



# Healing the World

Eight Bible Studies for the Pandemic Era



World Council  
of Churches



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## Preface

The global coronavirus pandemic, which has brought death to hundreds of thousands and serious illness to millions more, also poses profound spiritual questions and real challenges to Christians everywhere.

The pandemic itself has become a fundamental test of our faith in God and God's providence, and it urges us to earnest re-examination of our relationship to God, each other, and the natural world.

In *Healing the World*, the World Council of Churches offers these eight Bible studies to facilitate our coming to terms—as individuals, groups, and communities of faith—with the loss, fear, and confusion engendered by the pandemic, and the bracing prospect of building the world anew.

It is hoped, too, that these encounters with the Word of God can stimulate the spiritual and theological reflection necessitated by the many-faceted catastrophe, its economic consequences, and the interconnected questions of social justice.

For the ongoing global crisis has not only sorely tried the health of individuals but also the healthcare systems of whole countries, precipitated rapid and deep economic recession, and revealed stark disparities in access to care, food, income and wealth, and raised seemingly dormant spectres of racism, social injustice, and authoritarianism.

The concept of “healing the world” is based on the Hebrew word *Tikkun* (תִּקּוּן), meaning fixing, or rectification. It is often used in the context of “*Tikkun olam*,” which can be translated as “mending the world.”

It is clear that healing the world from the pandemic, its causes and its consequences, will not be some single event but a long and difficult journey. This is language already familiar to the WCC community through the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.

These Bible studies draw on the expertise and wisdom of ecumenical Christians from a variety of regions, confessions, and areas of expertise. They journey through key episodes in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament to ponder not only the meaning of the particular passages in their original contexts but also in our own and the opportunities they present us to formulate authentic responses to the crisis and our changed lives. Each study concludes with questions, suggestions for activities, other resources, and prayer.

Readers will also find further spiritual resources on the WCC's coronavirus page at [www.oikoumene.org/coronavirus](http://www.oikoumene.org/coronavirus)



## Facing the Red Sea

### Overcoming Fear by Using Your Gifts

Joy Eva Bohol

#### The Text

*<sup>10</sup> As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the LORD. <sup>11</sup> They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? <sup>12</sup> Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” <sup>13</sup> But Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. <sup>14</sup> The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”*

*<sup>15</sup> Then the Lord said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. <sup>16</sup> But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground. <sup>17</sup> Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. <sup>18</sup> And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers.”—Exod. 14:10-18*

**S**tanding on the beachfront, trapped between the Egyptian pharaoh with his soldiers behind them and the Red Sea in front, the Israelites feared imminent death. They cried out in despair, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?” they asked Moses.

In the context of COVID-19, have there been times when you can identify with the

Israelites? We cannot go back to the “old normal,” but we more and more realize how the uncertainties raised by the coronavirus have clouded our future. Even as we flee the viral enemy, at this point, we can only see the Red Sea in front of us and do not know what awaits us. COVID-19 has shut down the world and brought us to our knees, fearing what we don’t know.

### **The Text in Its Context**

This passage is a key moment in the great saga of liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. It captures the drama and suspense of the people’s being chased by a mighty army and in desperate straits.

Moses’ words of assurance to the Israelites were comforting. But those words would be empty if the Hebrews ended up dead either in the Red Sea or at the hands of the Egyptian soldiers.

The Lord said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground” (v. 15).

Moses, despite his long years journeying with God, perhaps forgot that he holds the staff that God gave him on their first encounter. Often, as church, we forget our prophetic voice, and we cry in desperation back to God. Like Moses, we are reminded by God of the “staff” that we possess. These are the gifts and resources that God, through the Holy Spirit, has given us. God is telling us, once again, to tell God’s people, not to be paralyzed by fear<sup>1</sup> but to go forward.

### **The Text in Our Context**

Fear, isolation, panic, anger, anxiety, doubts, impatience . . . These are a few of the emotions that some of my friends and I experience in this time of uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In several video calls with family, friends, and colleagues from around the world since the lockdown, I hear the common thread of how we’re dealing with the sentiments mentioned above, as individuals and as a community.

Fear, isolation, panic, anger, anxiety, doubts, impatience . . . I believe that these were the same emotions that the Israelites felt when facing the Red Sea. Nothing seemed right in their situation. There was no turning back to Egypt, yet there was nothing in front of them that promised deliverance. They were desperate for answers.

Listening to the desperate cries and seeing the difficult situation of God’s people, Moses said to the Israelites, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today . . . The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”

Moses’ response reminds me of a phrase in the Philippines that says, “Let us leave it all to

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1 See Cameron B. R. Howard, “Commentary on Exodus,” Narrative Lectionary, [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2206](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2206)



God. There is nothing else we can do about it.” This is often misused in situations where, in fact, there is something we can do about it. For example, a group of people from a slum in the capital region were arrested and put into jail, when all that they had done was to demand food and financial support from the government due to the lockdown.

Many people in the Philippines are desperate. They rely on the informal economy. They survive on a daily basis. At the start of the implementation of the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), all public transportation stopped operating, all non-essential shops were closed, and people were required to stay home. This resulted in many hungry Filipinos, day laborers in the city were forced to walk for more than seven days to return to their provinces, essential workers walking to and from their workplaces. Meanwhile, more healthcare frontline workers died and were infected every day, due to lack of proper protective equipment.

In the Letter of James 2:14-17 it says, “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the disparities of our world today more obvious: disparities in income and wealth, access to healthcare, along with disparate outcomes based on race or gender. But it has also created more opportunities for the church to live out its prophetic calling. It is our opportune time to be awake and be proactive in the issues of inequalities and injustices around us. During this time of the pandemic, we have seen many solidarity movements arise, now that people recognize the need for change. They mobilize, they draw inspiration from the strength of the people, they take initiative to move us toward a “new normal.”

Though Moses’ advice reminds us that the initiative is God’s, still we must also “go forward” (v.15). Our faith as Christians should inform our actions for peace and justice. The text in James reminds us that our faith should lead us to act. Prayer should be more than spoken words—it should be a living testimony of our call to mission as disciples of Christ.

I know of many stories of hope that are happening around the world—specifically involving young people or youth organizations from WCC member churches and ecumenical partners. For example, a group of young people in the Philippines raised funds to provide personal protective equipment for healthcare frontline workers in six district hospitals. A young pastor and his youth group in India distribute fruits, vegetables, and hygiene kits to more than 80 families in their communities. A young woman from Brazil provides Pilates class online for physical and mental well-being. A regional youth organization in Europe calls their members to volunteer to run errands and buy essential items for people in high-risk and vulnerable categories. Young women ambassadors of the Thursdays in Black campaign continue to raise awareness and demand for change for a world without sexual and gender-based violence.

This pandemic may have brought about fear, isolation, panic, anger, anxiety, doubts, and impatience. But God has provided us the gifts of courage, community, calmness, joy, confidence, trust, and patience within our faith communities to confront the current global crisis. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, together we will safely cross to the other side of the Red Sea—and a better “new normal” for all of God’s creation.

## Questions

- What hinders you from seeing the gifts that God has provided you? What are gifts with which you could respond to the COVID-19 pandemic more proactively?
- Where do you see the church’s prophetic voice resonate in your community, in your country, and in the world?

## Activities

- *Within your community: community mapping*
  - Are there people in high-risk and vulnerable groups, living in your neighbourhood, who need assistance to buy their essential items?
  - Are there daily wage workers in your community that no longer have food supplies to survive due to the lockdown?
  - Are there people in your community who are still unaware of the detailed information of COVID-19?
  - Identify some needs in your community that need immediate action due to the effects of COVID-19 pandemic. Once you do so, ask your church if you have programmes that respond to these needs. If not, identify local organizations in your area that deal with these specific needs and that have ongoing programmes to support the community. Once you identified them, you may link the church and the organization for a joint programme or partnership in the community—this could mean volunteering or fundraising. Find ways to help locally!
- *Go global: technology at its best*
  - Use the online platform to connect people within and beyond the ecumenical fellowship! Host an ecumenical solidarity conversation via video to encourage one another in this time of crisis.
  - Share your gift with a global audience. For example, there are young clinical psychologists, offering their professional counselling to people across the globe who are going through mental health crisis now. Distance is not a hindrance to offer your gifts or expertise to other people around the world. What’s your gift that you could share with others?

