THE LONGEST YEAR

Reflections on 2020.

by Philip Yancey

December 31 st 2020

In early 2020, as the COVID-19 outbreak spread and the United States went into a shutdown, a wry joke made the rounds on the internet:

> *Thirty days has September,*
>
> *April, June, and November,*
>
> *All the rest have thirty-one,*
>
> *Except for March, which has eight thousand.*

At least it seemed that way, with stores, restaurants, movie theatres, sports stadiums, and concert venues all closed. Days of the week blended together into what some called *blursday*, each one boringly like the others.

Then came April, bringing more of the same, though with a dawning realization that normal life would be suspended indefinitely. Many employees now worked remotely from home—the lucky ones who still had jobs, that is. Gas prices plummeted because, well, where would we go? Airplanes sat idle on the tarmac. Overstressed parents scrambled to adapt as college-age kids migrated home and younger ones now required a hybrid form of homeschooling.

Unlike most natural disasters, this one endangered everyone on the planet. Peter Piot, the Belgian scientist who was one of the discoverers of the Ebola virus and who headed the UN task force on HIV/AIDS, found himself sharing a COVID-19

ward in London with a homeless person, a Colombian cleaner, and a man from Bangladesh; “Finally, a virus got me,” he said. The new virus proved to be a great leveller: two of the UK’s early victims were Prince Charles and Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and eventually the virus found its way into the White House.

Despite its wealth and power, the United States was hit hardest of any nation, with the most infections and deaths. As the pandemic settled in, we resigned ourselves to a new normal of remote learning, trimmed-down weddings, home cooking, and Zoom conferences. The virus crisis dominated the news until the last week of May when, after the police killing of George Floyd, mass protests against racial injustice broke out around the globe.

All this took place during an already divisive election season in the United States. Several suspenseful days passed before a winner was declared, and more than a month later the sitting president still had not acknowledged his loss. The virus only widened the bitter divisions, because the practice of masking and social distancing somehow evolved into a political statement. As the year limped to a close, rates of infection and hospitalizations soared to new heights, news only eclipsed by the deployment of promising vaccines.

To many, it seemed we were living in apocalyptic times, with an out-of-control virus, climate change, and raging nationalism all converging as if to tear the world apart. The Census Bureau dutifully reported that one-third of American adults were exhibiting symptoms of clinical anxiety or depression.

New Realities

In this disorienting year, people of faith expressed their devotion by staying away from church, and families and friends showed their love by avoiding personal contact and cancelling Thanksgiving and Christmas gatherings. Some people scorned masks as a sign of weakness; others shot looks of condemnation at the unmasked. When I would meet another shopper in a grocery store, we sized each other up with a suspicious glance. The threat posed by a virus had destroyed the thin tissue of trust that allows us to live together in harmony.

The news media vacillated between stories that increased anxiety and those that inspired hope. On the one hand, a national crisis revealed the need for a quick-response government that could provide equipment, tests, treatment options, and a potential vaccine. But early failures, missteps, and mixed messages bruised American pride, and left most of us feeling confused and helpless.

On the other hand, the media featured stories that reminded us of our nation’s can-do spirit. The *New York Times* ran a feature on an Amish community in Ohio that was unemployed due to the loss of tourism and plummeting orders for furniture. They got a call from the director of the Cleveland Clinic, who asked, “Could you possibly sew 12,000 masks in two days?” Sixty home seamstresses got together and found a way to make it happen. Almost overnight they pivoted toward producing face masks and shields, surgical gowns, protective garments, and hardwood dividers for field hospitals.

The *Times* also profiled sixty Hasidic Jews who drove from New York to Pennsylvania in order to donate blood plasma rich in antibodies; they made the drive because blood banks in New York and New Jersey had already filled to capacity. Ultimately, twenty thousand Hasidim signed up to donate blood. And at the height of the crisis in New York, twelve thousand retired nurses volunteered to relieve beleaguered staff there, in spite of the danger to themselves.

Some time must pass before we learn the long-term consequences of the virus crisis. Will it define a generation, much as the Great Depression, World War II, the 1960s, and 9/11 did? Or will we return as soon as possible to being a society that idolizes the wealthiest, the most coordinated, the smartest, the most beautiful, and the most entertaining? What will be the long-term effect of disruptions on students, and of remote learning on the education system itself? How will our young people conceive of their lives and the responsibilities therein?

