

FAITH GROWS IN THE DARK NIGHT of a Covid-time

JANUARY 31, 2022

WELCOMING A COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS

Part One: What is Faith?
Q and A

Part Two: The Dark Night and Light of Faith
Q and A

Part Three: Is our Covid-time a Dark Night for our World?
Q and A

OUR GATHERING PRAYER:

Gracious God, we come before you this evening, filled with a holy longing and desire to seek you and find you in the midst of these long, weary, winter days. All of humanity has been enduring this global pandemic for many months now. This sudden and uninvited event of Covid-19 has made a major impact on our lifestyles and has catapulted us into a new relationship with God, with ourselves and with each other. We pray that this 'dark night' crisis might become an agent of breakthrough and transformation for all of us. We make our prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.

A READING FROM SR. JOAN CHITTISTER:

“There is a deep-down bone weariness that comes with struggle. The sheer weight of going on knowing that nothing we can do will change things as they are, that there is no going back to what was, exhausts the timbre of the soul. We want to give up. We want to quit. We want to give in to the thing that has defeated us and die. But the very fact that we do not succumb to the weariness of the impossible, that we endure, that **we keep on keeping on** touches into the hope of eternal justice, eternal good, everlasting possibility.

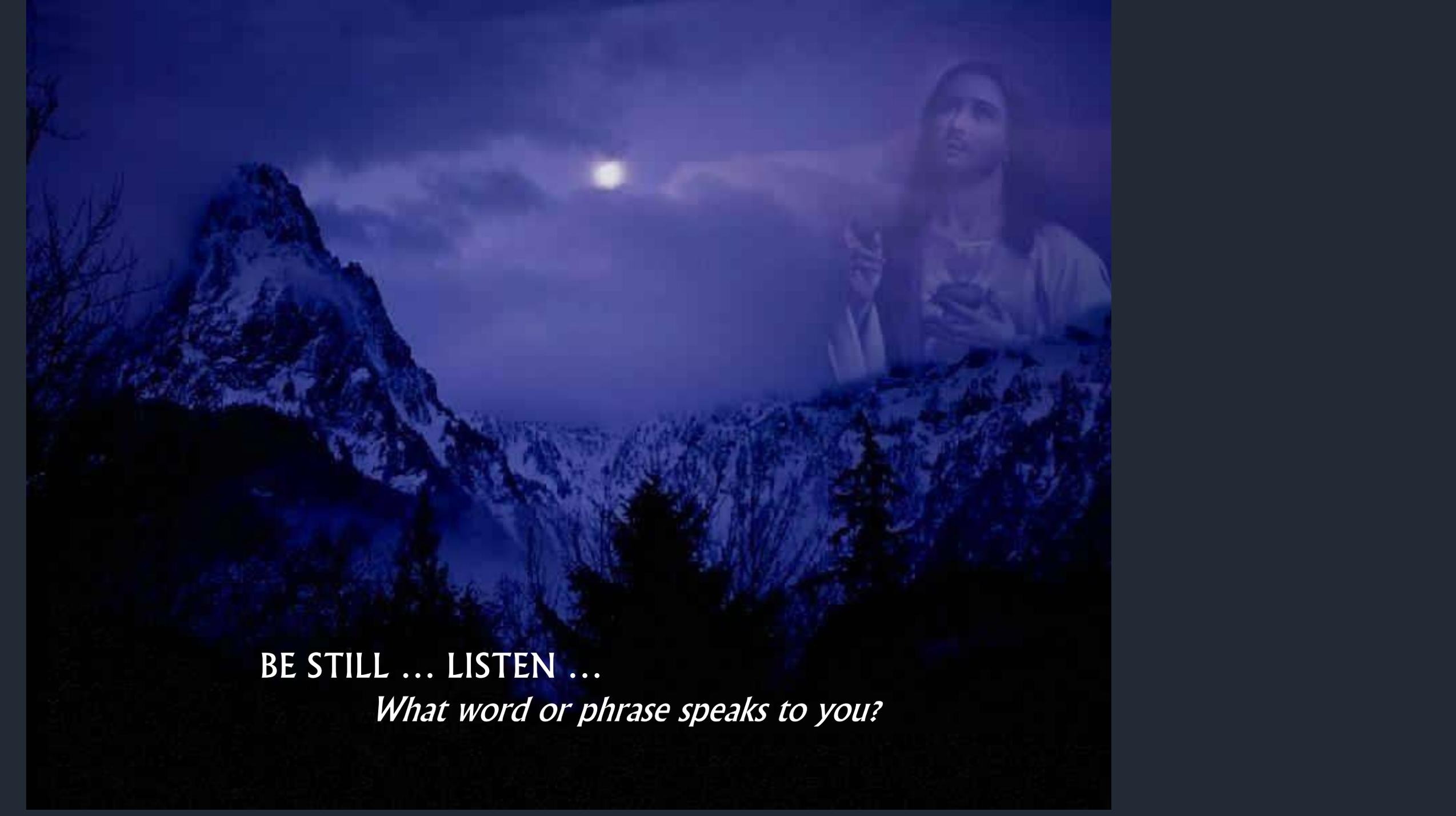
Then we see that our creating God who goes on creating - whatever the apparent failures of the process - asks the same of us. When we refuse to give up, either on ourselves or on the world around us, we become our own small sign that God is, that in the end right will prevail, that hope lives. **Endurance** is the light of hope in a continuing darkness that must somehow, somewhere give way to the light of Jacob's dawn."

