

**THE ULTIMATE WEAPON TO FIGHT THE PANDEMIC; PSALM 130; LENT IV,
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Here's one take on the pandemic—Adam Gopnik of *The New Yorker*: “Plagues happen only to people. Animals can suffer from mass infections but they experience them as one more bad blow from a predatory natural environment.

Only people put mental brackets around a phenomenon like the coronavirus pandemic, give it a name and historical perspective.

But the coronavirus is indifferent to you and me; it has no creed or moral purpose, yet it becomes human when it hits *us* and we experience its effects socially, mentally, spiritually, and God forbid, physically.”

Another way to look at this pandemic is to see it as World War III, but I'm not sure all of us realize how close the enemy is to overrunning our neighborhoods and hospitals.

They say there are no atheists in foxholes but all of us don't realize *we need to be in a foxhole*. The reason is what experts call the asymmetrical nature of the virus. It spreads from people without symptoms reaching millions before they are aware that they are infected. This adversary will take 2 in 10 infected persons to the grave. It deceives us into thinking because we can still food shop, watch Netflix, and go for a bike ride that it's not all that bad, until it's too late.

In Florida and Georgia where governors are less proactive and people less wary the virus is positioning to take more lives; not to mention the nation if we all gather for Easter when experts think the virus will peak.

Deception is the taproot of lies and misinformation that spread like an invasive weed. Deception creates a false reality that serves the self-interest of an individual or group at the expense of the common good. The serpent *deceives* Eve who *deceives* Adam; together they violate God's command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. 'God doesn't want you to have all that knowledge, *but you can,*' the serpent says, '*eat the fruit and you'll be as great as God.*'

Yet, Jesus in the wilderness is *not deceived* by Satan because he rejects Satan's false flattery, humbles himself, and embraces God's purpose for his life.

Andrew Cuomo is *not deceived* by the asymmetrical nature of the coronavirus. He's terrified with a shortage of ventilators and hospital beds; he knows the virus is spreading at an alarming rate we can't even measure; so he is warning us and trying to prepare for the onslaught to save lives. Federal officials who have dragged their feet responding to Gov. Cuomo's requests for ventilators and want to lift social isolation when the virus will be peaking are *deceived*. The result will likely be massive death.

I have noticed in our daily all-staff conference calls as we update ourselves on the local and national status of the crisis, it's *always worse* than I expected. Despite the 24/7 reporting *it is difficult* not to be deceived by this insidious virus.

The head epidemiologist at the University of Chicago Medical School put it in personal terms: we neglect social distancing at our own and our family's peril.

It's hard to think I'm fighting a pandemic staying indoors reading a book but when a family member is infected and can't get a room in the ICU or a ventilator because someone else is using it, that's when the 20% mortality rate is no longer a statistic and I realize *I allowed myself to be deceived*.

So I want to give us a spiritual weapon to counter the deceptive strategy of this lethal adversary, COVID-19; this pandemic demands that we address our problems in ways we weren't forced to before. In times like this people and organizations find new life as they reject business as usual, find creative solutions and discover spiritual resources.

Like Psalm 130. This psalm is a hymn to the greatness of a redemptive God. A God who loves to fix and renew people, relationships, nations. God is not only love, but *faithful* love. God is not only great but "great is God's redemption."

God is like my brother-in-law the engineer who loves to fix things. I helped him install a new battery in a space that seemed too small for a battery in his boat last summer. With bruised knuckles and sweat pouring down his face he fixed it. When something in our hearts or families or community breaks, it is God's nature to *fix us* – that's Psalm 130.

Here's how it works, step one, humility: the speaker is in a tight spot, knows he *needs God* and *asks God to listen*. Step two, trust: the speaker remembers God listened in the past, came to his rescue and *will again come this time*. Step three, hope: the speaker proclaims he is ready to wait patiently, vigilantly for the Lord, like a watchman who waits for the morning, a sentry on lookout for the sure approach of troops and supplies.

How can we use the spiritual weapon of Psalm 130 today? Remember I said this is a war. We need to be in foxholes. We work together. We are humbled by a powerful foe; we know we can't defeat this enemy alone so we do something only a crisis causes us to do: we reach out to ask God for help, and wait in hope.

