

Although sharing much common ground when it comes to philosophy and ministry, often Mary and Bob find themselves approaching ministerial concerns from different angles... *He said - She said* is a venue to share differing perspectives and provide food for thought.

Simplicity and Joy

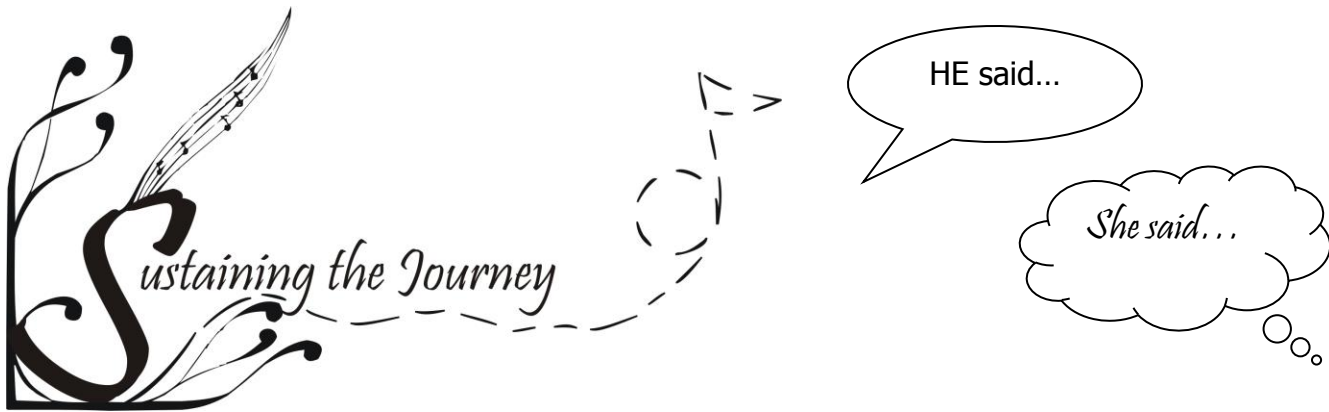
Mary's Perspective:

During these past couple of months, I have tried diligently and regularly to grow in new ways. I've stepped up my walking (pun intended), such that I get out to the park 5-6 times per week, and am now averaging 15-18 miles per week. This has facilitated my attempts at listening to podcasts, so that I can learn more and be inspired by positive voices. (I've been trying to grow my brain, too...) I have also participated in numerous webinars and online meetings to learn as much as I can about a variety of topics, including the ever-changing directives that impact my daily job at the church. I suspect many others have approached this time in similar ways.

As I sit down to write this blog, it is with a myriad of swirling emotions of surprising intensity. We are at the precipice of resuming public celebration of Mass (or have just crossed over, once this blog goes live). And while "public celebration of Mass" is something we have done my entire life, we anticipate the reality of the experience to be widely different from the celebrations we have experienced my entire life. Given the directive of no congregational singing, I have had to re-think my approach. Sparing the details of all that was considered, the end result is a mixture of instrumental music and my chanting or perhaps singing simply the proper antiphons of the day. I've been using this approach at weddings for the entrance procession, and it works well. However, it certainly feels very different from the full, active, conscious participation to which we have been accustomed.

Back to the original concept of filling my brain with positive stimulation, I've been thinking about two resources that I have perused in the past day. One is a podcast. I was listening to an interview with a bishop of a nondenominational American megachurch. He focused on how this time of isolation has helped us to scale back and find joy in the simple things. My first thought was that Mass without congregational singing is certainly scaled back and simple. More on this podcast – and similar ones – is yet to come, I'm certain, but the takeaway for right now was simplicity and joy.

The second resource is an organization whose mission is to help Catholic parishes "elevate the liturgy" through use of their digital platform and publications. I received an email invitation to beta test their technology. The premise of their tool is to make the Scriptures, chants, responses, and Order of the Mass accessible in new ways, not just to the assembly physically gathered, but also to the homebound, those who participate digitally, etc. This was an existing company that, after ten years, decided to re-tool and launch with a new name and new focus. Admittedly, launching just a couple of months before a national lockdown was challenging, but they have successfully observed opportunity where many were stumped with challenge. I very much appreciate their positive approach. The takeaway from this company is that, while robust congregational singing is restricted, now is an ideal time to delve into the joy of simplicity – simple chants, not being bogged down by heavy hymnals, and being open to the Spirit in new ways through Scripture.