J. Chittister, OSB, Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope, Novalis, Ottawa, 2003, p.101

SCRIPTURE: A FUTURE FULL OF HOPE

“I know the plans I have in mind for you – it is Yahweh who speaks – plans for peace, not disaster, reserving a future full of hope for you. Then when you call to me, and come to plead with me, I will listen to you. When you seek me you shall find me, when you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me.”

- Jeremiah 29: 11-13

A blue-tinted image of a mountain landscape. In the foreground, there are dark, silhouetted evergreen trees. In the background, a large, snow-capped mountain peak rises against a dark sky. A bright, full moon is visible in the sky, partially obscured by light clouds. On the right side of the image, there is a faint, semi-transparent image of Jesus Christ with long hair, wearing a white robe, looking upwards with his hands clasped in prayer.

BE STILL ... LISTEN ...

What word or phrase speaks to you?

#1 WHAT IS FAITH?

The Greek verb, *pistuo* and the Latin verb, *credo*, mean

“I trust” or “I commit myself”.

These root words indicate to us that faith is always relational;
faith is an active way of being.

I entrust myself to you or I commit myself to you.

FAITH is the term we use to express our relationship with God.

WHAT IS FAITH?

FAITH is a commitment of all that is mysterious and ineffable in myself to what is mysterious and ineffable in God.

This commitment shapes my identity,
involves my whole person,
and my life becomes intimately bound up
with God's life in this faith relationship.

FAITH EMBRACES OUR WHOLE PERSON

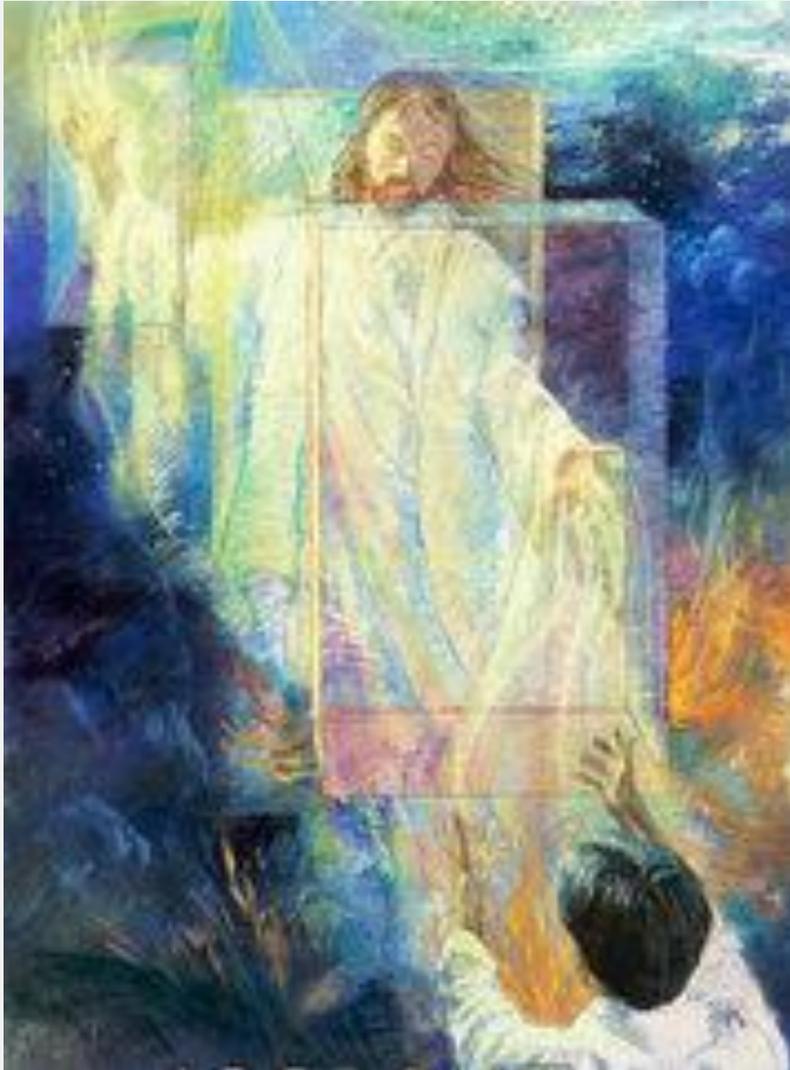
Religious faith has often been understood as belief in certain doctrines and formulations - the Creed. These are essential and state certain truths, but intellectual assent to these is not all faith consists.

Faith, the quintessence of faith, as revealed in the New Testament, is epitomized in Jesus' own words to the blind man:

“DO YOU BELIEVE IN THE SON OF MAN?”

John 9:37-41

WHEN DID JESUS GRASP YOU?



This believing in JESUS is not an act of blind impulse but rather it is an act of one who has first been grasped and invited by the other - God.

