Spirituality
Scripture for Life



A man wearing a protective mask and face shield prays inside the Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene in Manila, Philippines, Oct. 2, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. (CNS/Reuters/Eloisa Lopez)



by Sr. Carol J. Dempsey

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

January 30, 2021
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

This fourth Sunday in ordinary time marks the end of the first month of the new year 2021. Yet, this time is hardly ordinary. Still immersed in a global pandemic, separated from one another by masks and social distancing, we take to heart the comforting words of today's second reading, "I would like you to be free from anxieties" (1 Corinthians 7:32). These days continue to be anxious times, as all of the planet's communities struggle to deal with yesteryears' challenges and crises. Everyone is trying to move forward in a changed world that is grief-stricken and tear-stained from the loss of loved ones, yet bright with promise but not without perils, especially for those who experience insecurities caused by limited resources.

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 31, 2021

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm 95

1 Corinthians 7:32-35

Mark 1:21-28

In today's readings, we hear about a prophet to be raised up, a plea not to have hardened hearts when we hear the voice of the Holy One speaking in our midst, and a new teaching with authority.

These readings invite us to rethink our understanding of the "prophetic." The "prophetic" is far more active and diverse in today's world than the models we find in texts.

Central to the "prophetic" is its ability to expose realities that many people, especially leaders, would like not to see or face. The "prophetic" exposes injustices. How do we make sense of the "prophetic" in the midst of this global pandemic we are still experiencing? How have the pandemic and the "prophetic" intersected?

When we do discover the intersectionality, will we be able to respond and work for justice, which is central to the mission of the "prophetic"?

COVID-19, the most severe global crisis since the 1918 influenza pandemic, has plunged the world into a triple state of emergency with respect to health, humanitarian and development needs. This triple state of emergency compounds already existing inequities. Advanced economies have experienced higher rates of mortality among marginalized groups. In developing countries, vulnerable populations have suffered loss and pain.

Advertisement

Health care systems have struggled to cope. Incomplete social protection systems have allowed people to sink back into or deeper into poverty. Economic structures will not recover quickly; some may not recover at all. Hardest hit by COVID-19 are the millions who are poor, of color or ethnic minorities, the handicapped, the elderly, and those living in squalid, congested shanties.

The "prophetic" has worked through COVID-19 because this horrific virus has exposed the inadequacies of two trusted global systems, the health care system and the economic system, both of which supported the wealthy and either disenfranchised or abandoned the neediest and poorest among us. COVID-19 has exposed the pandemic of global poverty.

COVID-19 has also severely affected nonhuman communities too. It has exposed egregious acts of injustice and violence done especially to one community of animals — minks — whose plight we scarcely know about because of the anthropocentric focus of world news. One of the economic backbones of developed countries is mink farms where minks are raised in captivity for fur trade. Minks are the most popular farmed fur. The newly wealthy in China, South Korea and Russia seek fur, especially mink, for fashion.

Denmark is home to more than 200 mink farms. In November 2020, this nation culled 15 million minks because a small number became infected with COVID-19, passed on to them by humans. The infected animals then reinfected humans. Whether sick or healthy, no mink was spared; all lost their lives.

COVID-19 exposed the reality of mink farms, the everyday slaughter of animals for their skins to be made into coats and hats sported by the wealthy as a sign of status, and lives lost because they became a threat to human health when humans were the ones who infected them first. Denmark is just one example where animals are farmed for human pleasure.

The "prophetic" has intersected with the most horrific experience of this century so far, COVID-19, which has exposed multiple global injustices. As a world community, will we allow our hearts to be pierced by the suffering of those on the margins, human and nonhuman alike?

And if our hearts are not hardened, then what will be our response, and what will be our new works of justice? Will it be the work of dismantling systems and structures of oppression, or will we soon carry on with life as usual, happy not to wear a mask or social distance?

Prophetic work is justice work. Will we look for prophets like Moses and Miriam, or will we come to grips with our baptismal anointing and recognize ourselves as being raised up for the work of global justice?

A version of this story appeared in the **Jan. 22-Feb. 4, 2021** print issue under the headline: Prophetic work is justice work.