In their response to the pandemic, most Asian countries, accustomed to conformity and heavy-handed governments, fared much better than freedom-loving Western democracies. Is it possible for proud cultures like ours to shift when we're punished for the primacy we place on privacy and independence? I heard one Chinese American writer comment, "It's ironic that authoritarian countries like China quickly got the virus under control because citizens obeyed the government, whereas in democracies citizens didn't trust the very governments they had elected."

To complicate matters, how can we restore faith in government institutions such as the NIH and CDC in an age when fake news and conspiracy theories dominate social media?

A Global Sabbath

In a poll conducted by the University of Chicago Divinity School, almost two-thirds of American believers reported that through the COVID-19 virus God was telling humanity to change how we live. In the words of one respondent, "It could be a sign, like 'hey, get your act together'—I don't know. It just seems like everything was going in an OK direction and all of a sudden you get this coronavirus thing that happens, pops out of nowhere."

According to the poll, black Americans felt this sense more strongly than Hispanics and whites. Something similar happened after the George Floyd killing. One egregious act of injustice, captured on videotape, aroused the country and much of the world to attend to the centuries-old injustice of racism. Tragic events can lead to national self-reflection, as occurred after the Mỹ Lai massacre in Vietnam, and the Abu Ghraib prison scandal in Iraq, and the recent uproar over the treatment of immigrant families. As distressing as these were, they forced Americans to ask, What kind of country are we? Of what do we need to repent? How should we change?

The virus crisis pressed the pause button on our economy, in effect imposing a Sabbath on the world. With no professional sports to attend, parents spent more time with their kids, throwing a ball in the backyard instead of watching athletes do it in a stadium. Movies and concerts became family affairs, digitally streamed into homes. Sales of books—the old-fashioned, hardcopy kind—actually increased. Not everyone took advantage of this global Sabbath, but at least the interlude gave us a chance to fill the emptiness with something meaningful.

The novel coronavirus temporarily accomplished a societal reversal. In airports, janitors who clean the bannisters and wipe the seats of planes became as crucial to passenger safety as the pilots who fly the jets. We learned we can get along for a time without the sports industry that pays top athletes $10 million per year; meanwhile, harried parents of young children gained new appreciation for the teachers who earn less than 1 percent of that amount. *Time* magazine put some of the real heroes on the cover: cafeteria workers who serve up food to needy children. Inside, they also profiled hospital orderlies, paramedics, and small-business owners essential to the economy.

A pandemic, which puts everyone at risk, gives the opportunity to reflect on what needs to change in society. Will we address the inequities that leave minorities and the poor more vulnerable to economic and health disruptions? How is it that the stock market climbed to record heights, rewarding the wealthy, at the very time when thirty million Americans were receiving unemployment benefits and barely scraping by?

For decades we've been hearing that the government doesn't have the ability to properly fund health care, science research, and education—yet in a matter of days that same government came up with *trillions* of dollars to respond to an emergency. (And how will future generations pay for those trillions of dollars in new government debt?)

The underlying question is, Will we use the aftermath of a crisis to re-evaluate what kind of society we want? Is a shared vision even possible anymore?

The Gift of Solitude

Compared to its impact on many people, the virus barely altered my own day-to-day routine. Since I'm a freelance writer, I have no employer to furlough me. I live in the Colorado mountains, which makes social distancing much easier to practice than in urban areas. Yes, I had to cancel some planned trips, but these adjustments seemed trivial as I read about families banned from hospital rooms where their loved ones were clinging to life.

As the virus crisis deepened in 2020, I sensed a need to cultivate two coping strategies: first, to adapt to the social isolation being urged on us by health authorities and, second, to draw strength and insight from my faith.

An introvert who works at home, I am well acquainted with solitude, though not the kind enforced during my state's periodic lockdowns. For psychic relief, with fitness centres closed, I began taking long hikes in the Rocky Mountains. I stopped checking the internet for the daily tallies of infections and hospitalizations, which I had been following like sports scores. I read more poets, mostly W.H. Auden and Mary Oliver, and adjusted to the slower, quieter pace that poetry demands. And I looked to others who had mastered the art of prolonged solitude.

In search of guidance, I turned first to Daniel Defoe, who lived through London's great bubonic plague of 1665, and wrote about it in *A Journal of a Plague Year*. Then I reread Defoe's classic novel *Robinson Crusoe*, about a wealthy Englishman on a sea voyage who experiences a shipwreck and emerges as the sole survivor. A castaway, he is forced to carve out a life by himself on a tropical island.

