May 2, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In William Shakespeare’s play, *Richard III,* there is a famous line that begins: *“Now is the winter of our discontent,”* (Richard must have been under extended quarantine).It needs to be read with the line that follows it: *“made glorious by this sun of York.”* What Shakespeare artfully did was use the metaphor of winter/summer weather as a metaphor for the rivalry between the Plantagenet and York royal lines for the English throne. What he meant was that England was in the depths of a dismal winter under Richard III, but the coming “Sun of York” (Edward) would bring back good times.

The winter of our COVID-19 discontent has likewise left many us yearning for the “sun” of better times, and a resumption of familiar activities. But for us to enter into that desired “summer” having truly gained something, we need more than impassioned rhetoric, magical thinking and an overwhelming drive to “get back to normal.” We need a miracle.

Now that I have introduced the topic of miracles, what do you suppose God’s greatest miracle was? Certainly, that whole parting of the waters thing that allowed Moses and the children of Israel to make good their escape from Egypt, was pretty impressive. Making the walls of Jericho tumble down was pretty cool, and raining down fire to show up Jezebel’s idolatrous priests was a literal show-stopper. But the most difficult miracle of all is the bridging of that 18-inch gap between head and heart that awakens us to the Truth.

We live in a world of distractions that makes it easy for us to cherish many false notions, justify the most absurd things in our minds, and believe that our choices don’t matter. Jesus knew that the only way for us to heal, become whole, and live lives of integrity is for our false ideas and false selves to be shattered. In fact, he described this awakening (or “seeing”) in apocalyptic terms by comparing the coming of the Son of Man, with the *Genesis* Flood narrative, saying:

*‘But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. [[1]](#footnote-1)*

While usually interpreted in terms of the second coming of Christ, what if we also consider this passage to refer to the present situation? It is helpful to recall that the larger biblical understanding of *apocalypse* is less about calamity as it is about an uncovering or unveiling that reveals a larger truth. The key point of the Flood illustration relevant to our present situation is how people become so caught up in their daily lives that it takes a catastrophe to jolt them out of their rut.

I think it safe to say that just a couple of months ago most of us were going about our lives pretty much on autopilot. Then, this pandemic first got our attention, and shocked us awake. Who would have imagined that the eerily empty streets, silent city centers and absent rush-hours depicted in the 2009 movie *Contagion,* would become a visible reality around the world?

Because viral infections spread at lightning speed in a highly mobile and connected world, we faced the grim prospect of around 2.5 million Americans dying. Normality, as we knew it, simply vanished. The lower than initially projected casualty rate we have experienced to date is not a sign that it was never a big deal in the first place – it was. [[2]](#footnote-2)

Rather, it is a sign of the power of our personal choices to change the world. You and I did this - saving hundreds of thousands, if not millions of lives - even as we thought we were doing nothing by sitting on the couch. Our daily decisions and choices are important, and when enough of us appreciate our true power, the effects can be world-changing. Even though the global economy tanked almost overnight without daily cash infusions from each of us, the overwhelming majority of Americans have consistently approved enduring drastic measures to save lives. [[3]](#footnote-3)

Despite the extraordinary success of the measures we have taken thus far to “flatten the curve,” we are by no means out of the woods yet. Even when this acute crisis is past, the novel coronavirus will still be around, and we will still have no immunity to it. We may be in for a very long haul of social-distancing and heightened precautions. [[4]](#footnote-4) Everything has changed.

So too had everything changed for the disciples after the resurrection. They had joined Jesus in ministry, witnessed his death, and seen him alive again. Then, it was all over, so they went back to normal as if the last three years hadn’t happened at all. They resumed their trade as fishermen – and were miserable because they couldn’t catch any fish. [[5]](#footnote-5) “Normal” *no longer* *worked*, because they were never meant to return to it. Rather, Jesus had created a new normal for them as fishers *for people* rather than as fishermen. Likewise, our summer Son is patiently waiting for us to follow him into the new normal he has created for us.

Perhaps our “Great Pause” is not only a curse but also a blessing that has revealed to us more clearly the truth about who we are, who we are meant to be, and what is really important. If we want to come out of this collective trauma as better people and a better nation, we need to resist the siren call of the great forces, that are already manipulating us to return to the boat of “normal.” I ask you, how did we ever come to view rage-politics, zero-sum thinking, grotesque wealth divides, and pervasive gaslighting as “normal” anyway?

As we collectively move toward “re-opening” our society, let us realize that we are all in this together, and that our individual decisions about what should be resumed and what should not matter more than ever. Having been jolted awake, let us not roll over to go back to sleep. Instead, let us join our hearts and minds in a life-giving spirit of service and sacrifice so that we may enter into that summer of a better, fairer, and more civil world.

Recently, a “Pandemic Prayer” [[6]](#footnote-6) was brought to my attention that I share here with you because I think it wonderfully expresses our common yearning:

*I Pray We Don’t Go Back To Normal...*

*I pray that the next time a friend grabs me and pulls me in for a hug,*

*I actually take the time to appreciate the gift of their embrace.*

*I pray that when school resumes and people are dropping kids off, they take the time to thank the staff for the amazing gift that they give to our community.*

*I pray that the next time I’m sitting in a crowded restaurant I take the time to look around at the smiling faces, loud voices and thank God for the gift of community.*

*I pray that the next time I’m standing in church listening to the voices of praise and worship that I take a moment to thank God for the gift of congregation.*

*I pray that the next time I see a person or situation that needs prayer, I hope I pray as passionately and fervently as I have these past few weeks.*

*I pray that when I am at the grocery store that I take a moment to thank God that He provides us with the necessities of life and the amazing people who work so hard to keep us supplied.*

*I pray that I never again take for granted the ability to hop in the car*

*and visit a friend, go to the mall, go to a gathering, etc.*

*So, truth is, I don’t want things to return to the way they once were. I pray that we take the lessons and challenges of the past few weeks and create a new normal. My goal is to pray more, love harder, and truly appreciate the daily abundance of blessings that were so easily overlooked just a mere few weeks ago.*

*Amen.*

Grace and Peace to You,

Dr. Bob

1. Matthew 24:36-39 (NRSV); *cf*.: Luke 17:26-27 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There are approximately 1.2 million COVID-19 cases confirmed in the USA at this time, with about 33,000 being added daily. The US death toll to date is nearly 67,000. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/23/843175656/8-in-10-americans-support-covid-19-shutdown-kaiser-health-poll-finds> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/news-perspective/2020/03/modeling-stu> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. John 21:1-19 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This prayer has been copied and shared so widely on the internet that I have been unable to find attribution to an originator. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)