Faith, then, is yielding to this Someone who has grasped us by an invitation.

A RELATIONSHIP



Faith is our response and our awareness of being called into relationship - a relationship that involves a decision, a decision to live for God.

One's whole life revolves around this decision.

The decision of faith commits one's whole person.

We become a part of all that we love and trust – we become part of God's life and dream for humanity.

Do I accept the on-going responsibility of my faith?

FAITH IS A DIVINE GIFT

As one of the theological virtues, faith is an infusion of God's very own life.

God initiates faith. God calls this relationship into being and gives us faith as gift enabling us to respond to Him. The faith we are given at birth comes with a readiness to grow and develop and with a capacity for ever deeper trust and self-donation.

We are co-responsible with God for the quality, extent and depth of our faith response. Consider the faith at your Baptism and its growth and development over the years.

GROWING IN FAITH

Faith encompasses the whole of our lifetime from birth to death. We are called to a life of faith. God is continually communicating with us and inviting us to an ever deeper and more mature response.

One of the chief characteristics of this growth in faith is that a person moves more and more into a relationship of love, more and more into the mystery of God ... and away from any particular knowledge of God to a more general, loving knowledge of God.

At our March evening, we will speak about the
SIX STAGES OF FAITH GROWTH

THE GIFT OF FAITH

Theologians tell us FAITH is...

“a certain and obscure habit of soul which informs us of matters we have never seen or known, either in themselves or in their likeness.”

Scriptures tell us FAITH is...

“the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.” (Heb 11:1)

“No eye has seen, no ear has heard ...” (1 Cor 2:1-9)

THE VIRTUE OF FAITH

The virtue of FAITH is the means whereby we are united with God in this life. God is beyond our senses, beyond our natural knowledge.

FAITH is given to us to take us beyond what the senses can grasp, beyond what we can figure out rationally with our intellect.

“We see now in a dim manner, but then we shall see Him face to face.”

In the Beatific Vision there will be no need for faith - vision will wipe it away.

We have “union by faith” with God in this life and “union by vision” with God in eternity.



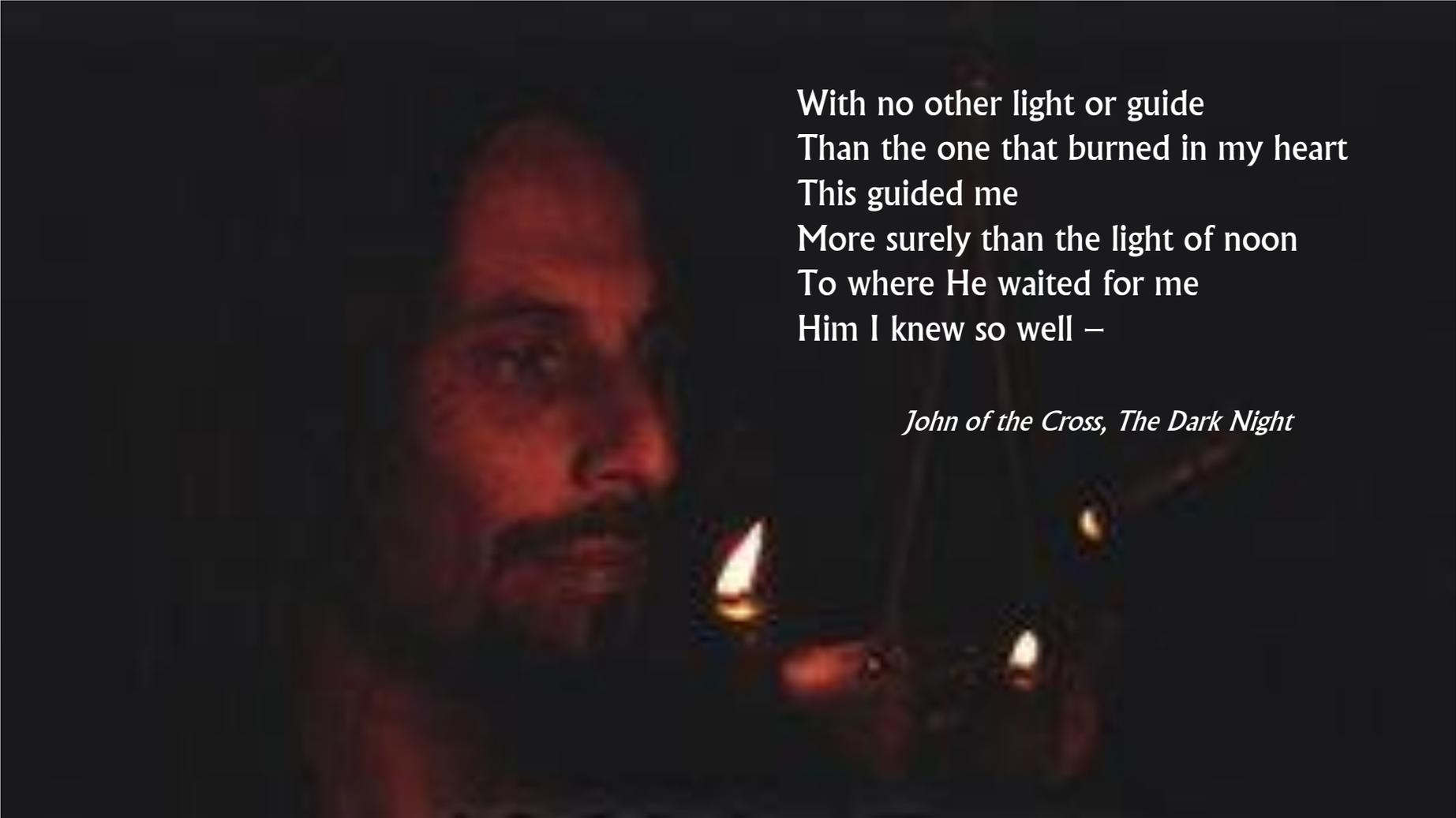
FAITH is a deep interior gift that affects all of our life and lifestyle.