The new circumstances force Crusoe to change his values. Luxury goods and gold, which he once sought like a drug, are useless on the island. With no one else to rely on, he must use his own resourcefulness to fashion what he needs. In the process, Crusoe undergoes a spiritual crisis. He reads the Bible, one of the few books he managed to retrieve from the wrecked ship. Burdened with guilt, he re-examines his life of selfishness and oppression—he had, after all, gone to sea in order to secure slaves for Brazilian plantations.

Gradually Crusoe develops a sense of gratitude for the simple things of life, such as a good day's work, his faithful dog, or birds singing in the stately trees all around him. When finally rescued, Crusoe is a changed man. He reflects, "I learned to look more upon the bright side of my condition, and less upon the dark side, and to consider what I enjoyed rather than what I wanted; and this gave me sometimes such secret comforts, that I cannot express them." He has learned a profound lesson: "All our discontents about what we want appeared to me to spring from the want of thankfulness for what we have."

Some three centuries later, the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us a similar lesson. It's possible to get along without professional sports and entertainment, and all but the most necessary shopping. Good health ranks as the highest value, with the love of family and friends running a close second.

I also turned to the writings of Thomas Merton, perhaps the best apologist for the life of solitude in recent times. He left a glitzy life in Europe and New York City to become a Trappist monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Even so, he felt crowded living among other silent monks, and made constant appeals for the privilege of solitude. Merton longed to join those "men on this miserable, noisy, cruel earth who tasted the marvelous joy of silence and solitude, who dwelt in forgotten mountain cells, in secluded monasteries, where the news and desires and appetites and conflicts of the world no longer reached them." After twenty-four years he finally got his wish, a hermitage of his own in the woods.

Paradoxically, during his years of solitude Merton became even more engaged with issues such as civil rights, nuclear disarmament, and the Vietnam War. His fifty books demonstrate that a life of solitude need not lead to isolation or

irrelevance. Has the modern era known a more acute observer of politics, culture, and religion than this monk who rarely spoke and infrequently left the grounds of his monastery?

Merton insisted that “the only justification for a life of deliberate solitude is the conviction that it will help you to love not only God but also other[s].” On one trip to nearby Louisville, he had an epiphany:

> *In the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. . . .*
>
> *I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.*

Perhaps the highest goal of solitude—even when imposed and temporary—would be to emerge from it, like Merton, with a renewed awareness of all we missed while shut inside our homes. An invisible virus has exposed us as fragile, dependent creatures whose differences pale in comparison to all that we have in common.

Sometime in the future, we’ll look back on AD 2020 and shake our heads in wonder. I can think of no more appropriate response on that day than humility and gratitude—the very qualities that solitude may help nurture in advance.

Lingering Questions

For Christians, the year 2020 posed a stern test, bringing into sharp focus age-old questions related to pain and suffering. A Pew Center survey reported that only 26 percent of Americans agreed with the statement “The pandemic has made my faith stronger.” (Forty percent of born-again Protestants agreed.)

Almost by instinct, we respond to suffering as a kind of karmic punishment. *I must have done something wrong. God is trying to tell me something*. That is the message Job’s friends kept harping on, and one he defiantly resisted. It’s one thing to see affliction as a time to pause and reflect on what needs changing, and quite another to piously blame the victims for bringing about that affliction.

I will not soon forget a week in September 2013 when a creek outside my home rose nearly six feet in a “flood of the century” and came within inches of overflowing its banks and flooding my office. One night I went out in pouring rain, barefoot and wearing pajamas, to measure the rising water. I spent the next day filling sandbags and placing them against the eroding bank. Whole trees and bridges hurtled past me, and if I didn’t position a forty-pound sandbag just right, the creek would grab it and whisk it away like a piece of litter.

Exhausted, soaked, covered with mud, I came inside to clean up, only to hear a pastor from Colorado Springs pontificate that the flood of the century was occurring because our state legislature had just approved gay marriage and legalized marijuana. I shook my head in dismay over another self-appointed prophet attempting to speak for God. Sometimes I wish pastors were required to take an oath similar to the physicians’ Hippocratic oath, beginning with the words “Do no harm.”

During the COVID-19 crisis, I wondered what that same pastor would say about the thirty-three African American bishops and denominational leaders around the country who died from the virus. Or what about the small church in Calgary, Canada, whose members met to celebrate the birthday of one of their most beloved senior citizens after a worship service? They followed strict protocol, limiting the gathering to less than fifty and maintaining a six-foot social distance. Despite the precautions, twenty-four of the forty-one who attended contracted the virus, and two died.

