

A SEASON TO HOLD OUR DESOLATION

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It is understandable to feel hopeless or helpless in our current global reality. God is with us in whatever we are experiencing, even as we gently tend to our deepest spiritual struggles.

Weary. Heavy. Drained. Depleted. Frustrated. Impatient. Unmotivated. Overwhelmed.

These are just some of the adjectives that I have heard used to describe the condition of many in this prolonged and challenging time. Generic proclamations of hope or inspiration feel hollow when despair and tedium are gnawing in the background of everything. Depending on the circumstances of your life, you might be in a dark night—that gloriously aching path to spiritual union. Or you might find yourself in spiritual desolation, a common yet rarely discussed spiritual condition identified by St. Ignatius that comes with its own wisdom and warnings.

Desolation as we move into Advent? Perhaps this is not you—not right now—and praise be if that is the case. But we all find ourselves there from time to time—the spiritual slump, the numbing, the lack of enthusiasm. It's helpful to be equipped, though that alone won't remedy the feeling or lack thereof.

It is understandable to feel hopeless or helpless in our current global reality. We are experiencing deadly weather events exacerbated by climate change, a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, the persistent pandemic, and strained relationships because of social and political divides.

I've heard some asking, Are we losing faith in each

other? What is all this for? Is it even possible to work toward Christ's vision of peace that is at the center of our identity and mission?

Mark Thibodeaux defines desolation as "the inner state of being wherein the person [or community] is 'out of sync' with God and lacks great desires for faith, hope, and love" (Ignatian Discernment of Spirits for Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Care: Going Deeper, page 163). For those familiar with the "dark night" of St. John of the Cross, desire is the primary difference from desolation. There is aching in the dark night because the longing for God is strong, and yet God seems elusive or is expanding to an image we have yet to recognize. We ache in desolation because the longing has ceased and desire has waned. Instead, apathy, fear, or avoidance take the place of a heart turned toward God and Jesus, the peaceful One.

First, we must dispel any assumption that desolation means lack of faithfulness. Faithful people all walk through the varied terrain of the spiritual life. To name and to normalize—to find expression for our experience—can help us exhale. In doing so, we are in the company of mystics and prophets whose attention to their varied inner terrain only deepened their journey with God. Their recommendations for times of desolation may be helpful for us to hear now:

ORIENT YOUR HEART IN GOD

God is with us all the time. Our perception of distance or absence does not mean that God has left us. Advent and the Incarnation are reminders of this steadfast presence. Desolation is typically described as the heart turned away from God. If we imagine God as a great light, it means that instead of viewing what is luminous we are facing our own shadow. In desolation, it can be helpful to spend time gently and prayerfully considering the orientation of your heart in God. What would turning back toward God look or feel like? If you feel closed off, what would it be like to find yourself opening again?

RESIST MAKING BIG DECISIONS

St. Ignatius suggests that this is not a time to make big, life-altering decisions. Discernment invites us to act from a state of consolation or turning toward God. As we move into Advent, the quiet patience of this season can provide some needed space for us to simply be present to the condition of our souls and to slowly let ourselves turn again toward the source of life.

KEEP SHOWING UP TO PRAYER

This one may be the hardest. While we are called to “carry our cross,” we are never called to simply endure spiritual desolation. Sometimes the moment we become aware of what we are experiencing is the first turn of the heart back toward God. A recognition of where we are can summon even a small amount of desire.

Be gentle and patient with yourself, but keep showing up to prayer even when you don’t feel like it. Maybe it is in a different way, form, or time of day, but make space to tend what is at work in you. Prayer is not just for when we feel good. It is also about the consistency of our presence to God as God is always present to us. Maybe it’s simply a commitment to spend the first five minutes of the day in some form of prayer or spiritual practice. Don’t worry about getting grandiose or making up for lost time. Just show up as you are and trust that God meets you here, unconditionally, and always.

TRY A SIMPLE PRAYER

Waking up to our inner state and naming what is real in simple prayer can be an important practice of reorienting the heart. If you notice apathy, name it, and pray instead for a heart that is open. If you notice despair, name it, and pray that it might be accompanied by a deep hope in the reality of God. If you notice lack of desire, name it, and pray to desire what is sacred and good. These simple prayers can happen throughout the day, anywhere and at any time.

TAKE CARE OF YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Desolation can occur in depression, but they are not the same thing. If you believe that you are experiencing depression or some other mental health issue, please seek help. Faithful Christians also go to therapy, take medication if needed, and talk to loved ones for support. To say this has been a hard time is an understatement, and rates of anxiety and depression are increasing around the world. The church is not exempt from this reality. While showing up to prayer can eventually reorient a heart in God, mental health professionals are needed to address deeper issues. This too is about our wholeness in the Spirit and openness to receiving all the dimensions of Christ’s peace.

CONSOLATION BECKONS, BUT IT MIGHT NOT BE WHAT YOU THINK

Consolation—the heart turned toward God—can bring fresh energy, life, light, and meaning, but it may not completely alleviate our despair. It will not right every wrong in the world. It might not make life easier, but it will certainly make it more bearable and remind us that God is with us in whatever we are experiencing.

If we expect to be perfectly happy, we may miss the gift of consolation: a sense of deeper joy and love in the Spirit of God that endures even when challenges arise or persist. It is possible to live in challenging times and to experience joy, love, and deep connection to God.

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

—Isaiah 9:2

We come into the Advent season as we are. For some of us, this may be in a state of spiritual desolation. Maybe our own hearts are turning and returning as the world itself is “about to turn” (Rory Cooney, *Community of Christ Sings* 404). Maybe this Advent can be a time to breathe and to pause long enough to tend to what is happening within us. May we remember amid the complexity, suffering, and injustice around us that God is still the ground of our reality, the center of our being, and holds us close even when we feel far away. May the people who walk in deep darkness turn again toward the light that shines and will never be extinguished.

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