

# JOURNEYING ALONE TOGETHER

SPIRITUALITY AND THE PANDEMIC OF 2020

APRIL 2020

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*A PASTORAL REFLECTION*

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## SPIRITUALITY AND THE PANDEMIC OF 2020

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Special thanks to **AJC's Project Interchange**, which sponsored and hosted the educational trip to Israel.

This reflection is dedicated to all people who continue to serve others even in the face of personal risk (medical professionals, etc.), and especially to my son, Joshua Spitzer, who along with all his supermarket compatriots, continues to serve as a bagger at Shoprite even though he could stay safely at home.

The questions, ideas and ruminations in this paper are those of the author as an individual, and do not necessarily represent the perspectives of any organization he may be associated with. He alone is responsible for any errors or omissions contained in the essay.

# JOURNEYING ALONE TOGETHER

## *Spirituality and the Pandemic of 2020*

I was traveling throughout Israel and the Palestinian Territories with a group of Christian leaders from New Jersey, New York, Connecticut and Pennsylvania just as the coronavirus crisis was emerging and beginning to receive global attention and concern. The educational experience was sponsored by AJC's Project Interchange, and featured exceptional discussions with Jewish, Bedouin, Arab Christian and Arab Muslim leaders and thinkers (politicians, academics, journalists, writers, educators and businesspeople).

Throughout the experience, I practiced my passion – looking for photographs that spoke to my soul and somehow expressed the hidden and often unappreciated beauty that surrounds us all. As I look back at the collection of photographs from that week, there are many levels of meaning embodied by the set as a whole, and by individual pictures in their own right. The collection attempts to appreciate the vibrancy, struggles and diversity of Israel at this moment in its history. Simultaneously, the set also captures my private coming to terms with the implications of the rise of the coronavirus pandemic and the challenges it was going to present to us all, across the globe. The photographs suggest questions, which I hope to discuss in this reflection.

### **How do We Journey Alone Together?**

One night in Jerusalem, I was walking by myself through the streets close to the Herbert Samuel Hotel. Young people had gathered around two musicians, while

others conversed with friends and savored food procured from various small restaurants.

Although part of the crowd, I walked in solitary silence, searching for a scene that epitomized my esteem for unappreciated beauty.



And suddenly there it was – at the virtual conclusion of my time outside! An exterior building wall, painted in black and white as if from a sketch book, surrounding a real

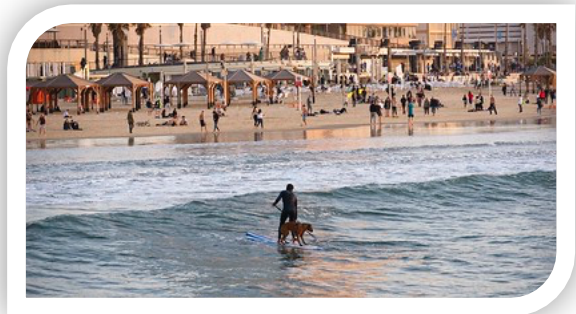
window! I took a first shot almost impulsively, and just as I was composing a second one, an occupant in the second-floor apartment appeared and looked out at me. Between us was a frosted windowpane, obscuring his identity. He and I, in that moment, were *alone together*.

*During this time of crisis, how do we journey alone together?*

In the weeks immediately following the pandemic's rise and the resultant prohibition of group meetings, schools, churches and other organizations have sought new ways to connect and serve their membership via internet facilitated gatherings, Facebook group discussions, and the like.

Such creative and compassionate responses surely have their value, but might it also be possible that our reflexive and almost frantic embrace of such connective methodologies might unwittingly serve to obscure an opportunity (and dare I say, a possible call?) to experience a very Biblical version of spiritual growth that is dependent upon distance, solitary experience and unmediated encounter with the divine?

Like the surfer and his faithful companion dog in this picture, during this pandemic we find ourselves aware of others and yet apart from them. No one on the beach can keep him afloat. He must do it himself. During our present crisis, spiritual growth requires a responsible commitment from within one's own soul. Although part of a spiritual family (my church) and a community (my workplace, neighborhood, etc.), I have to take responsibility for my own individual spiritual life, health and journey faithfulness. Who can be my role model for such a solitary adventure?



The Scriptures offer many examples of people who journeyed as responsible individuals in various levels of relational isolation. Although on their own, they also could identify with a larger social-spiritual family. Some examples:

- Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph took responsibility for their spiritual journeys, remaining faithful in light of God's call during trials and

tribulations. They accomplished such fidelity without a supportive religious community, and even without Scriptures to guide them!

- Moses spent years in the desert, maturing and pondering many great questions, before he encountered God's call at the burning bush.
- Elijah heard the voice of God in solitude during a season of great trial.
- Jesus sought solitary experiences throughout his three years of ministry, during which his soul was nurtured by intimate communion with God.
- After his dramatic encounter with the divine presence on the Damascus Road, Paul voluntarily entered into a three-year period of isolation in order to focus on grasping the revolutionary implications of Jesus' messianic life, death and resurrection.