“Everybody who believes in the Son of God has this testimony inside him/her.”

WHAT IS FAITH?

Q and A ... let's talk about it

#2: THE DARK NIGHT AND LIGHT OF FAITH



With no other light or guide
Than the one that burned in my heart
This guided me
More surely than the light of noon
To where He waited for me
Him I knew so well –

John of the Cross, The Dark Night

THE 'DARKNESS' OF A FAITH JOURNEY

We often hear persons speak of the "darkness" of their faith journey.

There are periods of "dark nights" that indicate one's faith life is deepening and intensifying.

God initiates these periods and God is the one bringing a person through them to more faith and more love.

We experience these 'dark nights' as strange and unfamiliar. Sometimes we face them with dread and apprehension. The radical change can be psychologically and spiritually challenging!

THE
ENDURANCE OF
DARKNESS IS
PREPARATION
FOR GREAT
LIGHT.

- St. John of the Cross



THE DARK NIGHT – a personal spiritual experience

WHAT IS HAPPENING interiorly?

The darkness of the night and the light of contemplation are like the two arms of God's love embracing me. While one arm of God is purging me of my false and wounded ego self, the other arm of God is awakening within me a consciousness of my transforming union with God in pure love.

During the 'dark night' I must anchor myself in faith and spirituality. These alone will steady me throughout the process. I must stay the course. Trust.

WHAT IS THIS DARK NIGHT REALLY?



“A GOD HUG OF IMMENSE PROPORTIONS”

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

All spiritual growth towards holiness and personal wholeness involves a passing through this critical threshold of a “dark night of the soul” experience.

We need to trust that our dark night or impasse crisis experience will always press us forward, rather than backward. The dark night is radical and irreversible.

Your life is the place where God encounters your deepest self and lures you into Divine union. You are coming home to your ‘true self’ and to God.

SIGNS 'A DARK NIGHT' IS IN PROGRESS

- an interior restlessness and disquiet
- a frustration with the present situation
- a dissatisfaction with material things
- an anxiousness about the meaning of life
- an urgency for 'something more'
- something/someone deep within seems to be pushing me forward, stretching me beyond my human limitations
- some struggling with a person, or an issue, or some conflicting values with church, family, or work.
- a subtle awareness of a deep, inner, un-nameable pain

- . a persistent darkness and emptiness of spirit
- . a recurring dissatisfaction with my life as it is now
- . a sense I am not yet living 'my' life
- . an intense yearning for God, for 'the more'
- . a mysterious, deep and inner stillness is experienced
- . a deep-down 'knowing' I must change something. But what?
- . a sense it is time to start taking steps in a new direction: let go certain things; or adopt new choices and behaviours.
- . a sense that it's time to make a decision; to surrender to God in the 'dark night' of mystery, not knowing what the future will be for me.
- . then, one day, "It's done. It is finished." And a new stage begins.



“THE DARK NIGHT”

St. John of the Cross – a 16th Century Spanish poet and Carmelite mystic

The ‘dark night’ is the image St. John of the Cross used to describe the work of God emptying and purifying us of our false and wounded ego selves with all their immaturities and imperfections. ‘Darkness’ represents the hardships and difficulties the soul meets in detachment from the world and reaching the light of union with God.

“This dark night is an influence of God within the soul which purges it ...

*By this God secretly teaches us and instructs us in the perfection of love,
without our doing anything or even understanding how this is taking place...”*

JOHN'S DARK NIGHT EXPERIENCE (1542-1591)

St. John of the Cross wrote the magnificent poem - The Dark Night - after undergoing not just a personal mystical threshold but also **a very specific historical event** in his own life. Namely, on one moonless August night, he escaped from his prison cell after being held for nine months in solitary confinement in his own monastery. He jumped through the small window, over the monastery wall to freedom escaping injury along the jagged cliffs and raging Tajo River. His Carmelite brothers rejected his work with the reform of their Order and he would not recant or discontinue. This was his very real suffering and impasse situation that effected in him a deep transforming grace.