Humility, trust, hope. That's the formula for one of the greatest spiritual arsenals of all time: AA's Twelve Steps. Step 1) **Humility**: we admitted that we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable (but we can insert for alcohol anything which is overpowering like a pandemic). Step 2) **Trust**: we came to believe that a Power greater than our selves could restore us. Step 3) **Hope**: we made a decision to turn our lives and will over to the care of God as we understood Him. The key for an alcoholic or potential victims of a pandemic is to get people to take responsibility for themselves and to support one another.

We don't get to choose our difficulties but we do get to choose our response. Taking responsibility for this crisis means realizing it's bigger than any one of us so we work together; but it also means seeing it as an *epic moral struggle*. Our decision to circulate or stay home is a *moral decision*. Psalm 130 restores us to the just and the good.

Albert Camus' great novel *The Plague* is moral tale; the pandemic is a time of *moral* contagion. He wrote it in 1947 just after WWII. And while it spoke to the fascism that engulfed Europe including his homeland of France and the Vichy government's capitulation to the Nazis, the target of his novel was compliance with policies that authorized the suffering of others for so-called higher goals—the language of authoritarian regimes, which Camus said are really cowards.

But Camus also recognized that much of life in crisis is lived in the gray zone – ambiguity. Rarely do we find simple categories of good and evil, guilt and innocence. We do the right thing from mixed motives or may do terrible deeds with the best of intentions; this is important for liberals and conservatives to remember about each other, rather than throw each other under the bus. Camus insisted that life comes down to acts of kindness. He believed in absolute truths but accepted our limitations.

See if this sounds familiar: the protagonist in Camus' story, a doctor, moves from his obsession with his own personal suffering and his indifference to others (remember panic-shopping?) to the awareness that he has become part of a community and will share its fate. We see him evolve into a moral character working for the common good: he ignores his earlier selfish needs and joins the health teams deployed to serve others (the transformation of our board of deacons now more than greeters, *caretakers* calling over two hundred people a week; or Gov. Cuomo more than a politician, saying to his critics he will not put a price on human life and doesn't care if he gets re-elected).

Camus' protagonist doctor becomes a leader not out of heroic courage or careful reasoning but because of his *hope* that together they will fight off the disease.

"We are all in this plague," he says, "all I know is that one must do one's best not to be a plague victim and this is why I reject everything that, directly or indirectly, makes people die or justifies other's in making them die."

Camus' character observes that for a longtime people didn't realize how rapidly the plague was spreading. "The city was inhabited by people asleep on their feet," he says. Administrators failed to call things by their name or to assume moral leadership. "But when you see the suffering the plague brings," the doctor says, "you have to be mad or blind or a coward to resign yourself to it, it may seem too simple but the only way to fight the plague is *with decency*."

Camus' story is a powerful lens through which to see our own plight. What makes it so inspiring is the honesty, humility, and hope of this doctor faced, as we are, with overwhelming odds, yet staying the course like the writer of Psalm 130, like Gov. Cuomo, like Dr. Fauci and like the nurses at the Elmhurst Hospital in Queens. "People are better than you think," Camus' doctor says, "you just have to give them the opportunity."

Vaclav Havel the first Prime Minister of the Czech Republic after the fall of the Iron Curtain understood long-term struggle against a powerful foe; now his nation was at the beginning of another long journey to build a democracy and new economy with few material resources; but he also knew that the greatest weapon they possessed, that enabled them to prevail over communism and would help them rebuild the nation was hope.

Havel said, "hope is a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul; it is not dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation...It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizon." That is the hope of Psalm 130.

It's time to equip ourselves for the fight. Yes, we need personal protective gear, ventilators, and a vaccine. We need to practice social distancing, good hygiene and find more movies to watch and good books to read.

But to gain the upper hand in this war, to not flag in zeal to do the right thing, to be decent to one another, to acknowledge we need each other; and the Sovereign of Life, who loves to fix what is broken and send us out again, to do this...

it's time to let hope unite us in common purpose for the common good.

Satan knows if he can rob us of hope he will win the day. But hope frees us to live in the present; it is rooted in the image of God within us waiting to be released to fight deception and the spread of coronavirus. Amen.