

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strong rock and our redeemer.

Happy New Year!!! As we begin Advent, we mark a turning in the church calendar, turning towards the arrival of a baby in Bethlehem. And although our secular calendar 2020 is not yet over, this year's trials have created a space in which the season of Advent may have more meaning and weight on a global level than ever before. We begin a season of waiting and preparing. This season, though anticipating joy and bringing hope to us all, can also be a space for lament and repentance. And there is certainly a lot to lament this year. But this trifecta of pandemics – of COVID-19, of racism, and of the climate crisis – bear an opportunity for the turning to and reorienting towards God – the markers of repentance.

The COVID-19 pandemic alone has forced us into behaviors that feel unnatural, has shocked our equilibrium and status quo in a way that has made us reevaluate every practice we have previously taken for granted. Every decision has weight and is stressful these days – from grocery shopping to building use to whether your work is worth your life or whether your withering mental health from isolation is worth your physical health. Decisions about school and child care feel impossible. Decisions about routine medical care feel dangerous. The anxiety from unemployment is overwhelming. Everything is just hard these days. A great turning must happen.

And if you are also a person of color, everything is even more difficult and impossible than it already was before the pandemic. We are in a moment of reckoning in our nation. White supremacy no longer hides behind coded language. It rears its naked and ugly head openly and with pride. Hundreds of years of racist policy and practice are visible in our systems of justice, which are not broken, but working more efficiently and effectively than we could have ever imagined. A great turning must happen.

And our planet cries out, with ever stronger storms and fires, with droughts and floods, and the unbearable silence of a forest cut down. A great turning must happen. It is our Christian calling, our vocation, to create a new world of heaven on earth through loving God and loving our neighbor. And we cannot do it if we continue to ignore the opportunities given us. This is our moment.

But a turn is not a return. If, when the vaccine becomes fully available to all and we are able to return to spaces unmasked and not distanced, if we have not been changed, if we simply return to what normal used to be, we will have allowed all the pain and unveiling of our sins to go to waste. This moment in time has all the groundwork necessary for a great shift to occur, but only if we pay attention and choose to participate in it.

As our Gospel passage implores us *Keep awake!* Don't be caught sleeping or in a slumber, numb to or ignoring what is happening, but wake up! Be vigilant! Advent asks us to prepare for Jesus' arrival – both as infant in the past, and as Christ in the now. This is our moment! So stay awake! Be woke! This requires patience. It requires practice. And one of the vehicles for this work is actually the feeling of despair, of honoring the pain of the world and in ourselves. The art of lamentation.

If we are to repent, to turn to and reorient towards God, we must first be able to acknowledge that something is in need of reorientation. We must cry out and confess, name and tell the truth of what is happening in the world and in ourselves. We must allow ourselves to pay attention to and become aware of where we have breaches. And we must *feel* it all!

Mainstream society has taught us that pain should be masked. It should be hidden. Hide it with a smile. How are you? I'm fine. But we are not fine. And we have not been fine, as a whole, for a while. So give in to the despair. *Feel it! Experience it!* Cry, sob, shout, clench your fists and your jaw, stomp your feet, curl up in the fetal position. Where is the pain located in your body? How would you describe it? Is it sharp? Is it tight? Does it make your stomach sick? Does it move around? Can you sit with it for a moment and just acknowledge it? No judgment, no shaming. Just observing. Waking up.

Our ignoring of the pain of the world, of our own pain, is what has paralyzed us from living truly in the Way. As Joanna Macy, a Buddhist activist, scholar, and great leader in the work of despair and empowerment has taught, although we may feel that we will get stuck and paralyzed if we give in to our despair, paradoxically, it is only through allowing ourselves to truly feel that pain that we will be able to move forward in effective ways. We hold ourselves captive when we avoid or ignore or numb ourselves from the reality of the pain we see and experience.

But the key to not becoming paralyzed in despair is through recognizing that you are not alone in your experiencing of the pain. There is a reframing, a reorienting that is possible. As Joanna Macy puts it – we reframe “our pain for the world as evidence of our mutual belonging and hence our power to take action on behalf of life.”¹ That is why despair and lament, of crying out to God, is so powerful. Because allowing that pain to touch you is what moves you into the space of compassion. And from the space of compassion, action can be taken to repair the breach.

Keep awake! Jesus says. Compassion is that wake-up call that creates movement. It is located in the realm of connection. Of relationship. Which requires cultivation. It requires listening, observation, an openness to transformation, vulnerability, and sharing.

This is a unique time, where there is a collective experience of despair, grief, and loss – so we are in a space where we can actually connect to each other more deeply than ever before – we can expand our compassion. As a species, we must name our participation in acts of violence and destruction that have led to the threat of extinction of one million species, and, if unchecked, will lead to our own extinction. Feel the pain in your back from mountaintop removal, the clogging in your veins of our poisoned watersheds, and the suffocation of our lungs from the burning of wildfires and deforestation practices. Feel it and make the great turn toward God – so that we can find “our power to take action on behalf of life.”

As a nation, we must name and recognize our participation in policies, actions, and systems that have performed violence upon and oppressed people of color. Feel the pain of the indigenous person, fighting to protect water. The pain of an undocumented person, separated from family. As we recall the haunting refrain, shouted over and over by black people “I can’t breathe,” feel the constriction in your own lungs. Feel it and make the great turn toward God – so that we can find “our power to take action on behalf of life.”

And as individuals in our communities, suffering from the isolation from our support systems created by this pandemic, feel the ache in your back from lack of touch, the cloudiness in your head from lack of social stimulation or from overstimulation from computer screens, feel the panic burning in your lungs from the claustrophobic closeness of those in your household. Feel it and make the great turn toward God – so that we can find “our power to take action on behalf of life.”

All three of these pandemics have an element of suffocation. So on behalf of life, one simple first action to take is to breathe. To take in the Spirit, the breath of God, allow it to inspire us, which means, after all, to give us breath, and move us in that great turning toward mutual belonging and connection. So as we wait and prepare for the coming of Jesus, remember to breathe. Remember that what you empty out of your lungs, the trees inhale, and what the trees release, we inhale. Our acts of breathing are a cycle of mutual aid. But we must empty our lungs before we can fill them. And with our emptying, let cries for justice be the marker of our breath. Cries for the earth and cries for the oppressed. And with masks on our faces, let our muffled inhales, the stifled refilling of our lungs, remind us of our love for each other, of the gift of breath, and that compassion that calls us to keep awake. Because *this* is our moment!

Amen.

¹ Macy, Joanna. *Coming Back to Life* (p. 65). New Society Publishers. Kindle Edition.