OUR 'DARK NIGHT' EXPERIENCE HAPPENS WITHIN THESE FOUR ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS:

1. It is down-to-earth.
2. It is received in/by the person.
3. It propels us forward.
4. It establishes us in peace.

-John of the Cross, quoted in F.K.Nemeck, Receptivity, p. 33

Every person can describe their own unique, concrete, down-to-earth story of a 'dark night'. The specific form it takes is always tailored by God to all the particulars of each individual's life, no matter how seemingly trivial or insignificant. So, for those on a spiritual quest, we can expect a real impasse situation to arrive, out of the blue, and often in our mid-life years.

3 SIGNS OF A DARK NIGHT: Am I in a dark night?

1st SIGN: ARIDITY

- family, home, relationships, work, all seem to go suddenly into a dryness and boredom that seems unshakeable. Nothing seems to satisfy us.

2nd SIGN: RESTLESSNESS AND ANXIETY

- a spiritual anxiety, painful questioning, fear backsliding, fear we are losing our faith, left in powerlessness.

3rd SIGN: DESIRE FOR SOLITUDE

- drawn to seek out solitude to be alone and pray, enjoy quiet reading and rest.

The 3 Signs	*The 3 Storms or Trials of Sense	Purification	Transformation
Aridity	“the spirit of dizziness”	Mind craving “the need to know”	Faith
Anxiety/ Restlessness	“the spirit of blasphemy”	Spirit craving “the need to be in control”	Hope
Desire for Solitude	“the spirit of fornication”	Body craving “the need to feel pleasure”	Love

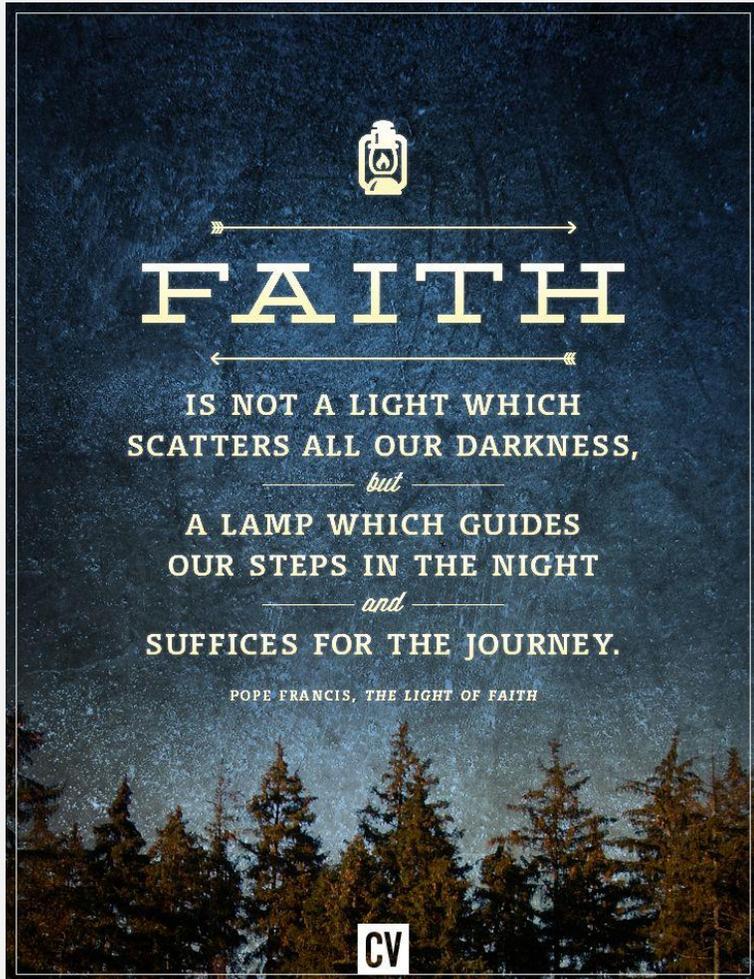
ALL IS WELL WITH MY SOUL

The 'dark night' is really God's gift to a person!

Over time, God purifies us, empties us and awakens us, to the depths of our inner poverty and helplessness. This experience catapults us towards a more radical SURRENDER TO GOD in faith, hope and love.

Once the dark night threshold is crossed, a person enters into an *experience* of God, beyond words and images and consolations. We awaken to what is already there - our oneness with God and our oneness with the sacred in everyone and in everything. This is transformation!

