

Dear Epiphany,

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times....”

In some ways, the words of Charles Dickens capture the essence of this pandemic for our nation. Indeed, it is easy to chronicle the *Tale of Two Cities*-esque blight of COVID-19: poverty, unemployment, depression, increase in suicide, ruptured education, malnutrition...all the things that jump to mind as we reflect upon these worst of times.

But in truth, when we are honest with ourselves, for many of us, these have also been the best of times. Financially, many are doing very well through thriving technology companies and market gains on investments. Many are thrilled to have a life pace that has slowed down. And COVID-19 has become the perfect excuse for not doing anything that we don't want to do. It is an excuse that is perfectly malleable to position us to look charitable, thoughtful, and maybe even beneficent for not accepting an invitation or living into an obligation that in our hearts we are more than happy to turn down.

Furthermore, COVID has given us a chance to indulge ourselves, to increase what we might term, self-care. “Oh, things are so bad that I'll just eat one more dish of ice cream, or just watch one more Netflix show, or not get up and exercise, or not say my prayers, or not do the dishes, or make my bed.” Many might think, after what we've been through, we *deserve* a break today.

Just as COVID-19 has proved to be tricky for epidemiologists, it will also prove tricky for the re-emergence of our society. A parishioner was sharing with me the other day her observation of her son's high school soccer game. She said that both teams were super aggressive. She opined, “It may have to do with being shut inside for so long, or it may have to do with their having forgotten, at some level, the ethic of sportsmanship. It is hard to say.” And while I don't think we have to worry about any *Lord of the Flies* aggression unfolding, we may have some unanticipated weirdness that will emerge when we choose to come up out of our dens. I preached recently how small talk has gotten awkward—it's as if we forgot how to do it! But that's when writer Anne Lamott's book titles come to mind: *Help. Thanks. Wow* and *Hallelujah Anyway*. She says these as prayer, sometimes the simplest words we need.

I'm using the season of Lent to reflect on the good of these times in my life just as much as the difficulty of these times. COVID-19 is real, and I do not want to say anything that would encourage anybody to put themselves in harm's way, not in any way at all. But I want to invite you to join me in something. I invite you to consider, honestly and thoroughly, the manner in which COVID-19 may have offered cover (consciously or unconsciously) for self-indulgence and a veneer of beneficence. That is also a reflection of your heart's preference. After all, it was Dickens who wrote, “There is nothing so strong or safe in an emergency of life as the simple truth” (from *David Copperfield*).

This pandemic has given us an opportunity to rethink and repattern our lives. That is a good thing. It was necessary to slow our culture down and give us a chance to consider what is most important in our lives. That may be the most profound macro-shift that comes out of this pandemic—the hidden blessing, if you will. How we come back into this world matters. Our common life will be more important than ever. How we give, and how we serve, and how we engage can be rethought, and should be rethought, but always within the context of the kingdom of God and our duty therein.

Rainer Maria Rilke's poem gives a modern perspective on Dickens's sentiment on the best and the worst of times. She writes:

“God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out of the night. These are the words we dimly hear: You, sent out beyond your recall, go to the limits of your longing. Embody me. Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in. Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final.” ([Go to the Limits of Your Longing](#), from *Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*).

Lent is the perfect season for consideration.

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