

Can Lent help prepare us for a pandemic?

I got my two weeks of groceries. But the CDC offers no wisdom on preparing the soul.

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The CDC is taking its cue from the Boy Scouts, as it urges local communities and institutions to be prepared.

On Saturday morning it was clear that my community was heeding that advice, stymied as we were in the aisles of Sam's Club, slowly maneuvering oversized

shopping carts past one another loaded with non-perishable foodstuffs and economy-sized packages of toilet tissue. In more than one place I'd read the recommendation to purchase two weeks' worth of necessities. For a family of five with two teenage boys, that's a lot of chips and salsa.

Four hours later, a wall in our basement laundry room stood half obscured by neatly stacked provisions. And the children had been warned that this stash is off limits.

Don't panic, we're being told. Be prepared.

But government health officials have offered no wisdom on how to prepare the soul, as fear and uncertainty rise like the prematurely sprouting daffodils in our front yard. And for folks like me, who have made an art out of catastrophizing, that kind of preparation is equally important.

Fortunately, we are still early in the season of Lent, a season that offers just the soul-wisdom we need, however uncomfortable it may be.

On Ash Wednesday I sat in our seminary chapel. I was on edge from too much CNN-checking. A pandemic seemed inevitable. The assertion that healthy people had little to fear had failed to reassure me, as two of my immediate family members have asthma.

Then the worship leader introduced the prayer of confession, and I scribbled on my bulletin something she said—just a phrase, but one that named the reality I know I was rebelling against: “the fragility and uncertainty of human life.”

There's a Shambhala Buddhist meditation center across the street from the seminary, but I don't need to go there to learn of the impermanence of everything, the fundamental flux of life. Christians spend one-tenth of the year displaying that reality before our own faces. We mark impermanence, flux, and uncertainty right on our foreheads.

Maybe this year, we washed those marks off too soon.

Lent's regimen for inner-preparedness is simply this: a steely-eyed gaze at reality. Just as Jesus “set his face like flint” toward Jerusalem, so our spiritual practice must be to investigate reality unflinchingly. Part of that reality includes the ashy truth we smeared on our foreheads just days ago: none of this lasts. And neither scientist nor charismatic leader is going to swoop in from the wings and make it go away. No

deus ex machina is going to get us out of this.

Thomas Merton once mused, “I wonder if there are twenty people alive in the world now who see things as they really are.... They are the ones who are holding everything together and keeping the universe from falling apart.”

Looking at reality has a dual benefit: it frees us from both catastrophizing and magical thinking.

Things are only as bad as they are, not as we imagine them to be. The universe isn’t falling apart—however often the universes we’ve created, with ourselves at the center, do and inevitably will again.

But things are also not better than they are, as our daydreaming of a miracle cure or the uninformed reassurances of some political leaders would have us believe. There’s no one to save us from the universal conditions of fragility and uncertainty or from the particular ways those conditions manifest themselves: the disruption of our routines, economic collapse, serious illness, death.

When Lent relieves us of these twin habits of mental escape, we are freed to embrace what many saints and spiritual writers refer to as the duty of the present moment. You don’t have to believe that present circumstances are willed by God in order to believe that even the present reality of uncertainty, fragility, and decline is the vehicle for God’s love and grace. And that grace frees us to ask, *What does this moment—this reality—require of me?*

For some the duty will be—indeed already is—to exist as patiently and lovingly as possible in quarantine. For others it will be to show-up, sacrifice the inclination to self-preservation, and care for the sick. For many, the moment calls for listening to experts and preparing thoughtfully, making sure there’s enough hand soap, peanut butter, and Cheez-Its on hand to endure a governmentally imposed staycation.

But in the midst of that work, the duty of the moment calls for something else as well: loving reality, even in its vulnerability. Especially in its vulnerability.

For me that meant, after the construction of a basement wall of food, putting fearfulness and wishful thinking aside, looking at the ten-year-old girl in front of me, who was a little stressed by the reason for our shopping trip, and saying yes to her plea for a trip to the park to practice her softball skills. Saying yes to basking in this

sunny, spring-like winter afternoon. To running and laughing and sweating. To accepting the joy of this reality.

Not worrying that this too shall pass. Not afraid that in a month this park might be closed, and we might be confined to our home, where the duty of the moment would call for something else: family prayer, playing Yahtzee, and making pancakes.

Lots of pancakes. There's enough batter in the basement to feed a family of five ten meals of pancakes. But we need to make one more trip to the store. We forgot to buy chocolate chips.