I've studied every biblical passage related to suffering and concluded that we receive little guidance from the Bible on the *Why?* questions. Job's friends, who thought they had the answer, were soundly rebuked by God, who pointedly evaded the questions in the long speech at the end of the book of Job. Centuries later, when the Pharisees or Jesus's disciples proposed neat answers by blaming victims for their misfortune, Jesus refuted them; yet he too gave no real answer to *Why?*

In the specific case of the novel coronavirus, we would best leave questions of causation in the hands of scientists, not pastors or amateur theologians. Viruses are the most abundant and diverse beings on earth, and virologists estimate that only 1 percent of them prove pathogenic (disease-causing). They provide valuable services to our bodies, for example by attacking harmful bacteria. Human interaction with animals increases the danger of contact with "bad" viruses that our immune system is not equipped to handle, as we've seen with swine flu, bird flu, and other coronaviruses traceable to bats or pangolins.

Around 85 percent of bacteria are also beneficial, and 100 trillion of them live in the human gut, aiding digestion. Both viruses and bacteria, however, have a tendency to mutate, causing problems for the human immune system—the reason flu shots have to be reformulated every year, to address the mutations.

Clearly, God has not chosen to intervene with every new virus mutation, every thunderstorm, every shifting of tectonic plates. We live on an imperfect, broken planet that displeases God as much as it displeases us. Jesus asked us to pray that God's will "be done on earth as it is in heaven," a prayer that has not yet been answered on planet earth. In the words of the apostle Paul, "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Romans 8:22 NIV).

Philosophers and theologians put forward various theories to explain what happened here: an invasion by evil forces, perhaps; a Fall introduced by disobedient humans; an evolutionary process that has not reached completion. None of these fully satisfies, especially if it's your child who has leukemia, or your parent who's contracted the COVID-19 virus.

Compassion Agents

What, then, can we offer suffering people, whether in a pandemic or in the normal trials of life? In a lovely phrase, the apostle Paul refers to God as "*the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort*, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Corinthians 1:3–4). That is the Christian's stated mission in a world full of pain and suffering. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas once described the church as "a company of people who have learned how to be ill and to ask for help and how to be present to one another in and out of pain."

Pain is an isolating, private phenomenon. If you tell me you have a headache, I must take your word for it; I can't actually feel the sensations carried by your nerves. Yet on another level, suffering can indeed be shared. I can feel compassion for you, a word that derives from the Latin *com pati*, "to suffer with." During his time on earth, Jesus demonstrated in person God's care for suffering people; now Jesus's followers are God's designated agents of compassion—the literal "body of Christ," as Paul put it.

Looking at history, sometimes Jesus followers have followed his example, and sometimes they haven't. When waves of bubonic plague swept across Europe, killing one-third of the continent's population, prophets appeared in the streets

proclaiming God's judgment. In fact, what Europe really needed was a supply of rat poison. More recently, prominent Christians spread conspiracy theories involving North Korea or China for deliberately unleashing the coronavirus. At a time when the entire world was at risk, they sowed division rather than unity, fear rather than comfort.

When *Time* magazine asked theologian N.T. Wright for his perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic, he responded that *lament* may be the best way to express solidarity with fellow humans. For a suffering person, bromides like "It's all for a good purpose" and "God won't put on you more than you can bear" don't offer much consolation. More realistically, the Bible offers deep expressions of empathic lament, including one entire book with the title *Lamentations*.

God welcomes our cries of anguish in the midst of crisis, and the Bible provides the very words we can use. In this respect, the Bible anticipates a principle of modern psychology: you can't really make your feelings go away, so you might as well express them. Elaine Pagels, a professor of religion at Princeton University, learned this firsthand when she lost her six-year-old son and, then, fifteen months later, her husband died in a climbing accident. "You have no choice about how you feel about this," she reflects. "Your only choice is whether to feel it now or later."

In her book *Why Religion?*, Pagels recounts that she found respite in a Trappist monastery, where "the monks offered silent, unspoken support, never speaking to fill an awkward silence or saying things meant to sound hopeful, as many others did, like, 'Your faith surely must have sustained you.' What did they mean—a set of beliefs? Whatever most people mean by faith was never more remote than during times of mourning, when professions of faith in God sounded only like unintelligible noise, heard from the bottom of the sea."

Her community of support, she reports, "surrounded us with unspoken care, acting on some protective instinct, like elephants who nudge the wounded into the center of the herd so that instead of falling behind, they keep moving along with the others."