- Support a cause—if you are living away from home but still would want to create an impact, contact your home church or organization and offer help (financial or in-kind) that you could contribute. You may also explore supporting initiatives across the globe—ask WCC how.

## Resources

- WCC COVID-19 Staff Support Team  
<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/covid-19/support-team>
- Prayer Practices for Children, Youth, and Families during COVID-19 pandemic  
<https://www.upperroom.org/resources/prayer-practices-for-children-youth-and-families>
- UNICEF: Voices of Youth  
<https://www.voicesofyouth.org/campaign/take-action-and-help-fight-covid-19>
- Mental Health First Responder, a global organization of young licensed psychologists  
<https://www.mhfirstresponse.org/>
- UN Generation Unlimited  
<https://www.generationunlimited.org/>

## Prayer

*Lord, you led your people out of slavery and through the many uncertainties and fears that stood in the way of their liberation. Help us to heed your word and discern the gifts that we might lend to others in this time of great need. Finding our prophetic voice and calling, may we become agents of your justice and find our own true liberation in your work, through Christ our Lord, Amen.*

**Joy Eva Bohol** is the WCC programme executive for Youth in the Ecumenical Movement. Originally from the Philippines, she served in various positions in the area of mission before being seconded to the WCC in 2017 by the United Methodist Church.

# 2

## Sorrow without Fear

### An Invitation to Encounter God

Benjamin Simon

*The Psalms invite us to a deeper encounter with God—and with our fears.*

#### The Text

#### Psalm 42. Longing for God

<sup>1</sup> *As a deer longs for flowing streams,  
so my soul longs for you, O God.*

<sup>2</sup> *My soul thirsts for God,  
for the living God.*

*When shall I come and behold  
the face of God?*

<sup>3</sup> *My tears have been my food  
day and night,  
while people say to me continually,  
“Where is your God?”*

<sup>4</sup> *These things I remember,  
as I pour out my soul:  
how I went with the throng,  
and led them in procession to the house of God,  
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,  
a multitude keeping festival.*

<sup>5</sup> *Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,*

*my help<sup>6</sup> and my God.*

*My soul is cast down within me;  
therefore I remember you  
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,  
from Mount Mizar.*

<sup>7</sup> *Deep calls to deep  
at the thunder of your cataracts;  
all your waves and your billows  
have gone over me.*

<sup>8</sup> *By day the LORD COMMANDS HIS STEADEAST  
LOVE,  
and at night his song is with me,  
a prayer to the God of my life.*

<sup>9</sup> *I say to God, my rock,  
“Why have you forgotten me?  
Why must I walk about mournfully  
because the enemy oppresses me?”*

*<sup>10</sup> As with a deadly wound in my body,  
my adversaries taunt me,  
while they say to me continually,  
“Where is your God?”*

*<sup>11</sup> Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.*

### **Psalm 43. Prayer to God in Time of Trouble**

*<sup>1</sup> Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause  
against an ungodly people;  
from those who are deceitful and unjust  
deliver me!*

*<sup>2</sup> For you are the God in whom I take refuge;  
why have you cast me off?  
Why must I walk about mournfully  
because of the oppression of the enemy?*

*<sup>3</sup> O send out your light and your truth;  
let them lead me;*

*let them bring me to your holy hill  
and to your dwelling.*

*<sup>4</sup> Then I will go to the altar of God,  
to God my exceeding joy;  
and I will praise you with the harp,  
O God, my God.*

*<sup>5</sup> Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.*

**I**n some countries, when you purchase a computer or other technical device, you get a warranty with it. Together with the computer or telephone, you have access to all the technical support that you need, and more. The aim is that you do not have to worry at all. They even go so far as to offer to replace the whole device, if needed: a true warranty of value.

It's very different in our personal lives. No worry-free guarantee comes with our lives, even if good marketing companies want us to think so. Life is fragile and vulnerable. It is not quickly repaired or reinstalled and never replaced. On the contrary, life is irreplaceable and cannot be repeated. It is precious. And so, we worry.

Worldwide, in the diverse regions around our globe, we face all kinds of threats and oppression as well as harassment, racism, and different kinds of fears. And in these last weeks and months, through the COVID-19 pandemic even more uncertainty and great unease have been added to the existing anxieties we face. It is not a simple challenge, and because aggravating the anxieties we already have, the whole of humanity is now facing the pandemic with a heightened sense of uncertainty - especially those who have always been the most vulnerable.

It is especially these vulnerable who cannot just adhere to the call to “stay at home,” because they have to feed their children by earning daily or getting the daily shopping done at the market. They do not have the luxury of a refrigerator, where they can store a week's worth of groceries. Many do not know how to survive till next week, never-mind securing their financial futures.

There is also so much uncertainty around the virus, sometimes fuelled by misleading biblical interpretations from some uninformed church leaders or political rulers who do not acknowledge the menace and very real threat which comes from this virus.

And so, I ask myself: Is this the only way out of such a situation, by worrying? Is falling into a deep valley full of sorrows the only thing left for us?

### **The Text in Its Context**

The Bible is no stranger to this condition: it is filled with stories of people and their sorrows. It knows about people who are living in distress. Since the dawn of time, people and believers have been struggling with this God who has not given us a worry-free guarantee so as to enjoy life unimpaired. Instead, we face challenges that cause agitation, anxiety, and apprehension in us, and there is nothing carefree about that.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we learn exactly the opposite, when Jesus teaches us, “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself” (Matt. 6:34). But can we do this and put this advice into practice in the time of this pandemic, a time with so many doubts and insecurities?

In Psalm 42 and 43 the psalmist shows us a way to live, despite the massive worries we have, and how to handle them. I invite you to read these psalms, pondering their message.

The two psalms are structured in stanzas and refrains (42:6, 42:11, and 43:5). We are not told who the lyrical narrator might be. We can, however, be sure that it is someone who is in distress and oppressed, someone who feels attacked by others and full of sorrow. “My soul thirsts for God (42:2) is a picture of his or her longing for God; their tears have been their food day and night (42:3). Fellow humans are provoking them because they trust in God (42:4). The narrator feels as if he or she is drowning (42:8); it is not surprising that their soul is downcast and disturbed (42:5) and that they are full of sorrows.

Yet the author of these Psalms trusts fully in God. He or she is asking God to send “your light and your truth” (43:3) and hopes fully in God (42:11), knowing that God is their stronghold (43:1) and delight (43:4).

Surprisingly, the narrator is talking to him- or herself. Whoever it is, is talking to their own soul – these two psalms are a conversation with oneself. The narrator exhorts his or her soul “to put its hope in God” (43:10).

Why is the narrator acting like this? Because he or she knows, is convinced, that God will help and save!

### **The Text in Our Context**

What can we learn from this? When we get into situations of distress and sorrow, situations of anxiety and uncertainty, it is important that we act as the narrator of Psalm 42 and 43 does. It is crucial that we too speak out our sorrows, that we verbalize what distresses us, that we are honest with ourselves and also with God, by telling God what depresses us.

We should not give up, when sorrow takes over, when we are consumed with doubt and anxiety. We need not despair when we are overwhelmed by our emotions and when some people try and convince us with comments like, “God is no longer present” or “God has forsaken us.” Especially then we should concentrate again on God’s message: We believe in a God of hope!

