Everywhere we look today, it seems, we see signs that ours is a culture and a time defined by insecurity, disorder, and even chaos. On an annual basis, now, we learn that last year was warmer, on average, than any previously recorded year. Owing to the pandemic, nearly 11 million Americans are unemployed right now. And with the surges we have seen and more expected, it’s anyone’s guess where that number is headed. Even worse, where are the numbers headed in terms of how many Americans will be infected? How many will die?

As if that were not bad enough, our children, whether in elementary school, high school, or college, are having to figure out how to learn without the benefit of face-to-face interaction with their peers and their teachers/professors. Parents are exhausted and depleted because the order of the household has been upended. Gone (for the foreseeable future) are the days when parents could have confidence that having successfully managed to get their children out the door in the morning or off to college for the semester, they could turn their attention to other concerns, like work, whether in the home or beyond it.

Holidays come and go and the balm that once was—that is, joyous time with plenty of loved ones—has vanished. There is all that and more—like the painful divisions among fellow Americans, too many of whom seem to think that other fellow Americans (even their neighbors) are their enemies.

Put it all together, and it’s too much. And I have not even mentioned health care workers. These are the saints of this moment who, unlike most of the rest of us, not only witness that human suffering but also somehow have to find the fortitude to keep fighting so that just maybe the person in their care will get to recovery.

In other words, it looks pretty bleak these days.

And then, in what seems to me so very much in keeping with Advent, God says in our text from Isaiah today “I am the LORD, your God, who grasp your right hand; It is I who say to you, ‘Fear not, I will help you.’” And the text goes on. God says to the afflicted and the needy and the thirsty, “I will not forsake them.” On the contrary, God lists all the amazing gifts that are forthcoming—rivers and fountains and marshland and springs of water and on and on it goes.

The response to Psalm 145 says it so well: “The Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger, and of great kindness.”

These readings remind me of the story that Father Satish shared on Facebook about the profoundly loving decision that healthcare workers made on behalf of an elderly couple—she had recovered from COVID and her husband was dying of it. The individuals taking care of them arranged to put them next to one another so that she could hold his hand.

“I am the LORD, your God, who grasp your right hand; It is I who say to you, ‘Fear not, I will help you.” May we be in every way we can imagine this help to one another.

Fifty-two years ago, Thomas Merton was at a conference on monasticism that afforded him opportunities to talk with other Christian and Buddhist monks. In the course of the conference, he found himself before a statue of the dying Buddha. And there he experienced an epiphany. The word that he received was this: “Everything is emptiness and compassion.”  (To read more about Thomas Merton and this experience, see “Blessed Among US” in Give Us This Day for December 10, 2020.)

As we face a time and place that can feel so chaotic, so scary, so loveless, perhaps our prayer can be that whenever we feel emptiness we can pour forth (as our ridiculously generous Trinity does) compassion. Surely, that will get us through.

Amen.

- Sue Trollinger