Opinion
Guest Voices
"Bah! Humbug!"

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As a campus minister, I have been preparing for the season of Advent for several weeks now, and it was those reflections that came to the front of my mind as I sat in my doctor's office last month.

On the afternoon of Nov. 19, I sat in the waiting room of my asthma doctor allowing myself to sit with the now-familiar feeling of my breath catching in my throat. This time, the feeling was not asthma related, but due to the news of an acquittal in the Kyle Rittenhouse case.

I have experienced a growing discontent in the past few years with the temptation of Christian and Catholic culture to emphasize the bright and shiny sides of Advent: We focus so much on the expectant hope and joy that comes with anticipating the birth of Jesus because it is deeply uncomfortable to focus on the essential context that Jesus is born into a broken, unjust world.

It is this same inability to sit with discomfort that has fueled a distinct, yet often unnamed, movement to avoid the present realities that the pandemic is still ongoing

and the unjust systems that were the focus of so much attention are, in fact, still in place today. With these realities in mind, I chose to sit in the waiting room, facing the discomfort of my breath caught in my throat. I allowed myself to be transported to the last time I remember feeling that same catch: just over 18 months ago, on the morning I learned that George Floyd was killed.

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I had gone to bed early and without checking any social media, so in my early morning scroll through Twitter the next day, I found myself suddenly wide awake at the news of George Floyd's death and unable to tear my eyes away from post after post containing the words Floyd repeated as he was dying with a police officer's knee on his neck: "I can’t breathe." We were already months into a global pandemic that was literally and disproportionately causing people of color to lose their breath, their lives.

In the months that followed, I watched as protests took root across the country and I felt some semblance of hope: the tenor of these protests, the involvement of white people advocating for racial justice and the conversations the protests sparked in my circles of white Catholics felt new or different.

As September 2020 began and the West Coast lit on fire and Spokane, Washington — where I live — was blanketed in hazardous levels of smoke for a full week, I was forced again to reconnect with my own breath. Conversations about climate justice and environmental racism became front and center and I noticed the connection between breath and justice kept returning.

Then, the months wore on. Whether exhaustion from the ongoing global pandemic, a desire to resume some semblance of "normal" life or the very human desire to rid ourselves of discomfort as quickly as possible, I watched as the urgency I had seen in my predominately white communities faded away.

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I felt it as well, my own burnout from my experience of the pandemic creeping in and showing up as cynicism towards the very issues about which I had so much hope in June 2020. It is a matter of privilege that I was able to walk away for a full month: in June 2021, I took my work email off my phone and I did not check Twitter or read the news for a full month. It was in this month that I returned my focus to my breathing.

The Christian tradition holds that our breath is the Holy Spirit running through us. The Hebrew word "ruach" means both breath and spirit and is used to refer to both humans and God, which serves as a reminder that the breath running through us is holy. It is an innate signifier of the divine within each of us, a reminder that any action that serves to quell the breath of another is, at its core, an act of injustice.

As we move through the season of Advent, this understanding of breath as divine can help ground our work for justice in a real and incarnational way that does not shy away from the discomfort of facing an unjust, oppressive system. Jesus, born into a living, breathing human body, was ultimately killed for the threat he posed to the system and power structure into which he was born.

It is far easier to focus on simple checklist tasks in addressing ongoing injustice. If I just repost this information to my Instagram story, if I just call my senator, if I just march in this protest, then I can pat myself on the back and tell myself that I have done the work — that I am an ally. If it were really that simple, the work would be done already. The reality is far less comfortable: The systems that led to the death of George Floyd, the deaths of so many others and the acquittal of Kyle Rittenhouse are still very much in place.

Our faith tells us that the promise of the birth of Jesus is that the kingdom of God is both already and not yet. The Advent season provides ample temptation to focus on the "already" portion of this promise with no regard for that which is "not yet." While we should not lose sight of the hope in that promise, our faith asks us to engage with our present reality, even and especially through discomfort and systemic injustice. There are no easy answers for dismantling the unjust systems still so present today, but faith and allyship as a white Catholic requires an ongoing willingness to engage with the discomfort of not knowing while maintaining disciplined hope that change is possible.

The essential invitation for white Catholics this Advent season is this: Lean into the discomfort. Embrace the ways our faith grows when we allow ourselves to notice God's presence in and through brokenness. When it feels difficult, return to the breath. Remember that our breath is the Holy Spirit running through us, the same breath that ran through Jesus. Take a deep breath and return to the work to which our faith calls us through the model of Jesus — the long, uncomfortable work for justice in our present world.