Yes, there are some things in life which we cannot change, which we have to accept in humility and humbleness; all we can do is try and make the best of them. But, on the other hand, God wants us to change those things and circumstances which we can. Knowing that we are fully loved because of God's grace can empower us. Even if we are weak and full of sorrow, we can be assured that God is with us and leads us through our dark valleys.

The Apostle Paul was also full of sorrow and even pain, he knew that he had no power, and yet he didn't give up. On the contrary, his faith in God led him to write these beautiful words: "[The Lord] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (2 Cor. 12:9).

God's grace is sufficient for all of us to overcome distress and sorrow. Because of God's grace, I am what I am. Recognizing this gift can help us handle worries and uncertainty. During this time of crisis, we are not only faced with an increase of sorrow, but also of hope! Humanity is developing new ways of interacting; new forms of togetherness are being institutionalized; we have become more sensitive to the needs of others; people are rediscovering the helpful side of prayers; environmental pollution is diminishing; we are focussing more on the important things of life, realizing that health and relationships are what is most important in life.

We can move on forward by trusting in God, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "I believe that God both wills and is able to bring good out of everything, even the worst" (*Credo*).

## Questions

- Which uncertainties or sorrows bother you?
- When or where have you encountered God helping you out of your distress?

## Activities

- Write down the uncertainties or sorrows that you have currently. Reflect if God has helped you previously in a similar situation – and reflect if it is not time to make a change by becoming proactive?
- Write your own psalm, where your uncertainties or sorrows are articulated, along with your gratefulness for God's helpful actions.

## Resources:

- "I am sure I shall see the goodness of the Lord:" Taizé community song <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ly45q8EgN8>
- Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 1984).
- C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (Harcourt Brace, 1958).

## Prayer

*God of life, in our fragility and uncertainty, we turn to you. Vindicate our confidence in you, showing us your love and your care. Lift our spirits and our hopes, empowering us with your grace to understand our fears, to face our difficulties, and to wrestle good from them. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

**Rev. Dr Benjamin Simon**, programme executive for Church Relations in the World Council of Churches, is also editor of *International Review of Mission* and has most recently served as Professor for Ecumenical Missiology at the Ecumenical Institute Bossey, WCC, for nearly four years. He is an ordained pastor of the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) and has served as parish pastor as well as ecumenical officer in his hometown of Karlsruhe, Germany. He was very much involved in ecumenical cooperation between established and migration churches, and he lived some eight years in different African countries. He is a member of the WCC's COVID-19 Support Team.



# 3

## From the Old Jerusalem to the New Lamentations to Blessings

Annika Mathews

### The Text

*How lonely sits the city*

*that once was full of people!*

*How like a widow she has become,*

*she that was great among the nations!*

*She that was a princess among the provinces*

*has become a vassal.*

<sup>2</sup> *She weeps bitterly in the night,*

*with tears on her cheeks;*

*among all her lovers*

*she has no one to comfort her;*

*all her friends have dealt treacherously with her,*

*they have become her enemies.*

<sup>3</sup> *Judah has gone into exile with suffering*

*and hard servitude;*

*she lives now among the nations,*

*and finds no resting place;*

*her pursuers have all overtaken her*

*in the midst of her distress.*

<sup>4</sup> *The roads to Zion mourn,*

*for no one comes to the festivals;*

*all her gates are desolate,*

*her priests groan;*

*her young girls grieve,*

*and her lot is bitter.*

<sup>5</sup> *Her foes have become the masters,*

*her enemies prosper,*

*because the Lord has made her suffer*

*for the multitude of her transgressions;*

*her children have gone away,*

*captives before the foe.*

<sup>6</sup> *From daughter Zion has departed*

*all her majesty.*

*Her princes have become like stags*

*that find no pasture;*

*they fled without strength*

*before the pursuer.*

<sup>7</sup> *Jerusalem remembers,*

*in the days of her affliction and wandering,*

*all the precious things*

*that were hers in days of old.*

*When her people fell into the hand of the foe,*

*and there was no one to help her,  
the foe looked on mocking  
over her downfall.*

<sup>8</sup> *Jerusalem sinned grievously,  
so she has become a mockery;  
all who honoured her despise her,  
for they have seen her nakedness;  
she herself groans,*

*and turns her face away.*

<sup>9</sup> *Her uncleanness was in her skirts;  
she took no thought of her future;  
her downfall was appalling,  
with none to comfort her.  
“O Lord, look at my affliction,  
for the enemy has triumphed!”—Lamentations  
1:1-9*

**L**amentations: just the title of this biblical book conjures up images of weeping, crying, grieving. Yet, amid pain and destruction, there are glimmers of hope. Things are to be restored but, beyond that, renewed and reinvigorated in perhaps new and better ways after a period of stillness and reflection.

Lamentations contains the Prophet Jeremiah’s elegies for Jerusalem, once a great and mighty city, now in ruins and misery, her life completely altered after its destruction by the Babylonians. Though focused on a city, the book and this passage really speak to me of the whole world, and the current losses and desolation felt keenly within people’s lives.

### **The Text In Its Context**

Traditionally attributed to the seventh-century BCE prophet Jeremiah, this passage is styled as a lament of the prophet over the fall of Jerusalem in 597 BCE, which he had warned of, and which he attributed to the faithlessness of the people. The conquering Babylonians pillaged Jerusalem and the Temple and largely depopulated the city, deporting its elite and most of its inhabitants to Babylon. In its original Hebrew, this passage is an acrostic, a poem whose 22 stanzas consist of triplets, each beginning with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in order.

The description of the deserted city, “once full of people” is comparable to the situation within many places today, when we see photos of once-full, familiar places across the world making the rounds in the media. Though the city is full of places, the life within it comes from the people living out their lives in its streets and buildings. Of course, in the current situation, most people haven’t left the places where they live; they are just enclosed within their homes. However, some expats may well have returned to their “home countries.”

The description of some of the lack and difficulties the city is undergoing— “no-one to comfort her,” “affliction and harsh labour” are surely things which some people are having to undergo across the world not only in these times, but always. They are forgotten, and their voices are often unheard by many of those in power as well as by much of the general population—these are the sick, the homeless, the lonely, the poor, those living in fear. Although in some ways this virus, for bad reasons, is seen as some kind of “leveller,” hitting all in society the same, in reality, those living in the poorest sectors of society and those who require social care and support are the ones being most abjectly affected. Some may be afforded temporary respite, but the majority faces worse hardships than before the pandemic.

## The Text in Our Context

Obviously, not all of this passage is applicable to now, seeing as it was written for a specific purpose thousands of years ago, focused on Jerusalem. However, there might be something to draw from the wealth and prosperity of commerce as well as the influence and power of countries being exposed to the light and brought low by the coronavirus. This virus not only causes sickness and death in the most serious cases but has already had a negative effect on the economic prospects of countries worldwide and affected even the most robust of medical systems. It puts into perspective the promises of Boris Johnson prior to Brexit to “make our country great again,” in a rhetoric copying Donald Trump, when in stark contrast the UK currently has one of the worst death rates and highest number of cases in the world. On a wider scale, humanity or at least a proportion of humans have wielded their power over the rest of creation and now are being put firmly back in their place, enslaved in some ways by this virus, their physical contact with one another limited for fear of endangering others and themselves.

The very real grief and loss are realistically described, in, for example, “how bitterly she weeps.” Such pain, anguish and even anger are all emotions I have felt in varying degrees over the past few months, no doubt mirrored by countless others. Being faced with calamity, sudden losses, crushed expectations and failed plans, and for some serious illness or even death, causes such emotions and crying out to God. It is only natural and, in my eyes, important to acknowledge all this, before moving forward and looking ahead. I was surprised by the speediness (sometimes by necessity) and very quick adaptability of many to new ways of working, in particular a transfer as far as possible to online, virtual forms of contact with others, which for some is their usual daily lifeline and connection with the world. This is all commendable, but it is also OK and perhaps important to stop, process and reflect before going again, as otherwise we run the risk of not noticing what is missing from our lives, of reflecting what needs to change, of considering our values and desires as well as the needs of our neighbours. We need to lament.