LIVING IN THE LIGHT OF FAITH



LIVING IN THE LIGHT OF FAITH

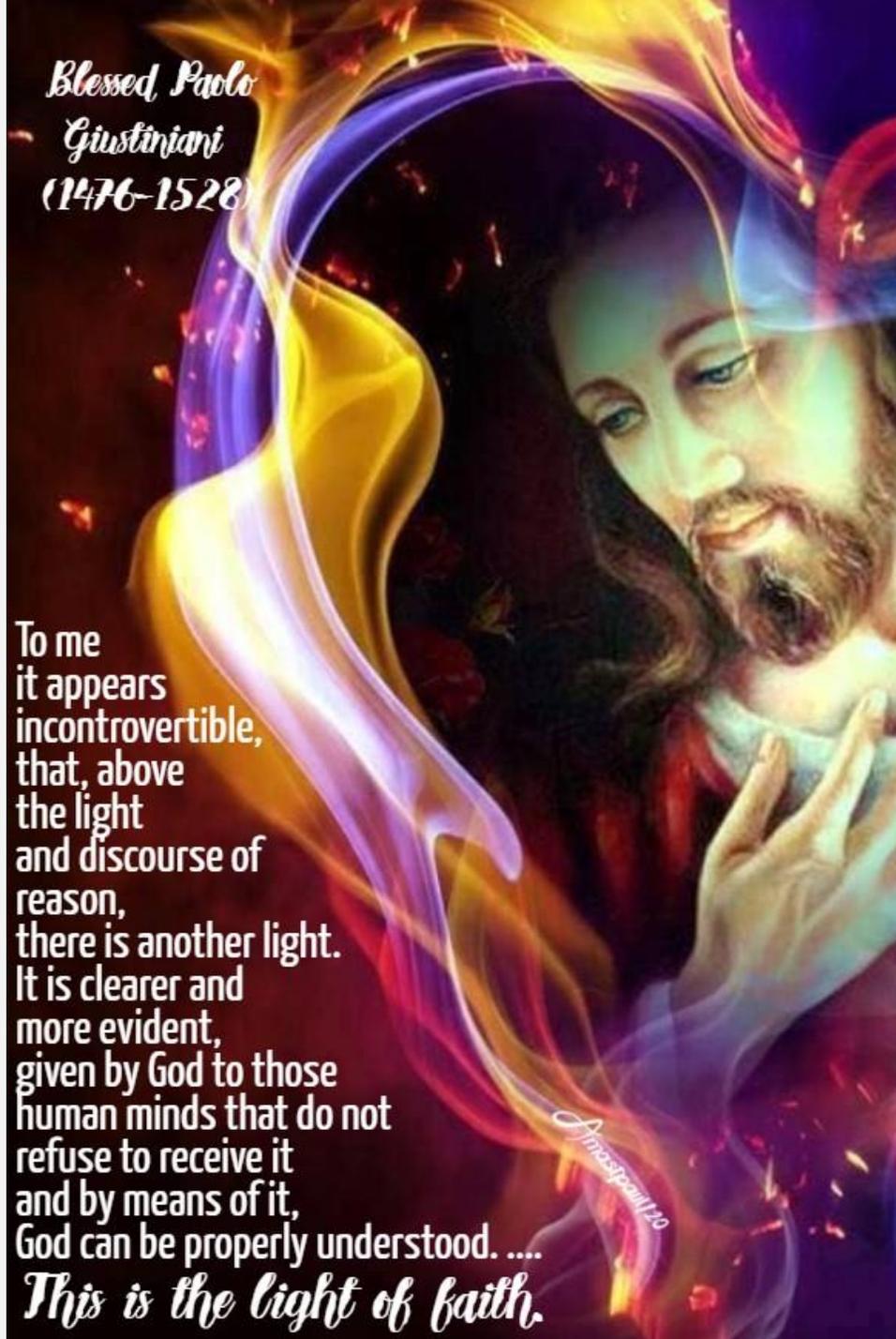
- Central to St. John of the Cross is that prayer and transformation are rooted in the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love.
- Faith corresponds to the intellect, and faith is darkness to the intellect.
The progressive nearness to the light of God blinds, disallowing our images and presuppositions about God. Faith is a functional darkness giving us a true perspective.
- Therefore, for the soul, the excessive light of faith is darkness. This default of darkness leads to a radical option for faith.

THE LIGHT OF FAITH

*Blessed Paolo
Giustiniani
(1476-1528)*

To me
it appears
incontrovertible,
that, above
the light
and discourse of
reason,
there is another light.
It is clearer and
more evident,
given by God to those
human minds that do not
refuse to receive it
and by means of it,
God can be properly understood.

This is the light of faith.



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THE DARK NIGHT AND LIGHT OF FAITH

Q and A ... let's talk about it

#3: IS OUR COVID-TIME A “DARK NIGHT” FOR OUR WORLD?



“Right now the whole world seems to be going through a dark night of the soul.”

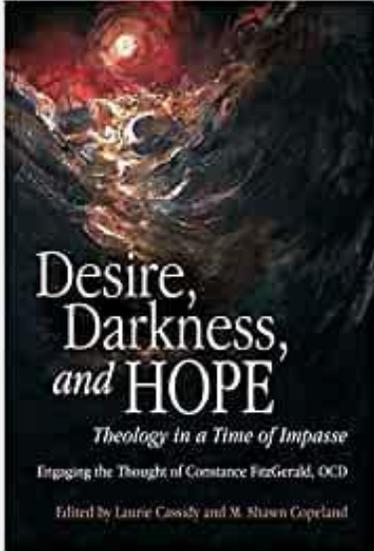
Flannery O'Connor

Would you agree with us, that this is the big question?

Is humanity, at large, standing at a critical threshold of a radically new era?

Is our world in a dark night?

O'Toole, Contemplation and Dark Night of the Soul, p.61



New book urges Catholics to face into the dark night of our times

“What if, by chance, our time in evolution is a dark-night time — a time of crisis and transition that must be understood if it is to be part of learning a new vision and harmony for the human species and the planet? ... for a new consciousness and harmony?”

Sr. Constance Fitzgerald, OCD writes...