**I do not believe** that God has sent the virus as a punishment or judgment of humanity. The spread of the virus is a natural biological phenomenon. Similar outbreaks have occurred throughout history. The present crisis demonstrates how economic and social globalization facilitates the movement of such tiny organisms. Nevertheless, we are all called to respond to the pandemic as spiritual people who in all circumstances seek to grow closer to God. How so?

### **Who Am I to You? Who are You to Me?**



*Social distancing* has become a buzzword in just weeks. The spread of the coronavirus can be retarded by maintaining a six-foot distance between us and others. For some, this feels like a hardship or punishment; for others, it mitigates a threat and provides a measure of comfort and

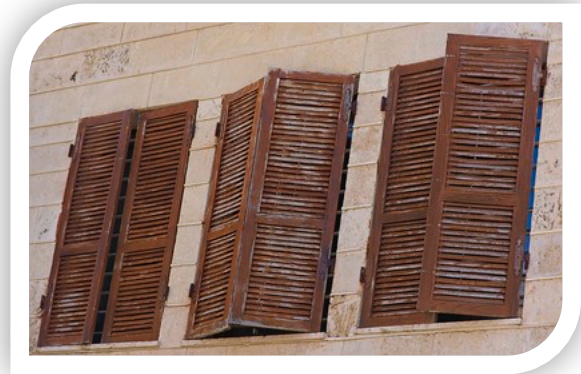
control. For many people, social distancing reinforces a sense of loneliness, alienation and detachment that may heighten insecurity and depression.

Might I suggest an alternative interpretation of the impact of social distancing? Just as the silence between notes in a musical score may enhance the depth and beauty of the melodies and harmonies of a piece, reflecting on the distance between people has the potential to heighten the appreciation and compassion we may have toward others. Distance provides perspective and reveals beauty.



I sense that the present crisis is calling us all to consider the beauty of our friendship circles with fresh eyes. Who are the people who mean the most to me, and how close is each one to me? Why do I appreciate them and how do they bless me? What kind of influence (positive and destructive) do they exert over my journeys? What kind of influence do I bring to their lives?

We cannot cut ourselves off from other people; living in selfish isolation just won't do. The windows of our heart must always be open to the plight of our neighbors and others. Appreciating our friendship circles inevitably calls us into some form of service, mission or outreach. Who am I called to contact, care for, and love in such a challenging time? Are there people who are not currently within my network of friendship that might be invited to share life with me and those I already am connected to in heart and mind? Who around me is threatened by a suffocating isolation; how might I help dispel their loneliness?



Put another way, Biblical discipleship involves equipping Christ-followers to be representatives of the Kingdom of God in whatever setting to which they may be dispersed. On a fundamental level, Christ-followers represent the Kingdom of God through relationships. Having entered into a vital and ongoing friendship with our Redeemer, we naturally seek to share that friendship with others.

### **What is Our Daily Bread?**



In the old city of Jerusalem, just inside Jaffa Gate, I encountered a sobering site. Shops of all kinds were open for business, but there were few tourists present to bargain with. I passed a vendor whose wares included delicious bread, but he had no customers.

In stark contrast, upon my return to the United States and as soon as the pandemic became real to Americans, I observed just how quickly the hoarding of food (and toilet paper) became commonplace. Anticipating the worst out of fear, people bought necessities they did not immediately need, in order to survive during uncertain times. No bread on the shelves. But this anxiety was unwarranted; there has been enough to sustain us all, especially when we shop with a kind regard for the needs of other people. Selfishness is not a spiritual virtue but sharing surely is!

The shutting down of restaurants, businesses, stores, schools, entertainment venues, parks, sports arenas, houses of worship of all faiths, and just about every other communal activity, has served unwittingly to simplify our days and our lifestyles (unless, of course, you are a parent!). Enjoying extended daily spiritual devotional and study time, walking leisurely in the neighborhood (observing the six-foot rule!) and sharing meals with family are daily highlights now in my life. Working from home has eliminated hours wasted on commuting; people are not rushing here and there. Our family has clearly experienced a decline in spending, which I did not expect. I can't help but believe that for many of us, this enforced lifestyle simplification points to a healthier way of life. Will we forget this when life returns to "normal" in the post-pandemic future?

The busyness of pre-pandemic life, especially in the prosperous countries of our world, has often crowded out the voice of the soul, the vision of spiritual reality and the vista of sublime beauty. But being busy is not synonymous with being faithful or spiritually mature.



Rather than threatening authentic expressions of spiritual life, life during this pandemic provides a new opportunity to re-assert the central role that spirituality can play in sustaining a well-grounded and balanced life. While we all need food ("our daily bread") for physical sustenance, it is just as crucial

for us to receive spiritual nourishment (through the contemplation of God's Word) and refreshment (through the life-giving enrichment of a Spirit-infused relationship with God).