For all of us, adjustments have had to be made in our lives, meaning some who were living within their means or on the edge now find themselves struggling, having lost jobs or been furloughed. For others, the loss or change in lifestyle, altered living arrangements, upset to daily routine and impact on social interactions have begun to grind them down, leading to an increase in people presenting with worsened or new signs of mental illness or at least a poorer state of mental health; some truly are “in the midst of distress.” Some, already living on the margins of society, find themselves like Judah in exile, having to socially isolate, less protected and valued by the government and its strategies to combat coronavirus.

The vivid image of what once was in Jerusalem reminds us all of the times of festivity, public worship corporately in church buildings and cathedrals, celebrations and cultural entertainment which only a few months ago filled cities by day and night. We too wonder at our own barer roads and “desolate gateways.” Though many mourn the loss of these experiences in the flesh in cultural and spiritual places, and yearn for them to be full again, the translation of many events and services online has enabled some of the worship, music,

drama, entertainment to still occur and in fact opened up the possibility for more to attend than might have been able to otherwise. The talents, values and gifts of some previously noticed professions, God, the community to be found in towns, the courageous spirit of the nation have all flourished in this very different time, where sometimes they were quashed by individuality and superiority of others. Much good is being discovered and unfulfilled potential tapped and hope for change is on the horizon. Things which had remained hidden by the trappings of society and the busyness of daily life have been laid bare. All have to reconfigure their personal and corporate lives, weighing up their values in life and the causes they are fighting for. Injustices and inequalities are being brought to the light, now as then, and there is great suffering for all.

Yet, both for Jerusalem in the prospect of the “new Jerusalem” and for us today, there is hope. Though we might sometimes feel afflicted, like “the enemy has triumphed,” Christ has won the victory over evil and sin. We have hope not only for eternity but in our lives today too. All things will eventually be made new, but we have a chance to do our bit now to be beacons of Christ’s light in our communities and world, to combat climate change and safeguard all creation, to offer a helping hand to those most vulnerable and in need, to comfort the sick and the lonely. Nothing with God is impossible. Although there is much grief and pain, and many remember fondly things before lockdown and the pandemic hit and wish to return to how things were, we can do more. We can look to the future, not back to the past.

Yes, let’s reinstate some things we could do then but can’t do currently, such as hug our friends and families and be together in person. Yes, let’s fill our city spaces again with laughter and conversations and our churches with praise of God. But let’s take some of what we’re learning in this time into the future with us and make our churches and societies more open, inclusive and missional. Let’s not limit ourselves but be open to God, prepared to be changed and renewed, because after death comes life.

## Questions

- Do any of the emotions and feelings recorded within the passage resonate with you? If so, how and why?
- In what ways, if any, has the current situation affected your relationship with God and others? Are there changes you hope to make going forward?

## Activities

- Think of a way you can be a blessing to others, then go and put it into action, e.g., donating some food/money to a food bank, sending a message of encouragement to someone, sharing a gift you have with others.
- Pray for those you know who are especially anxious or vulnerable at this time, as well as those who are ill and those who grieve. If you’re struggling, think of writing a journal to record your thoughts and feelings and do talk to someone.

## Resources I Have Enjoyed from the UK

- This is a pandemic blessing written and produced by a friend, Grace Thomas, featuring several members of the congregation of the churches I served in Manchester:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o\\_c30LcVNmw&t=55s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_c30LcVNmw&t=55s)
- This is the UK Blessing, featuring many people from across the UK  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUtll3mNj5U>
- Beatitudes for a Global Pandemic, written by Jayne Manfredi and illustrated by Dave Walker:  
<https://cartoonchurch.com/content/cc/beatitudes-pandemic/>
- This is the link to the website of St Martin's in the Field, who have created a lot of digital talks, reflections etc:  
<https://stmartins.digital/>
- My local church Holy Trinity St Mary's Guildford has produced short but effective reflections as well as virtual choir pieces:  
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8u4ifk6gS9q0NYdsJkIz9g>

## Music Resources

A few choral songs I have particularly found comfort in over the last few months:

- Rheinberger – Abendlied  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGc\\_\\_HGwdxk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGc__HGwdxk)
- Brahms – Geistliches Lied  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PHe48dEar2A>
- Faure – Cantique de Jean Racine  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NzUMfVpugq4>
- Rutter – A Gaelic Blessing  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eve2y-P-Zjk>
- Elgar – Lux Aeterna  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwdeqVmXIHk>

## Prayer

*Loving God,*

*Be our comforter and our guide in these uncharted waters.*

*Renew our spirits when we feel tired and weighed down.*

*Empower us to truly love others and reach out to those in need.*

*Inspire in us the hope and vision for a better future,*

*And draw us ever closer into your Presence.*

*In the name of Christ, we pray.*

*Amen*

**Annika Mathews** writes of herself: “I’m in my mid 20s, currently waiting to see what God calls me to next. Over the last few years, I’ve done a variety of paid and voluntary internships, some in ministry contexts across the UK as well as one year spent in Romania. I’m an Anglican but also an extended member of the Methodist Church. I am currently Lay Rep from the Church of England on the Churches Together England Enabling Group.”

# 4

**Stay at Home, Save Lives!**

***We Wait on the Lord***

**Ayoko Bahun-Wilson**

## **The Text**

*<sup>19</sup>Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise.  
O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!  
For your dew is a radiant dew,  
and the earth will give birth to those long dead.*

*<sup>20</sup>Come, my people, enter your chambers,  
and shut your doors behind you;  
hide yourselves for a little while  
until the wrath is past. —Isa. 26:19-20*

**T**hroughout human history, epidemics have marked and marred the stories of human societies. Examples include smallpox, measles, cholera, influenza, yellow fever, polio, tuberculosis, the chikungunya virus, HIV, Ebola and today the coronavirus known as COVID-19.

Whenever there is such an outbreak, societies use their imaginations and initiatives to explain the causes and to propose means of prevention and treatment. Today it is known that not all serious diseases, for example, diabetes, obesity, or certain autoimmune diseases, are contagious; and many are related to genetics, environment, or lifestyle.

For the ancients, epidemics never arise by chance. The different editorial traditions translate the term for “epidemic” as pestilence, plague, hitting, striking, or wound. In the collective

imaginations of the time, epidemics were seen as warning signs of the end time, signs of divine wrath, or consequences of violations of natural laws.

Many solutions or approaches, and various guidelines, were disseminated to help stem the scourge as quickly as possible. One way to address pandemics, then as now, was to stay at home:

*Come, my people, enter your chambers,  
and shut your doors behind you;  
hide yourselves for a little while  
until the wrath is past.*

### **The Text in Its Context**

The passage Isaiah 26:19–20 is contained in the first part of the work, or First Isaiah (Chs. 1–39). This part contains essentially oracles that denounce sins and warn of misfortunes and that hold out the promise, given repentance, of a possibly bright future. It reflects a period of international crises during which Isaiah, the son of Amoz, received the call to prophesy concerning “Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, the kings of Judah.” These four reigns serve to situate the chronological framework of the prophet’s activity. Isaiah presents Israel as a people who have turned away from the ways of God by living in total corruption. This leads the Lord to judge the leaders and offenders in every social category, already announced in chapter 1:

*<sup>23</sup>Your princes are rebels  
and companions of thieves.  
Everyone loves a bribe  
and runs after gifts.  
They do not defend the orphan,  
and the widow’s cause does not come before them.*

*<sup>24</sup>Therefore says the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel:  
Ab, I will pour out my wrath on my enemies,  
and avenge myself on my foes!*

It is during this period of general disorder that Isaiah asks the rest of the people to hide a little while.

