Re-emerging From Solitude
Series Introduction

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We are pressed and what is inside becomes visible . . . We have an opportunity to stop, pay attention, notice, and slow down. I can see what is happening, and where the Lord is present in it. What might be my personal invitation? – Mimi Dixon

Some scholars believe the Book of Job was written earlier than any other book of the Bible. It seems fitting that before Moses set out to write Israel’s origin story and record the miraculous events of the Red Sea, someone first composed a story of loss and pain. “There once was a man named Job . . . ” (Job 1:1), the author begins. Job’s life was turned upside down until he encountered Yahweh.

Like Job, Yahweh’s people have good reason to lament pain and its attendant suffering. On the Christian view there was meant to be order and predictability, so when disorder and disruption come, persons are rightly destabilized. It is not that God caused the disorder nor that he always has a particular purpose in allowing it to occur. Rather, pain first and foremost signals that something has gone awry. That is the basis of the Christian story of redemption: God has come in Christ Jesus to set right what went horribly wrong. Every departure from the “very good” reminds us that we are in the middle of redemption. Perhaps “There once was a man named Job . . . ” is the first story because it is, in some sense, everyone’s story. There once was a woman named Susie. There once was a man named Jeff. There once was a child named Amy. Each of us waits in pain for our encounter with Yahweh.
when “he will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more . . . pain” (Rev 21:4).

In the meantime, in the middle of our stories and our pain, how do we attend to painful loss, disorder, and disruption? There is much to say. First and foremost, as agents of Jesus’ love, Christians are always meant to move towards those in pain—“when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds” (Lk 10:33). Moreover, Christians lament—we “weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15). And in the midst of lament and binding up wounds, we also pray, “Lord, teach us what we do not see” (cf. Job 34:32). James, the brother of Jesus, puts it well: “Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don’t try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way” (James 1:2–4 MSG). And yet, it can be difficult to stay put long enough to let tests and challenges grow us up. Indeed, it can be easy to quickly jump back to normal. We are understandably eager to move on from times of pain.

Do you recall that moment in the early weeks of COVID-19 when your head stopped shaking back and forth in disbelief and you came to the realization that this was going to be awhile? For many, that initial shock was enveloped by far greater pain and confusion as someone close was infected and perhaps died. The many inconveniences of pandemic life look trite compared to the tragedy of lost lives. Around the globe, humanity has suffered immensely and the losses painfully continue.
Perhaps in the middle of it all you have had moments of encounter. Perhaps a realization of something you took for granted and you thought to yourself, “when things get back to normal, I am going to . . . .” Or perhaps a growing awareness of something that was buried under the surface: your frenetic pace, your fear of death, your resentment of others, your loneliness, your vulnerability. Or perhaps an awakening to those around you: the inequalities, the privilege, the injustice, the needs of neighbors. Or perhaps a glimpse of God’s nearness or felt absence: wondering where he was and how to live with him when your spiritual rhythms were eradicated. These realizations, awarenesses, and awakenings due to COVID conditions are what the Christian tradition has called purgation. Purgation occurs when the truth of our selves “gets forced out into the open and shows its true colors. So don’t try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed.” Easier said than done.

As some of us begin to cautiously re-emerge from COVID, how do we take stock? How do we recall and lament and recollect what has transpired? How do we reenter a regained normality in a manner that does not move on too quickly, jumping back to the same old conversations and same old routines? One New Yorker emerging from the devastation of COVID said this, “There’s some pieces of normalcy that I don’t really want back . . . Our normal wasn’t always ideal.”¹ A wise friend, who also happens to be a New Yorker, often reminds me, “don’t waste your pain.” As the baseball games, family gatherings, and

indoor worship restart, how do we identify and bring with us the costly insights of COVID-19?

In what follows we offer four themes to help you reflectively re-emerge from the involuntary solitude of pandemic life. We invite you to consider . . .

**God:** How was your relationship with God formed in unique ways during COVID?

**Isolation:** What does the process of re-building Christian community look like?

**Meaning:** How do we regain a meaningful life when so much of what we previously found meaningful has been exposed as incredibly fragile and even hollow?

**Upheaval:** Now that we have seen so much that is wrong with our world, how do we sustain that awareness and commitment to work towards righting those wrongs?

– Steve Porter
Beth Ratzlaff offers spiritual direction and writes about life with God. She is a trainer and steering team member at Get HOPE Global, a non-profit organization that provides Christian business training for women and students through local partners in impoverished countries. She loves to play, travel internationally, run away to the mountains whenever possible, dabble in various creative pursuits, and dream big dreams. Beth lives in Highlands Ranch, Colorado.

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