“Placing the dark night in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic opens possibilities that the transformative power of the night embraces not only our personal narratives but also the catastrophic quandary confronting the world at present.”

“We need to bring global dark nights into dialogue with the dark night of John of the Cross arguing that “our experience of God and our spirituality must emerge from our concrete historical situation.” (p. 147)

COVID-19 - AN IMPASSE SITUATION!

Constance Fitzgerald's **description of the dark night** details our present condition in face of the pandemic: "There is no way out, no way around, no rational escape from ... no possibilities in the situation ... every normal manner of acting is brought to a standstill."

- Constance affirms that crises are harbingers of hope and transition, if we but discover their call to conversion, healing and justice.
- God is waiting ... with gentle and insistent urgency... summoning humanity to follow new paths of compassion and righteousness. (p.147)

PRAYER CAN BRING ABOUT CHANGE

“Fitzgerald raises the question of whether we believe that prayer can bring about change. She affirms that historical situations of deconstruction confront us with a need for a contemplative spirituality and pedagogy leading to “a societal understanding of the contemplative process of transformation.”

Relative to prayer and conversion, **the powerlessness experienced in the pandemic** has led to a new interest in prayer and meditation, and these practices often include an impulse toward solidarity and service.”

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER – alone and with community

In her article “The Science of Prayer,” Elizabeth Bernstein refers to an analysis from the University of Copenhagen that found **Goggle searches for “prayer” increased exponentially in ninety-five countries**, and according to a Pew research poll, more than half of Americans have resorted to prayer during the pandemic. Bernstein points out that prayer offers a sense of connection with others as well as providing a way to surrender our control.



(The Wall Street Journal, May 17, 2020, quoted on p. 147)

The 3 Signs	*The 3 Storms or Trials of Sense	Purification	Transformation
Aridity	<p>“the spirit of dizziness” uncertainty indecision searching for answers confusion</p>	<p>Mind <i>craving to know:</i> looking for reasons and answers and explanations. There are none! Let go “the need to know”</p>	<p>Faith deepens surrender to God who is mystery. We go beyond ‘knowing’ God to an <i>experience</i> of God.</p>
Anxiety/ Restlessness	<p>“the spirit of blasphemy” frustration spiritual anxiety painful questioning fear backsliding, losing faith impatience annoyance</p>	<p>Spirit <i>craving to be in control:</i> feel lost inability to fix things Let go “need to be in control” Not in charge of my life</p>	<p>Hope deepens God will be our hope. A future full of hope given us, guided by Spirit. Present moment mindfulness.</p>
Desire for Solitude	<p>“the spirit of fornication” addictions compulsions excessive habits</p>	<p>Body <i>craving to feel pleasure:</i> emotions go in frantic search for comfort, satisfaction - nothing satisfies! Let go “need for pleasure”</p>	<p>Love deepens abide in Mystery. relax and rest in silence. loved by God. “Beloved”</p>

THE GIFT OF A DARK NIGHT ... in these times

God is drawing more persons into the 'dark night'
at the dawn of this new millennium.

Our human condition desires and longs for another way - a better way -
a way of nonviolence with all persons and with creation.

Divine Love is calling us, reaching out to us, longing for us.

We cannot persist indefinitely in this direction of the 'dark night'.

THE GIFT OF A DARK NIGHT

- ✓ Some will refuse to surrender and continue in their suffering.
- ✓ Some will still drift in the chaos and unrest for a little while longer.
- ✓ Others will endure the inner and outer confrontations with Truth that present themselves and will **yield** to the great desire of God's longing love and **surrender** in love. They will cross the threshold and be released in this breakthrough into a new mystical consciousness that is bathed in freedom, light and simplicity.

THE ADMISSION and AWARENESS of our COMPLETE POWERLESSNESS

A most profound and life-altering experience awaits us when many of us, collectively, as a family, a community, a nation, a country, **admit we cannot fix the problems** we face in our world today. We surrender in love to God.

We need God's power at work, God's power released, yes, from the depths of each one of us. God then, will call forth all of humanity to live at our very best, with maximum freedom and maximum decision. All of us living together as children of God – one family, beyond creed, race, colour and nationality.

IS THIS YOUR WAKE UP CALL?

Will YOU say yes to those interior nudges and risk crossing the threshold into a deeper faith, hope and love?

YOU too can become a mystic-missionary who lives in the world, being an instrument of God's peace, God's justice, God's mercy.

The apex of the 'dark night' journey is that the power of God flowing in and through more and more human beings brings about a renewed humanity, participating fully in the "kingdom of God". St. Paul joyfully experienced:

"I live now, not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me."

(Gal 2:20).

BEYOND 'THE DARK NIGHT'

- Persons who pass through their dark night, abide now in contemplation.
- They make choices about creative lifestyles.
- They live in peace with themselves and in harmony and balance with nature.
- They have their own unique rhythm of work, prayer, study and leisure.
- A flow of energy and love radiates through all their relationships and ministry.
- There is a genuine renaissance of the sacred emerging!
- There is the hope of a universal compassion.