This isolation, Isaiah says, will only last for a few moments, as long as it takes God to hold the world and its inhabitants accountable for the crimes and wrongdoings they have committed. This measure is similar to that already taken with the patriarch Noah at the time of the flood (Gen. 7:16), when his family was saved by being “quarantined” in the ark; or in Egypt, at the time of the death of the first-born of the Egyptians, when God asked the Israelites to remain safe in their homes under the protection of the blood of the Lamb. Verses 19 – 21 therefore present themselves as a kind of conclusion, calling Israel to place itself under the wing of its God, until the difficulties have passed, and while they await the glorious end which Israel is promised.



Paradoxically, some of the measures administered during the COVID-19 pandemic today, including containment measures, seem to be already prescribed in specific situations of human distress in Israel's history.

### **The Text in Our Context**

Where is God in a pandemic? We need not see the pandemic as God's judgment, in order to learn from it. COVID 19 opens our eyes to understand the inconsistencies and sufferings experienced by the people of Israel as well as the promise of restoration, recovery, and hope whose realization draws its strength from faith in God.

If there is one lesson to be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is to recognize that humanity is fragile and lives permanently in interdependence. Just as the poor are fragile, so are the rich. We must start by building societies that are more mutually supportive.

COVID 19 shows us that the misfortune of others is at the same time our own misfortune, that the color of one's skin or eyes, or one's language or culture makes no fundamental difference in the face of contamination.

The pandemic of COVID 19 urges us all to introspection by staying at home while respecting the ordinances of civil authorities, and looking toward the renewed world that God has promised his people:

*<sup>16</sup>Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;  
remove the evil of your doings  
from before my eyes;  
cease to do evil,  
<sup>17</sup>learn to do good;  
seek justice,  
rescue the oppressed,  
defend the orphan,  
plead for the widow.*

### **Questions**

- Is the COVID-19 pandemic a result of the violation of natural laws and disobedience to God? How can we understand a pandemic today in relation to our faith and God's action in the world?
- Do you believe that confinement is an approach to awareness of human frailty and can be an opportunity to revive hope? What kinds of lessons about faith can we learn from this time?

## Activities

- Isaiah prophesied against the widespread injustices of his day. How might we join each other in understanding and addressing the particular injustices and inequalities we find in our own communities?
- How might we work with other communities of faith in our city or region to provide effective advocacy or actions on behalf of social justice, and particularly in the area of health and healing?

## Resources

- Albert Camus, *The Plague* (Paris, 1947)
- M. Kangudie, *Les Vrais Enjeux De La Renaissance Africaine* (Goma RDC : Pôle Institute, 2017).
- Geoffrey Wigoder, ed., *Encyclopedia of Judaism* (New York: Macmillan, 1989).
- J.J.M. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2015).

## Prayer

*God of life, God of love,*

*You ask each of us to side with justice, to stand with the poor, to work for peace.*

*Enlighten our minds to understand the needs of those around us.*

*Enflame our hearts to love without reservation or discrimination.*

*Strengthen our limbs to offer ourselves in loving service to our families, friends, neighbours, and all in need.*

*We pray in Jesus' name.*

*Amen.*

**Ayoko Bahun-Wilsonis** is a deacon in the Methodist church in Togo, and has worked as the West Africa Co-ordinator for WCC EHAIA (Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative and Advocacy) for more than fifteen years. In this role she has entered deeply into many of the cultures and cultural practices within West Africa that have made people vulnerable to HIV and or isolated them from access to sexual and reproductive health services.

## Who Touched Me?

### *Healing in a Time of Social Distancing*

Manoj Kurian

#### The Text

<sup>25</sup> Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. <sup>26</sup> She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. <sup>27</sup> She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, <sup>28</sup> for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” <sup>29</sup> Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. <sup>30</sup> Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” <sup>31</sup> And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’” <sup>32</sup> He looked all around to see who had done it. <sup>33</sup> But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. <sup>34</sup> He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” — Mark 5:25–34

**T**he cry for help and healing is often soft or even silent. The dignity of the person in need, the insensitivity of the wider society, our overwhelming focus on ourselves, and our relative inability to sense the pain and misery around us, make this silence even more poignant. Today, the COVID-19 pandemic is exposing and exacerbating deep divisions, injustices, and inequities in our society. The need for healing and assistance has exploded. Jesus the healer shows us with his life, teachings, and actions that concern, care, and compassion surpass all boundaries and can be effectively practised even today, to bring hope and healing, to transform society.

## The Text in Its Context

In Mark's gospel, Jesus is frequently depicted as a folk healer, and here he is contrasted with the "professional" physicians.<sup>1</sup> In the gospel portrayals, his healing power is challenged by the Pharisees, and he is seen to ignore or defy important commonly held notions and practices of purity/pollution or clean and unclean. Jesus' focus is not on the woman's disease as such but on her illness, that is, on her social exclusion. The unnamed woman, likely a widow (since she had her own financial resources), prostrates herself before Jesus, as one would before a clear superior or a patron from whom one wishes favour.

The story itself is striking: Nearly two thousand years ago, Jesus was returning to Galilee with his disciples from the region of the Gerasenes. When they sailed back across the lake (the Sea of Galilee) to Capernaum, Jesus was received by a large crowd. At the shore, Jesus was approached by a distraught leader of the local synagogue, Jairus, whose twelve-year-old daughter was dying. He pleaded with Jesus to visit his home to heal and give life to his daughter. Jesus agreed and was on his way to Jairus's house. A large number of people were accompanying him and crowding around him.

It is at this moment that, in a desperate move, a woman who had suffered from bleeding for 12 years touches the hem of Jesus' cloak, hoping to be healed without being identified. According to the law (Lev. 15:25-27), excessive blood flow made her ceremonially unclean. Anything or anybody she touched was considered unclean. If other people touched anything that she had touched, they too would be considered unclean. She was ostracized by society and the religious establishment. She was "self-isolating" or social distancing for 12 long years. In her attempt to find a cure to her ailment, she had spent all her resources on doctors and their therapies. Though she was desperate and impoverished, she had faith that Jesus had the power to heal her. This conviction emboldened her to break all the rules she was subject to and risk touching Jesus' robe. She was healed instantaneously.

## The Text in Our Context

At that moment, amid the jostling crowd, Jesus asks, "Who touched me?" His disciples were with him and in close contact with him. Many people were touching him, physically and socially. But only one person truly touched him. *She touched in faith*—faith in Jesus and in the power of God to free her. *She touched in hope*—hope for healing and liberation from isolation and poverty. *She touched with courage*—courage to break the unjust laws and rituals of the establishment.

Jesus responded with love, expressed in three ways.

- Jesus acknowledged the presence of the unnamed, ostracized, and sick person, who probably was considered the least among the crowd.
- Jesus appreciated the agency of the person by highlighting her role in the healing. ("Daughter, your faith has healed you," v.34a).
- Jesus answered her quest for healing, freed her from suffering, and gave her peace (v.34b).

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<sup>1</sup> See the illuminating discussion of this passage and related cultural notions in Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 167, 368-69, 395-97.

Today Jesus continues to breach barriers. The barriers between the unnamed and named, distance and proximity, men and women, rich and poor, disease and wellbeing, death and life. The barriers are breached with faith, hope, courage and, most of all, love!

May God, people, and the situations we encounter lead us to opportunities to break free, to touch and be touched in faith, hope, courage, and love. May we act for and contribute to the healing and transformation required for the establishment of the reign of God, here and now, even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Questions

- In situations where you are helpless and with little hope, where and to whom do you reach out? What has been your experience in such situations?
- Have there been situations when you had the power to help but have not responded? What can you do today, responding to the hurt and the need for healing in the context of the current pandemic?
- Who are the excluded, the ostracized, the “unclean” in your community? Your church? Your nation?

