

# Light in the Valley of Crisis

4th of Lent - Laetare Sunday - March 22, 2020

At the start of his novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens writes a very long sentence — almost as long as the 'everlasting' sentences in the first Book of Common Prayer. It reads like this: *"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair..."* The sentence goes on & on, but you get the point. Dickens' story is a tale about how the very same objective situation can mean profoundly different things to us, depending on our points of view.

It reminds us of the classic psalm about "point of view" in extreme situations — Psalm 23. David, the Psalmist, has been walking through the darkest of valleys, *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, in the presence of his greatest enemies. A place where **the fear of evil** — the fear of lacking the resources needed to survive; the fear of being abandoned, the fear of being harmed and the fear of death — **can easily overtake the mind**. We've all been there, even if the circumstances in "our" valleys were not this extreme. But within this dark place — **something good happens** — in the mind of David. A moment of grace opens the eyes of his heart to see another (more subtle & easily missed) side of this frightening situation he finds himself in. Without dismissing its objective potential for harm, he becomes able to see that "in the midst" of all the outer chaos & turmoil, **God is silently "resourcing" him**. And for a long moment, **time just "stops"** for David, as God actively calms the paralyzing panic that has him on an unhelpfully high alert, like a lamb in the presence of wolves. Inwardly, God makes him lie down in soft, green pastures; God leads him beside still waters that slow down the churning of his inner juices; God prepares a wonderful table for him, where he can eat his fill, be nourished, and settle his growling stomach; God anoints his troubled head with healing, sanctifying oil; and fills his "empty cup" till it overflows.

As a result of all this good care-taking, David's disturbed soul is restored to health, and **his inner horizon expands**. He acquires a healthy kind of "double vision." He can clearly see the great disturbance in this dark valley he finds himself in. But now he can **also** see that he is somehow — invisibly — dwelling in the sacred, resource-rich *"House of the Lord."* Outwardly, he is alone, but inwardly, he is not. And this unusual new point of view changes his experience of himself and the world around him. **His suffering** from the worst of fears (the fears of lack, abandonment, annihilation) **somehow ceases**. He is not blind to the potential harm in his midst, nor careless about protecting himself & others from it. But now he recognizes that, although **in one sense** this is *"the worst of times"* — **in another sense** it is (strangely enough) *"the best of times"* — a time of greater growth in divine wisdom & compassion. Greater than Dickens could possibly imagine. As we all know from personal experience, times of crisis can bring out the very best in us human beings... and also the very worst. Perhaps this is why Psalm 23 is so powerfully attractive to so many — for David is standing on the fine edge that separates **the best** from **the worst** responses in a crisis. He can go either way. But he discovers the means of choosing wisely. It's what we all want to discover in our crises, I think..

As you know, Fr. Rishi is a bit of a bookworm, God bless him. He's always reading & writing about one thing or another. And — as he and I have been talking together about the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, and how best to respond to it — he told me about a fascinating finding in psychological research that still hasn't received the press it deserves. It's about how different people respond after being in the same (physically or emotionally) traumatizing situations. Some experience the debilitating aftermath we've all heard so much about — *post-traumatic stress*. But others experience a phenomenon that gets far less coverage. They experience *post-traumatic wisdom*. These folks are somehow able to process their experience of traumatic suffering in ways that leave them — *not unscathed, not invulnerable* — but more "*spiritually mature*" — more confident, compassionate, and wise — more at peace & less anxious than they were before. So the big, overarching questions being asked by these researchers are: **"How does that work?" ... "What's the 'secret' of those who get better instead of worse?" ... "Can we ALL learn that 'secret' to protect us in times of trouble? — and, if so, how?"** (If you would like to hear their answers to those big questions thus far — do an internet search on "*post-traumatic wisdom*" and read the reports from reliable sources, like the National Institute of Health.)

For me, the most interesting thing about this contemporary research is that, in various ways, the Great Wisdom Traditions of our world have been carefully asking & answering these same big questions for millennia — and have been slowly developing understandings that are now being confirmed by outside research. The core messages of the great religions in this area are very much "*in synch*" with one another. They all come down to getting situated in a community that is continually cultivating & strengthening the capacity to see the often "unseen" world in the midst of us. The more subtle world, where the powers of wisdom & compassion are always actively moving through the thoughts, words, and deeds of ordinary human beings. As we find described in the 23rd Psalm — becoming able to see this "other," more subtle & holy world—*without ignoring the dangerous facts in our Valleys of Crisis*—is the key.