During a podcast conversation, the president of Denver Seminary, Mark Young, told me of a seminary graduate who worked as a chaplain in a facility for seniors with dementia. Twenty residents and two staff members died within a three-week period. The facility banned all visitors, and as a result many times the chaplain was the sole person sitting with a resident as he or she died. Then she had to go outside the quarantine area and try to comfort the families of the deceased, who wanted to know all the agonizing details.

"Where is God in a situation like that?" Mark asked. Of course he knew the answer. God was present in that chaplain who brought comfort as best she could, first to the dying person and then to the family left behind.

Shared lament should ultimately lead to action. Two recent books describe how members of the early church fulfilled their mission as God's agents of compassion. In *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, the British historian Tom Holland credits their care for the poor and the dying, as well as their adoption of abandoned babies. The sociologist Rodney Stark (*The Rise of Christianity*) observes that one reason the church grew so rapidly within the Roman Empire traces back to how Christians responded to pandemics of the day, which probably included smallpox and bubonic plague. When infection spread, Romans fled their cities and towns; Christians stayed behind to nurse and feed not only their own relatives but also their pagan neighbours'. Their proffered comfort drew others to the God of all comfort.

As a journalist I have traveled to some eighty-five countries, and in most of them you can follow the trail of Christian missionaries by the hospitals, clinics, and orphanages they founded. Jesus may never have made it to Asia, Africa, Europe, or the Americas—but his followers did.

A Template of Hope

There’s an easy correction to the reflex response of assuming tragedy comes as God’s punishment. Simply follow Jesus through the Gospels and watch his response to a person afflicted with leprosy, a blind beggar by the road, or even a Roman officer whose servant has fallen ill. Never does he blame the victim or philosophize about the cause. Always, without exception, he responds with comfort and healing.

Christians believe that Jesus is, as Colossians tells us, “the exact likeness of the unseen God” (1:15 TLB). If we want to know how God feels about people who are suffering—from poverty, oppression, cancer, or the COVID-19 virus—all we need do is look at Jesus’s compassionate response. God is on their side.

As the scholar Jacques Ellul reminds us, “The suffering of Jesus is in no way good news to *him*. . . . No, from the biblical point of view, suffering is a horror; it is an act of ‘Satan,’ the ‘devil’s pleasure.’” When Jesus faced a personal ordeal of suffering, he reacted much like any of us would, recoiling from it and asking if there was any other way.

From Job to Psalms and on through the Prophets, the Old Testament is filled with anguished questions about human suffering. *Has God forgotten us? Does God even care?* The tone changes dramatically in the New Testament, especially the Epistles, even though they were written by people who were being persecuted and imprisoned. For them, the example of Jesus’s life on earth had answered forever the question of whether God cares.

Jesus did not solve “the problem of pain” in his short time on earth. In person he affected relatively few people in a small corner of the Roman Empire. He did, however, provide lasting proof of God’s desire to see the entire planet healed. Jesus’s miracles—calming a storm, healing the blind and the paralyzed, raising the dead—serve as signposts pointing to God’s plan to restore the entire planet someday.

The Bible never discounts the reality of suffering, but it does add the key word “temporary.” And although New Testament writers offer no real explanation for suffering, they keep pointing to Jesus—especially his death and resurrection—as a kind of template of hope.

In 2020, Easter Sunday fell at a time when the COVID-19 virus was ravaging the country, and almost all churches had to resort to technology, live-streaming their services from eerily empty buildings. Hope seemed almost as elusive as it must have been to the disciples who watched their leader die. But the three-day pattern—Friday’s tragedy, Saturday’s despair, Sunday’s triumph—became for Jesus’s followers a pattern that can be applied to all our times of testing.

Good Friday demonstrates that God is not indifferent to our pain; God, too, is personally “acquainted with grief.” Holy Saturday hints that we may go through seasons of confusion and seeming defeat—such as characterized much of 2020. But Easter Sunday holds out the strong promise that, in the end, suffering will not prevail.

SUBSCRIBE

Topics: Faith Public Theology COVID-19

PHILIP YANCEY is the author of over twenty-five books that explore spirituality and speak to those living in the borderlands of faith. His books have sold more than 15 million copies in English and have been translated into more than 50 languages worldwide. His bestselling titles include *What's So Amazing About Grace?* and *The Jesus I Never Knew*. His most recent book is *Fearfully and Wonderfully: The Marvel of Bearing God's Image,* released August, 2019. Philip and his wife live in the foothills of Colorado, where they enjoy mountain climbing, skiing, wildlife, and many other delights of the Rocky Mountains.

DOWNLOAD AND SHARE ARTICLES FROM THE COMMENT READER

An introduction to Public Theology for the Common Good