## Activities

- *Accompaniment*: Identify a group of people or a person who is marginalized and suffering, who may even be at a distance, and take specific steps to accompany the person or persons in a way that upholds their dignity and agency.
- *Advocacy*: Stand with a person or persons who are being marginalized, to speak with and act with them, so that justice can prevail. The advocacy should provide the space for the oppressed to speak and take the lead, accessing the power and creativity that are bestowed by God.

## Resources

- “The Gift of Being: Called to Be a Church of All and for All,” [www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/2016/the-gift-of-being](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/2016/the-gift-of-being)
- “The Role of Churches in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic,” [www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/executive-committee/online-june-2020/statement-on-the-role-of-churches-in-the-context-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-love-steadfastness-hope-and-courage/](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/executive-committee/online-june-2020/statement-on-the-role-of-churches-in-the-context-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-love-steadfastness-hope-and-courage/)
- “Stigmatization and Discrimination Are a Sin,” [www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/stigmatization-and-discrimination-are-a-sin-says-wcc-hiv-aids-consultation](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/stigmatization-and-discrimination-are-a-sin-says-wcc-hiv-aids-consultation)

## Prayer

*O Lord, forgive our insensitivity to the needs of those around us. May we touch you, so that your grace can transform us to become carriers of the Good News. Let your presence enable us to breach barriers between the unnamed and named, distance and proximity, men and women, rich and poor, disease and wellbeing, death and life. We know that, in your name, all barriers can be breached with faith, hope, courage and, most of all, love!*

**Manoj Kurian** is the coordinator of the WCC-Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance. He is a Malaysian medical doctor, trained in Community Health and Health Systems Management. After working for seven years in mission hospitals in diverse rural regions in India, from 1999, he headed the health work at the WCC for 13 years. From 2012, for two years, he worked at the International AIDS Society as the senior manager, responsible for its policy and advocacy work.

# 6

## From Chaos to Calm Our Demons, Our Identity, and Our Calling

Wati Longchar

### The Text

*They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes.<sup>2</sup> And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. <sup>3</sup> He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; <sup>4</sup> for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. <sup>5</sup> Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. <sup>6</sup> When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; <sup>7</sup> and he shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” <sup>8</sup> For he had said to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” <sup>9</sup> Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion; for we are many.” <sup>10</sup> He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. <sup>11</sup> Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; <sup>12</sup> and the unclean spirits begged him, “Send us into the swine; let us enter them.” <sup>13</sup> So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.*

<sup>14</sup> *The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. <sup>15</sup> They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. — Mark 5:1-15*

**T**oday we are challenged by the ongoing pandemic caused by a demon called COVID-19 or coronavirus. Every nation, every tribe, family, individual has felt fear and uncertainty. We are all in a chaotic, sometimes overwhelming, situation, struggling to stay safe and alive. No power, authority, religion, caste, culture, or wealth provides immunity; none of this

can protect us or overthrow this monster. One reason is that the world was not ready for this virus, and hence no vaccine was developed; rather, this is a time that tests the limits and capabilities of our science and medicine. Presently, the only way out is for everyone to “Stay Inside and Be Safe!” In the midst of all this, this biblical passage is significant because it teaches us that there is hope, no matter how deep or severe the element that envelops us.

### **The Text in Its Context**

The text presents us with yet another miraculous healing of a man with a demonic spirit. Let us see his condition. Here is a man in such a wretched state, which the ancient world attributed to being possessed by an evil power. He is helpless because he is overpowered by a much superior force, such that he cannot decide for himself or live a free life. He has not lost his life, but he had lost everything that could render a happy, desirable life. The text affirms the capability of supernatural agency to dominate, take possession, overpower, and dictate to a person.<sup>1</sup> It graphically portrays the severity of the domination by such demonic spirits, to turn a victim into hopeless condition, making him or her act out of control. They harm others and even themselves! This is exactly what was happening to this man, who was residing among the tombs. All human efforts had failed to bring healing and relief to this man. Eventually this man was considered unfit to live among society, was looked on as harmful for his community, and was rejected as contaminating or threatening the community. It aggravated his wretched condition and was in fact fearsome: When not attacking others, he was tormenting himself, wounding himself with sharp stones as his agonized howls echoed through the mountains, making the place dreadful for travellers to pass by. It was because of both his physical and mental suffering that his family and community isolated him, which worsened his condition, spiralling downward. Consequently, his comforts were all gone, he lost respect for himself and for others, his life was laid to waste.

The gospel also portrays the demons’ fear of Jesus, his command over them, their obedience, and people’s fear of the disruptive character of Jesus’ power.

### **The Text in Our Context**

The COVID-19 pandemic is driving humanity to similar conditions. No one can express the loss it is causing to our lives and livelihoods, our national economies, our politics. Nations big or small, developed or undeveloped, persons rich or poor, healthy or unhealthy, abled or disabled, aged or young are all affected. Everyone under the sun has been overwhelmed by the rapid multiplication and spread of this virus. It has plagued us with fear, uncertainty, selfishness (at times), and in some places hate toward the infected.

Such fears spawn aggression toward strangers or “the other” and exacerbate other tensions. In India we can see people committing fiendish atrocities on people coming from the Northeastern part of India. One day my children and their teenage friends went out to

<sup>1</sup> On this passage (and its parallels in Matthew and Luke) and the understanding of demons in ancient Palestine, see Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2003), 164-66, 350-51. “Demons (Greek) or unclean spirits (Semitic) were thus personified forces that had the power to control human behavior” (350). The Gospel of Mark notes many instances in which Jesus’ power is pitted against demons, and he himself is accused of being possessed (Mk 3:30).



get something from the shop. Since they all look like Chinese, the people in the street ran away, screaming, “Corona! Corona!” My confused kids came back and told me what had happened. In the same manner, racial discrimination increased as COVID-19 intensified. Young men and women from northeast India were physically assaulted and spit upon. Ironically, just few days after the whole nation applauded medical workers and police, by clapping and clanging of *thalis* (plates), these people were either chased or assaulted. This is the scenario that COVID-19 has created in the minds of the people. There is so much fear that some people dare not come out of their houses. While violent and outrageous conduct goes hand in hand with mischievous and diabolical acts, we are facing challenges of what or whom to fear or feel secure with. Is it the COVID-19 or the people who look at us as infected people, as if we were demon-possessed persons? Such hateful treatment toward us causes anxiety and consternation.<sup>4</sup>

As isolated as we are and in our morbid situation, this text urges us to look and recognize Jesus our Saviour (vs. 6, 7). In times like this, we are cautioned not to get excited, traumatized, or deranged. Rather, look up to Jesus, who deals with such harsh situations with calm, composure, and resolve. This was the strength and authority of Jesus when he approached and dealt with the Gadarene man.

With this strength, faith, and authority, Jesus asked his name, which was to help him recollect who he was. This was helpful to uncovering his real identity and recovering his better self. Jesus gave him time to think and see the possibility of hope. And the man did recover; he was his self again and was among the people—healed and harmless.

It is God’s intervening, healing touch that the world needs today. Racial discrimination, labeling our fellow humans indiscriminately, and committing diabolical acts will not bring healing! Rather, they will aggravate communal hatred, breed intolerance, and deepen social wounds. Humanity’s effort should go hand in hand with the divine hand of *shalom*. Only then can we experience holistic healing. As Christian communities let us learn from the strategy of Jesus how a calm, open faith helped the man recover, breaking the chains that bound him. The world may give up on us but let us be reminded that God’s searching love will never give up on us. When our attempts to reform ourselves fail, or when we try to confront the various personal and social demons we face, as persons and communities, God reassures us, “I’m able to save you.” Let us keep this flicker of hope alive, even in the midst of uncertainties.

## Questions

- Identify what is it that dominates or ails you, curbs your freedom, stunts your growth?
- What “monster” surrounds or challenges your community or society?