Although substitutes for communal worship (like live streaming services or posting video sermons online) have been adopted wholesale by the churches in order to minister in this new social reality, clergy should not be fooled into believing that this is a long-term solution to the religious crisis humanity faces at this point in our collective history. The long-term relevance of religious life and mission cannot be guaranteed or secured by technological fixes to our crisis.



Instead, the pandemic's impact on the life of the faith communities provides us with an unexpected opportunity for self-reflection and clarification concerning our purpose and mission. The physical closing of our churches and the temporary curtailment of most of our

ministries should lead us to ask, "Has the church sufficiently disciplined its members so that they are engaged in a personal relationship with Christ that is vital enough to grow and thrive regardless of circumstance?"

If our members' fidelity to the faith depends on constant feeding from the church, then we have unwittingly created an unhealthy form of dependency in which members are consigned to remain spiritual children. Wise parents raise their children to become as independent as possible by the time they reach adulthood; the church should seek to do the same through its discipleship ministries. The pandemic provides a context in which we may assess to what extent we are raising up disciples who can embrace adult-level responsibility for their faith, spiritual growth and service.

By asserting that now is a great time to exercise our faith as spiritually mature and faithful adults, even if we are cut off from our customary gatherings, I am **not** devaluing the normative necessity for believers to meet regularly for worship, fellowship, instruction and missional cooperation. I am asserting that each and every disciple should be able to take responsibility for their own relationship with God and thus remain faithful to their own personal journeys, even when conditions prevent gathering with other believers.



## What About Walls of Separation and Shalom?

Contemporary society often seeks to manipulate our feelings, thoughts and actions by corralling us into groups that define (and thus reduce) our identity in order to control our existence. We are political conservatives or progressives (and once identified, we are discouraged from deviating from the party line). We identify as part of a racial, ethnic or cultural affinity group, which imposes a boundary between us and others. Nations see their borders as something existentially real, reinforcing a notion that the human race is not really one.



But the coronavirus does not respect human made social distinctions, national borders or walls. Covid-19 seeks a home in any person it comes into contact with, regardless of political persuasion and personal background. Accordingly, we must respond to the challenge facing all of humanity by reasserting that all people have eternal worth and value. The Christian's vocation of peacemaking flows out of our understanding of the reconciling power of God in Christ.



On the Cross, Jesus sacrificed himself for the sake of humanity, both Jew and Gentile, so that friendship with the Divine Creator might once again be enjoyed by those who place their faith and trust in God's mercy and grace. The subsequent community of faith that acknowledges Jesus as Lord and Messiah

expresses the universal applicability of Jesus' messianic journey by embracing people from all nations, ethnic groups and languages.

## What About the Future?

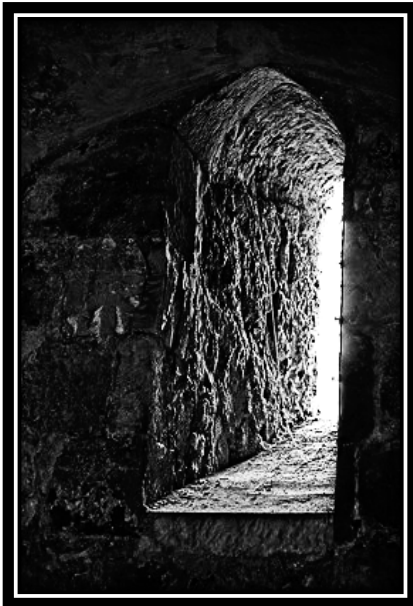
Shimon Peres served as Israel's Prime Minister and President and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his peacemaking efforts. In Tel Aviv, the Peres Peace House is dedicated to both peacemaking and technological innovation. The point is well taken – no matter what obstacles to progress we face, dreams of future peace and progress go hand in hand.

Let's dream big! Now is the time to courageously visualize new possibilities for our personal future, our family's future, our friends' futures, and about the future of our churches, society and world. The history of humanity will not be concluded by this pandemic, but it will



inevitably change how many of us perceive the future. Armed with faith and creativity, together we can emerge from this current crisis, help repair the wounds that we have collectively suffered, and move into a future of innovation and new challenges.

### **Optimism or Pessimism?**



The time to exercise prophetic faith is when the present seems darkest and most grim. The pandemic we are experiencing is a genuine global crisis, but we must not lose hope.

The virus will be effectively neutralized, as others have in the past. People will rebuild their lives even as we grieve over those we have lost, and the hustle and bustle of societies across the globe will resume.

But one big question remains – will we permit our lives to be transformed by the crisis? Will we learn from the crisis and how we responded to it (individually and collectively)?

My hope is that both the church and society at large will gain wisdom and not forget it once the pressure of the present crisis is off. Will we be closer to God because of what we have been called to experience and endure? While we journey through this crisis alone together, "the light (from God) shines in the darkness, and darkness will be unable to overcome it." I am without reservation optimistic about our future, and I am encouraged that along with you all, my family and I weather this present storm, and faithfully journey alone together!