***So, what can we do to grow more wise & compassionate in the midst in this COVID-19 crisis?*** First, we can stop and recognize that we are already situated within a wise & compassionate community. Not simply or necessarily the church community of a particular parish or denomination, but within the far larger community of *all persons-of-good-will* across the planet. In addition to the countless scientists who are working arduously behind the scenes to develop a vaccine, other members of this larger community are at work in teaching us the objective facts about the virus — how it is being transmitted; who is most at risk; how best to protect ourselves & others from infection; how best to respond if we think we're seeing signs of infection in ourselves or others; how our collective efforts are going to contain viral spread, and how they can become more effective. Still others are working on the ground to teach & help those without access to reliable information. In many ways, this larger community-of-good-will are working hard every day on all of our behalf, and we need to accept their help. At the end of our online service today, Ken Walker, our friend & physician in the parish, will give us a short "brief" on these important, factual details and he will also answer any questions you wish to post.

We need to know & need to heed these important facts and instructions. But we need much more than them alone — if we are to not get obsessed or panicked in this health crisis, but to instead grow in wisdom & compassion in the midst of it. For this higher level of coping, we need to find & follow the more subtle, "holy", and often unseen "thread" that always runs through our world's crisis situations (*for all who develop eyes to see it*). Here are three practical things that we can do as a spiritual community to foster & nurture this deeper, more subtle perception within ourselves & others. They're not always easy, but with grace, they're doable:

### **Number 1: *Be discerning....***

This may seem obvious, but... to find & follow the very **best** "thread" running through this crisis, we first have to stop following the **worst** "threads." So when you're getting the latest news on the virus... on television or some other media... and you discern that "*the facts*" being presented to you are **not** "*just facts*" — but are coloured to incite anxiety in you before the next commercial comes (which will promise you relief) — **change the channel** — and not just with your remote control, but with your mind. Recognize the baseness of the message — and don't "entertain" it in your thoughts — don't "swallow & ingest" it. Instead, "spit it out" like you would a rotten apple that you inadvertently took a bite of. Then search for a better, cleaner, simpler source of information on the virus that isn't contaminated by such agendas & tactics. And when you find one or two or three, tell your families, friends & neighbours where to find them, and post the details for all of us here online. Be polite, of course, but practice this same kind of "**quality control**" when it comes to neighborhood chat, which can often be even more persuasive & fast-spreading, either for better, or for worse.

### **Number 2: *Be on the lookout....***

Be on the lookout for good stories about how people are responding **well** — responding wisely & compassionately — to the crisis. "Prick up your ears" & "keep your eyes peeled" to catch these moments of grace, however small they may be. Anticipate and watch for them — among your families, friends, and neighbours — within Canadian communities across the country — and in other countries & cultures around the world. See yourself as an investigative reporter on special assignment — always "on the lookout" for good news about how people are responding to the pandemic. And keep a list of every inspiring bit you find. Review, reflect on, learn from, and cherish each little story or anecdote on your list, so they'll easily come to mind when you or someone else needs them the most. Encourage others to let you know if they hear or see any responses to the crisis that affect them in a helpful way, and if you agree, add it to your list. Then share your list with others. Post the points you treasure the most online, and invite others to do the same. As Archbishop Rowan Williams once said, "the best cure for bad religion is good religion." The same is true of the stories we entertain in our minds and share with others about the COVID-19 crisis.

### Number 3: Take time out

Take a few minutes (after you get up in the morning, or before you go to bed at night, or whenever you can) to prayerfully reflect on some wise words about **crisis**, such as those we hear in Psalm 23. Consider how they might relate and be of help to you in your life. And pray for those who feel alone in this, or any, crisis. Carry them into the safe, helpful, healing hands of God. And be open to inspiration about how your **own** hands might be of help to someone in need — by making a phone call, sending a card, delivering groceries, providing financial support, or other things that you might be able to safely do.

During this global health crisis, my desire, hope, and prayer for us (in particular) as a parish community is that we will care for ourselves & others by reducing the risk of contracting & passing on the virus – in all the practical ways that Dr. Ken will remind us of in a few minutes.

But in addition, I pray that each of us will seek & find **the spiritual gift** that is present for us in this crisis, so that our capacity for community will grow even wiser & more compassionate during our time apart. Amen

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