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2 My heart goes out to those who are targets in recent days in the name of coronavirus (which otherwise also happens occasionally to our brothers and sisters coming from the Northeast and residing in India for studies or work). Those stranded in different parts of the country due to emergency lockdown are now in a big dilemma!

## Activities

- Identify those who are the soft targets of racial discrimination and ways in which you might extend help.
- Identify and support organizations or communities that advocate for their safety and security.

## Prayer

*God, we see Jesus' example of love and responsibility. He was calm, composed and wise while dealing with his opponent. We seek you to help us be like Jesus even as we are overwhelmed with this indiscriminate monstrous pandemic. We remember our brothers and sisters who are targeted adding to their fear of corona. Keep them in your safe hands, protect them! Help us to be channels of providers and help for those who are in need of support and protection from racial attacks. May thy reign of love and shalom come over us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

**Wati Longchar** is Dean of the Senate Centre of Extension and Pastoral Theological Research, Senate of Serampore College, Kolkata, India.

## God Has Wounds, Too

### *The Gifts of Doubt and Vulnerability*

Emelie Hjerth

#### The Text

<sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

<sup>26</sup> A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

<sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” <sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup> But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. — John 20:24-31

**I**n my tradition, which is Church of Sweden (Lutheran), the text at hand is read every third year on the Sunday after Easter, as a witness to the resurrection. This year I could see Christ standing among the disciples. They were hiding, staying inside out of fear for their lives and their security, much like many of us, who have a choice, are doing in these times about 2000 years later. For the first time I noticed the wounds. After the resurrection the wounds are still there, they have not disappeared as a consequence of the resurrection. Not even after the resurrection is God denying the reality of evil, suffering and fear, but acknowledging that those same things led to the death of his son on the cross. Our God

has wounds, even when death is no more. In these times of uncertainty, pain, suffering and fear, I find it comforting that the God I relate to knows all those feelings in his body, even after the resurrection. And that's where this text can help us, comfort us, and give us hope during this time of pandemic.

### **Our Context: Invincibility and Security**

Sweden is one of the world's safest countries, we haven't been at war for over 200 years, the last severe famine is over 150 years behind us, and we're about 100 years from the last big emigration from Sweden. It is a safe place to live with a stable economy, good health care, and a financial safety net for most of the people inhabiting the country. I think we have seen ourselves as invincible; nothing can ever hurt us, we are our own saviours. That's not to say that Sweden is without problems, but from a global perspective we are privileged, so much so that we take it for granted.

We have no wounds to heal, or so we think. Death won't come until we're old. We can plan what's going to happen tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, or so we have thought, as a collective for the whole of my life, born in the 1980s, with all the opportunities in the world. I think that may be why we, collectively, have forgotten about God. We felt we were safe; we didn't need God.

In March 2020 Covid-19 turned our lives upside down, and all the security we had felt just some weeks before was swept away. Realizing what had been true all the time; we can't take anything for granted, we can't control anything. We don't know the next time we can travel to meet those living far away, we don't know the next time we can hug a beloved family member belonging to the at-risk groups. We're still privileged, very privileged, but the fear of death, our own and others, is a reality. Life isn't ours to control, only to live.

### **The Text in Our Context**

The disciples were living in fear, hiding from the world and fearing what would happen if they went out into it. Would they live? For fifty days they were hiding, until the Spirit came. And here is Thomas, doubting the resurrection, demanding to feel the wounds. I can't help identifying with Thomas. I'm a child of my age, keen on science, scientific evidence and critical thinking. These are necessities in the world I've grown up and lived in. But they also sometimes have hindered me from receiving the grace of God, doubting the wonders to be true, since they can't be proven: doubting, while longing desperately for all of it to be true.

I also, desperately, need the wounds to still be there after the resurrection, I didn't understand how much I needed that until Covid-19. If the wounds had disappeared, the body had healed, no scars were to be seen, it would be as if all the suffering were forgotten. It would be the easy way, to put make-up all over it, telling everyone to forget about the darkness and move on. Maybe Thomas just wanted to make sure that it wasn't forgotten, because it was not just Jesus that suffered that first Easter in Jerusalem, the disciples suffered too, as did all those who followed Jesus. They continued to suffer after the resurrection. Fear had the power over them for 50 days after the resurrection, before they received the Spirit on Pentecost.

Thomas, asking to feel the wounds, showed us and proved to us that they are still there, even after the resurrection. In the same way, our wounds will be there also after the pandemic is over. There will come a day when we can move outside again, when we can meet those we love, when we can return to a new normal—just as the disciples did when the Spirit came and gave them courage to go out and speak the gospel. But the suffering and fear of that first Easter would affect them for the rest of their lives. Maybe this pandemic won't affect the rest of our lives, but it will have given us deep wounds. And as we know, the scars will always be there; they'll fade, but they will still be there.

I find it reassuring that God also has wounds, even after the resurrection. Jesus won't make us forget the hard times, but he will walk with us through them. He will walk with us in our doubt. And there will be Pentecost, and we will go out again, though the wounds won't be forgotten. They are a part of us and our history, just like the wounds of the risen Lord are a part of his history.

### Questions

- What wounds has Covid-19 inflicted upon you, your family and your community?
- What signs of hope and healing do you see in your context?

### Activities

- If you're not in an at-risk group, help those who are. Ask an elderly person or a person belonging to at-risk groups in other ways how you can help them during this time. Be the gospel for your neighbours.
- We need community: call a friend, a relative, or someone that you know needs your call. Pray together over the phone. Even on the telephone we can gather two or three in the name of Jesus.

### Resources

- Ruth C. Duck, "In Fear the World Is Weeping," at: [www.facebook.com/RochesterUnitedMethodistChurch/posts/in-fear-the-world-is-weeping-and-longs-with-every-breath-for-life-and-hope-and-se/3246979201997245/](https://www.facebook.com/RochesterUnitedMethodistChurch/posts/in-fear-the-world-is-weeping-and-longs-with-every-breath-for-life-and-hope-and-se/3246979201997245/)
- A poem, "Jesus of the Scars," by Edward Shillito: [thejesusquestion.org/2013/10/28/jesus-of-the-scars-by-edward-shillito/](https://thejesusquestion.org/2013/10/28/jesus-of-the-scars-by-edward-shillito/)
- N. T. Wright, "The Resurrection and the Renewal of Creation," video at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=GenlGUKZ-6Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GenlGUKZ-6Q)

### Prayer

*God, your compassion became incarnate in the person of Jesus, you suffered with him in his crucifixion, and you vindicated his life and witness in the resurrection. Teach us through our vulnerability and wounds, calm our doubts and fears, heal us of all infirmity, and renew our lives through the gifts of your Spirit. Amen.*

**Rev. Emelie Hjerth** from the Church of Sweden is a former WCC steward and a board member of Young Clergy Women International.

# 8

## Do Not Weep

### *Transform Vulnerability through Compassion*

Nicole Ashwood

#### **The Text**

*<sup>11</sup> Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. <sup>12</sup> As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. <sup>13</sup> When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." <sup>14</sup> Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" <sup>15</sup> The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. <sup>16</sup> Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" <sup>17</sup> This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country. —Luke 7:11-17*

**O**ur generation is living in unprecedented times. Humanity has travelled to outer space, yet many people have only limited access to transportation. Medical sciences have provided care for many who are ill, yet humanity is living through perhaps the worst pandemic ever. A heightened sense of urgency among global leaders led them to stave off the far-reaching impact of the virus by closing international borders and imposing restrictions on local movement. Despite the best of efforts, many remain vulnerable; and in the face of rising death tolls and limited access to basic resources, their situations are desperate. Luke 7:11-17 offers an unexpected lesson on human vulnerability transformed through compassion, one that also challenges the church to be equally compassionate to the vulnerable in such a time as this.

