the long haul that our religious institution truly become “life-sustaining.”

One of the consequences of COVID-19 is that it is purging us of our illusions that status, wealth, nationality, race or personal beliefs can secure us. This is where we need to recall that the whole point of Jesus’ mission and resurrection is to show us that God is closest to us when we have been purged of our attachments to the trappings and assumptions of our lives. When we are powerless, we become open to a power beyond us; a power that is united with us everywhere and all the time.

Only a God of bottomless love can go toward the source of our pain and perplexity and teach us to breathe underwater. Only a suffering God can save a suffering people with a hope that perseveres in every circumstance, and which no roiling waters can quench. And only that hope can open our eyes and our hearts to those who may be struggling in our midst.

Yours in Christ,

Dr. Bob

1. Paula D’Arcy [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richard Rohr, ***Breathing Under Water,*** (Franciscan Media, Cincinnati, OH), ***2016*** [↑](#footnote-ref-2)