

An Omicron Christmas

I don't know if this is the pandemic's end game. I do know that new things are already being born in us.

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Across Canada, days before Christmas, our churches have begun the snowball effect of closing down in-person worship. Church leaders are choosing what politicians aren't prepared to choose, moving our worship offerings online in the belief that not being together might be the most loving and faithful thing we can do.

This has a nauseatingly familiar feel to it. We can only speculate about what the cost might be in infections if we were to go ahead with our gatherings, but the cost of not gathering is felt immediately and viscerally. The sadness, disappointment, and even

anger across our congregations is its own monstrous presence—so heavy and taking up so much space between us and within us that it has become hard to move, to see, to think, to breathe.

For a few precious months, life felt almost back to normal. We trusted in the protection of vaccines and the lower case counts being reported each day. Our churches had begun singing together again and talking about a fuller return to programming in the new year.

Now the wildfire spread of the Omicron variant across the globe in just a few short weeks—and with it, the dawning realization of how much could still be taken from us—is causing a variety of responses. Some of us act scorned and betrayed, as if someone deliberately misled us with the promise that things could be better only to stab us when our backs were turned. Some of us are struggling with despair and depression as we look toward another long winter of isolation and difficulty. Some of us are keeping our holiday plans, willfully defiant of the latest numbers and modeling. We are too tired to keep living in lockdown. We're ready to roll the dice with this damned disease.

I was fretfully listening to yet another epidemiologist on an afternoon radio program, looking for some guidance about how our family and church might proceed over the holidays. His words were as depressing as any I have heard: he was issuing the same dire warnings that we have been hearing for weeks about how wide the gap is between what we need to be doing to slow Omicron's spread and what politicians are actually willing to mandate. Then he said something that was meant as warning but, to my ears, sounded like hope: "This is how pandemics end. There is a wildly transmissible variant, and by the time it has run its course, we are all either vaccinated or we've caught the virus."

I don't know what it will take to end COVID, but when I heard these words I felt a glimmer of lightness. One of the hardest things about the pandemic is the sense that we're stuck in a relentlessly repeating pattern of disappointment. The milestones come and go, and each time our situation seems no different from—or even worse than—last year. The idea of having Christmas worship snatched away from us at the last minute once again feels almost impossible to believe or bear.

But what if Omicron is actually the end game? What if, when it's over, there will be newness on the other side?

One of the things I appreciate most about the Christian faith is how honestly new life is tied to death. There are no fairy godmothers in scripture showing up to wave magic wands and transform circumstances we don't like into something more palatable.

Instead there is a small grain of wheat—which, in order to grow into something that gives life and nourishment, must first be buried in the ground and die.

There is the wilderness and the newly baptized supplicant who goes there—with all the ways he sees the world around him stuck, and all the ways he himself, well past the prime of his life, might feel stuck too. Jesus of Nazareth reminds us that it's only in allowing ourselves to get lost that we might also be found.

There is the new Jerusalem offered as a vision in the closing pages of the Bible, its people fed by streams of living water flowing from the tree of life that stands at its center, reminding us of what it took to get there. The book of Revelation is not a crystal ball prediction of future events; it describes in vivid detail the spiritual truth of what is happening now. Right now, and always, life is a long and hard road that takes us through the crucible of death and suffering. But in having our eyes opened to the truth of what it means to live as creatures who will one day die, we are also given the choice to align our lives with the unstoppable and liberating life of God.

At this time of year, we get to focus these truths through the lens of a brave young woman in a barn in Bethlehem. She has no idea how the image of that dark and lonely night will become beautified in our stained glass depictions, how we will sentimentalize and romanticize what happened to her. I have to imagine that as she gives her body over to wave upon wave of painful contractions squeezing the baby out of her body, she feels lonely, afraid, and held in a precarious balance between the new life that wants to come out of her and the many ways the process of birth might kill her. When she makes it to the other side and brings her silken-skinned baby to the temple for the appropriate religious offering, she is offered a prophetic promise of suffering: "a sword will pierce your heart too."

A lot of us have felt stuck during this pandemic. Being slapped in the face now with the prospect of more long, dark, isolated, and restricted months ahead feels like the proverbial straw breaking our collective back. And yet, we are learning from this pandemic that what feels like a pause button has actually been a catalyst for change. It might feel like we've been going nowhere, but all along we have been

collectively considering in profound ways who we are and who we want to be, what is and is not working.

We have been forced en masse into that great spiritual terrain of the wilderness. And the reflections that have poured out of us during this wilderness time—about the importance of community, about how interdependent we are and how we might better care for one another, about equality and dismantling systemic injustice—are all essentially spiritual in nature.

I don't know if this particular scientist's reading of the data is correct. Omicron may or may not be this pandemic's end game. But I know that what feels like stasis is always movement. The patterns of life and death are so closely tied to one another that there is no way of being alive without also being in the process of dying.

But so, too, there is no way of journeying through the crucible of pain and loss without something new in us being born.