## The Text in Its Context

In Luke's day, the most vulnerable were those who lacked social protection and access to economic and social independence. The laws of primogeniture prevented widows and daughters from property ownership and management, so women often were left extremely vulnerable at the deaths of their husbands and sons. Loss of one's only son thus placed the widow in this story at the mercy of kinsmen or predatory males.

Luke presents the healing narrative as a very concise drama, beginning with Jesus and his entourage approaching Nain, having just departed Capernaum. They may have been in high spirits, albeit tired, as they might have travelled for a while to get to Nain. Suddenly, Jesus' entourage meets a funerary entourage just outside the city gates.

The sharp contrasts are immediately obvious – excitement vs. mourning. Jesus is at the centre of his followers; while the chief character of the funerary party is a vulnerable, distressed widow. Her son is dead; Jesus, the firstborn, the living son, is in the prime of life. He is returning from healing a treasured slave; she is going to bury her treasured son. She is shrouded in weakness; he exudes strength. She faces an uncertain future; he transforms the future. She is at risk of being contaminated and contagious; he is the healer of the sick and infirm. She is clothed in mourning garb; he sees beyond the garb and is clothed in righteousness and grace.

Under the laws of cleanliness, Jesus and the team should have accompanied them to the sepulchre. But that does not happen. Jesus' actual response is immediate and very different from the previous healing scenario.

In that story (Luke 7:1-10), a Roman officer had pleaded with Jesus to heal his slave. The officer's plea aligns with the general pattern of healing miracles in the gospel narratives. That is, persons usually approached Jesus for their own healing, or sought healing on behalf of their loved ones. Here, though, Jesus approached her as he was en route to Nain town; she did not approach him. Perhaps she was deep in grief; maybe she was unaware of Jesus' identity; possibly the size of the crowd prohibited her from seeing Jesus.

Yet we do know that Jesus saw her, and he was moved by her situation.

There, amid the gospel's multiple snapshots of faith and fear, Jesus was moved by the woman's pain and vulnerability. Jesus acts immediately and decisively, touching her heart while maintaining personal distance. Few could imagine that Jesus' command signalled the turning point for the widow, as Jesus followed his command, "Do not weep," with action. He touched the bier and called the (embalmed) boy back to life. Immediately, as with the centurion's slave, the boy was transformed – he arose and began speaking. His mother is right there, and it is Jesus who hands the boy back to her.

In the Nain healing, the widow's vulnerability stems from her lack of social access and economic resources, effective immediately after her only son's burial. The irony is obvious – for burial laws positioned the funerary procession on the outskirts of town, a space that she would occupy socially, if not literally, after his burial.

Jesus sensed this, and his action reflected that understanding. He saw the deeper issues of vulnerability and marginalization that dehumanize and breaks the soul. He knew that there was no one to put those broken pieces together again. Her husband was dead, and so was her son. He understood what brokenness would do to her. Thus, the son's resurrection was less about the boy's transition from death to life and more about the transformation of the desperate and vulnerable widow. She who was extremely vulnerable received fullness of life through Christ. In one compassionate act, Jesus transformed the widow's life – her value, her livelihood, her future, and her hope.

### **The Text in Our Context**

As followers of Christ, we in the church bear witness to the words and works of Jesus. Thus, the Nain miracle is a call to the church to offer life in its fullness to the vulnerable among us: persons without access to resources, now as then.

There are many “widows” in our midst today. Their desperation is visible to those who meet her outside the city gates where COVID-19 placed her. Hear her cry among the desperate women who are losing income due to COVID-19 isolation. Hear her cry among the wails of migrant workers who are forced to make the long, arduous trek home during the lockdown – and among the recently unemployed and visa-confiscated migrants feeling desperate and desolate. Hear her cry among the sick and infirm, women who lack access to medication or even basic healthcare. Hear the cries of those who have no access to material resources for their current needs or redress through social and economic justice. Hear her cry among the women on the frontlines, working overtime without PPE or basic protection against infections. Hear her cry at the inhumane absence of water with which to wash away possible infections in the crowded communities of the homeless. Hear her in bread lines and remittance lines, where stimulus cheques are not available, where economics and politics leave her vulnerable and desperate.

Hear her cry. Feel her desperation and vulnerability.

Restore life to her again as she leads the funerary procession of the vulnerable, downtrodden, dis-eased and marginalized outside our sanitized cities.

Today's widows are crying, and our response to the funerary procession could be the only opportunity they have to “see” Jesus at work. They cannot come to us. It's not allowed. We must reach out to the widow. When we reach out to her, and command her not to cry, let it be that, moved with compassion, we do not leave our widows bereft.

### **The Text in Our Lives**

We must match our words with concrete action. We can arrange community interventions, like the youth in India who have prepared and delivered much-needed supplies to families under lockdown. They are not alone; the Presbyterian Church in Trinidad and Tobago is intentional in ministering to migrants in need, providing them – women and families – with food supplies at a time when others would rather that the migrants were sent home. The Christian Conference of Asia has worked on getting masks for the vulnerable. The YWCA also has several stories of young women mobilizing the provision of resources to the vulnerable during the lockdown.



In times of crises, religious buildings and schools are usually appropriated to provide shelter for those rendered homeless by the disaster. To some extent, physical distancing has negated that possibility. But what of providing sanitation facilities for those who have no access to water? They have been popping up in Ghana – solar or rustic pipes created from drums to aid impoverished communities. Alternatively, we might convert storage units or sheds to accommodate bathing and handwashing, while respecting physical distancing.

Truly, we are living in unprecedented times – of illness, brokenness, disease, and despair. As followers of Christ, we must extend a compassionate hand of comfort and hope in the face of distancing, despair, and death. Unprecedented times demand extraordinary acts of faith. Providing social access by offering medication to the needy, food to the hungry, a word of comfort or a listening ear, are essential services required by all vulnerable persons today.

### **Questions**

- Where are the vulnerable in our local communities, and what are the death-dealing factors that could create despair among them presently?
- How might we share news of God’s comfort and transformation to those in need?

### **Activities**

- Explore practical approaches to helping persons who have no access to food, like community gardens or walk-in showers
- Offer skills training after the isolation period of COVID-19 to help women generate income through your church/community centre

### **Resources**

- Ashley Bowerman, “This Is Needed Right Now: Local Church Opens Showers, Laundry Service to Homeless,” WSFA News, 5 April 2020, at: [www.wsfa.com/2020/04/05/this-is-needed-right-now-local-church-opens-showers-laundry-service-homeless/](http://www.wsfa.com/2020/04/05/this-is-needed-right-now-local-church-opens-showers-laundry-service-homeless/)
- Christian Conference of Asia webinar on “The Plight of Migrant Workers amidst COVID-19 Crisis,” Zoom meeting, 30 April 2020, and highlights of other CCA COVID-related webinars: [www.cca.org.hk/news-and-events/experts-to-analyse-impact-of-covid-19-on-food-insecurity-in-asia-at-cca-virtual-conference/](http://www.cca.org.hk/news-and-events/experts-to-analyse-impact-of-covid-19-on-food-insecurity-in-asia-at-cca-virtual-conference/)
- Tim Harmon, “Social Justice in Ancient Israel,” *Transformed: Living the Gospel in an Everyday World*, at: [transformedblog.westernseminary.edu/2013/11/18/social-justice-in-ancient-israel/](http://transformedblog.westernseminary.edu/2013/11/18/social-justice-in-ancient-israel/)
- Jeannine K. Brown, “Commentary on Luke 7:11-17,” *Working Preacher*, at: [www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1679](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1679)

## **Prayer**

*Giving God,*

*Stir in us discomfort when others are in life-threatening situations.*

*Open our eyes so that we might see the widows in our midst and be moved to compassion.*

*Empower us to offer life and hope amid dis-ease, distress, and despair. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

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