So why the swirling emotions? On the one hand, surrounding myself with positivity has been a saving grace for me during this time of isolation. Hearing an awesome preacher, with his energy and rootedness in Christian belief, is energizing. Seeing how a company can literally make lemonade out of lemons challenges me to see beyond perceived boundaries and restrictions. On the other hand, we have all experienced grief during this time, and to deny that is to close ourselves to healing. Even the dynamic preacher admitted he has had days where he just cried at the overwhelming sense of loss – families who couldn't physically be with their loved ones as they died, "private" funeral celebrations that minimize the support of friends and family who can't physically be there to offer comfort, job loss, etc. Even if it isn't an experience of death, many of us know loss during this time – students whose celebrations of prom and graduation were canceled or digitalized, kindergarteners who didn't get to experience a full year with peers, adults who have been isolated from their elder parents and grandchildren, etc. And our return to public celebration of Mass really is less of a "return" and more of a venture into a different planet. Little feels familiar and comfortable.

So let me get back to that message of simplicity and joy. Now I know, on bad days (or even mediocre ones) this may feel like a stretch. Sometimes I just want to wallow and be sad. But I need to set a limit on that – acknowledge and experience the sad part, but then move forward. And for me, the forward part needs to seek joy. Things are different, yes. Definitely more simple. So what is good about simple?

Without all of the noise of busy life, I have been able to take great joy in smelling freshly blooming flowers. I literally stop mid-walk to stick my nose into a flowering tree, sometimes to the surprised reaction of my walking partner. But smelling those beautiful fragrances bring me joy. Spending time with my offspring cooking, playing board games, or watching Jeopardy really isn't rocket science – but it also brings joy. Even within the confines of surreal-feeling celebrations of worship, focusing on the antiphons – typically one line or one verse Scriptures that add context to the celebration – brings new learning, focus, and joy.

Perhaps with hindsight, we could see that a year ago, life felt like it moved at a pace so fast it was nearly out of control. We filled all of our time being "busy": with work, or play, or exercise and entertainment. Sleep was not restful, but rather something I had to minimally get over with in order to be functional. I tended to eat mindlessly, grabbing something convenient rather than nourishing the needs of my body. We were bombarded with voices – talking heads on the television, radio personalities shouting loudly, even co-workers with unsolicited opinions and housemates with an abundance of complaints.

What happened when life shut down? We scaled back. We figured out our priorities and values. We found little things that brought joy.

Here's the challenge... as life resumes, will we hang onto that simplicity and joy?



Bob's Perspective:

I recently read an entry on social media from someone whom I deeply admire. Pastor Charles Eduardos leads the congregation of All Saints Lutheran Church in Olmsted Falls, Ohio (a wonderful little suburb of Cleveland). His entry was a photograph of some notes that he had made for (what I believe to be) an upcoming sermon. It read as follows:

- **Nothing should go back to normal.**
- **Normal wasn't working.**
- **If we go back to the way things were, we will have lost the lesson.**
- **May we rise up and do better.**

I'm very much reminded of the days of the Babylonian Exile. The exile occurred a little more than 550 years before the birth of Jesus. While there is some debate as to exactly when and how many Jews were exiled, it is traditionally believed that the exile lasted 70 years. It is most likely that most of the exiled Jews had resided in or near Jerusalem. Because of cultural and political pressures, the Jews suffered greatly at the hands of their captors. However, they were able to maintain a strong national spirit and religious identity. In many cases, they composed new prayers and revised their rituals as needed in order to continue forward. This quotation from Psalm 137:1-4 immediately comes to mind:

By the rivers of Babylon there we sat weeping when we remembered Zion. On the poplars in its midst we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for the words of a song; our tormentors, for joy: "Sing for us a song of Zion!" But how could we sing a song of the LORD in a foreign land?

At this point, I'm tempted to not say much more. I think that both of these entries speak volumes, and too many words from me will do nothing more than trivialize them. I don't know about you, but even in some of the toughest points of my life, nothing has challenged me as significantly as the times (and situations) we are currently facing. At this point, I'll just offer a few questions for personal reflection.

1. If normal wasn't working, what needs to change in our realities?
2. What lessons have we learned?
3. What lessons are we in danger of losing?
4. In what ways can we rise up and do better (or maybe we have already)?
5. What are the songs (literally as well as figuratively) which we cannot sing right now?
6. What are the songs (literally as well as figuratively) to which we hang on in our hearts that bring us peace, solace and joy?

Godspeed!