BEYOND 'THE DARK NIGHT'

- Some of these mystic souls attract each other and form small faith-share communities. They support each other in friendship and faith.
- The movement of Spirit becomes contagious! New breakthroughs start to happen in small steps... in homes, families, parishes, communities...
- These men and women engage with the world, their neighbourhood around them with positive thought-energy and love-energy. **Love changes everything!**
- God's energy of Love is released each time another person comes into this transforming union. Love grows and unites people, families, nations ...

BEYOND 'THE DARK NIGHT'

At the close of the dark night one realizes **a new freedom, joy and gratitude** welling up within.

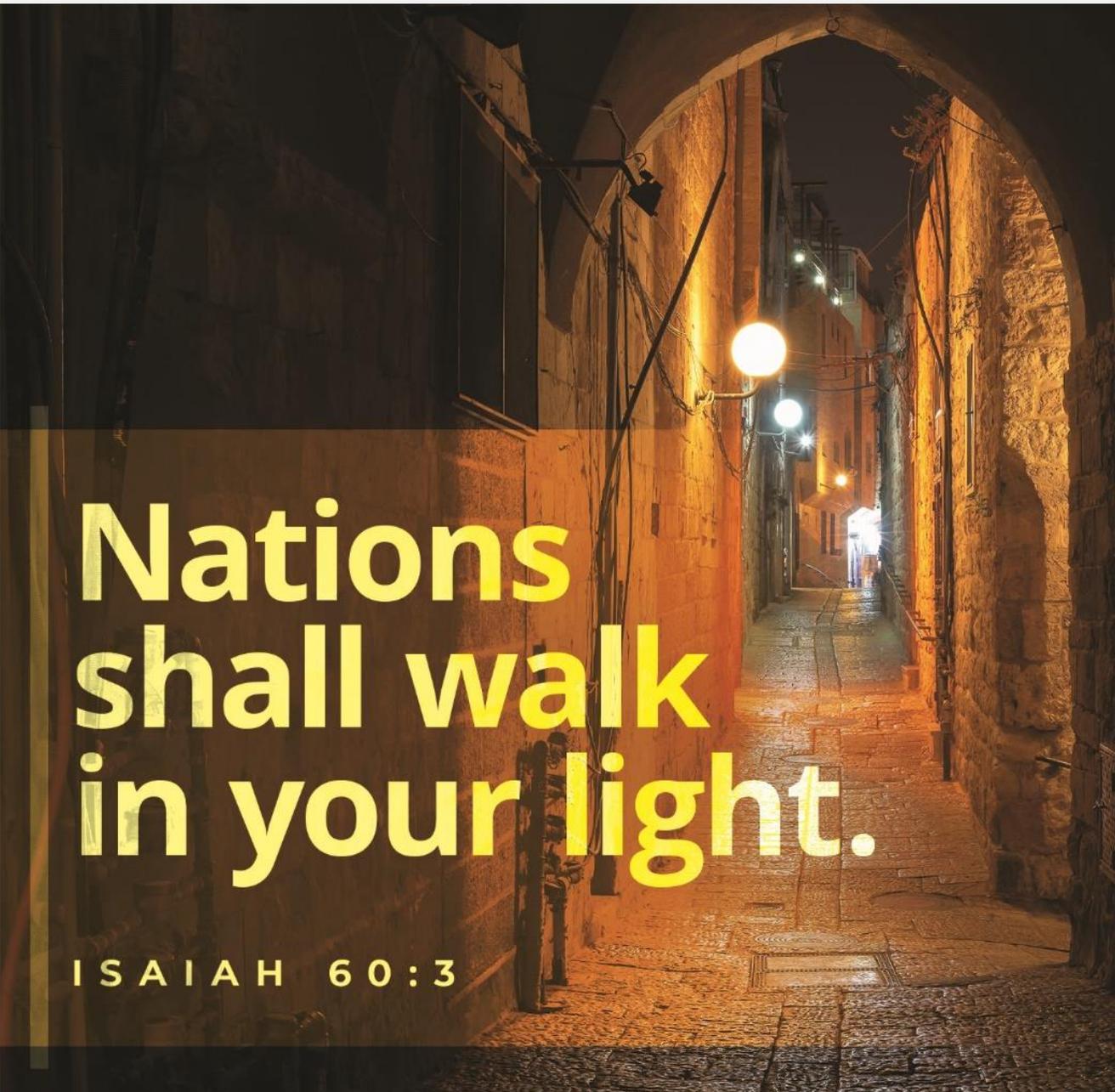
The struggle has become integrated into their being and they become persons of light, hope and peace for our world.

They understand God's plan/mission for them now and pass on hope and peace to others. These joyful 'great lovers of God' proclaim a time of rebirth and renewal for the human community.

GIFT and HOPE FOR THE WORLD!

Our world will be a much better place when more persons have passed through their 'dark night' and embraced the quietude and simplicity of a more contemplative lifestyle. Yes, FAITH grows in the dark night.

Imagine a family, community, parish, city, world with more and more persons living from the freedom of their true selves, with more authentic compassion in every human encounter, with more persons witnessing in their everyday lives, the energy of God's life through simple acts of kindness and mercy. Here is the fulfillment of God's dream – that God's life and God's love fills the whole earth through us human beings.



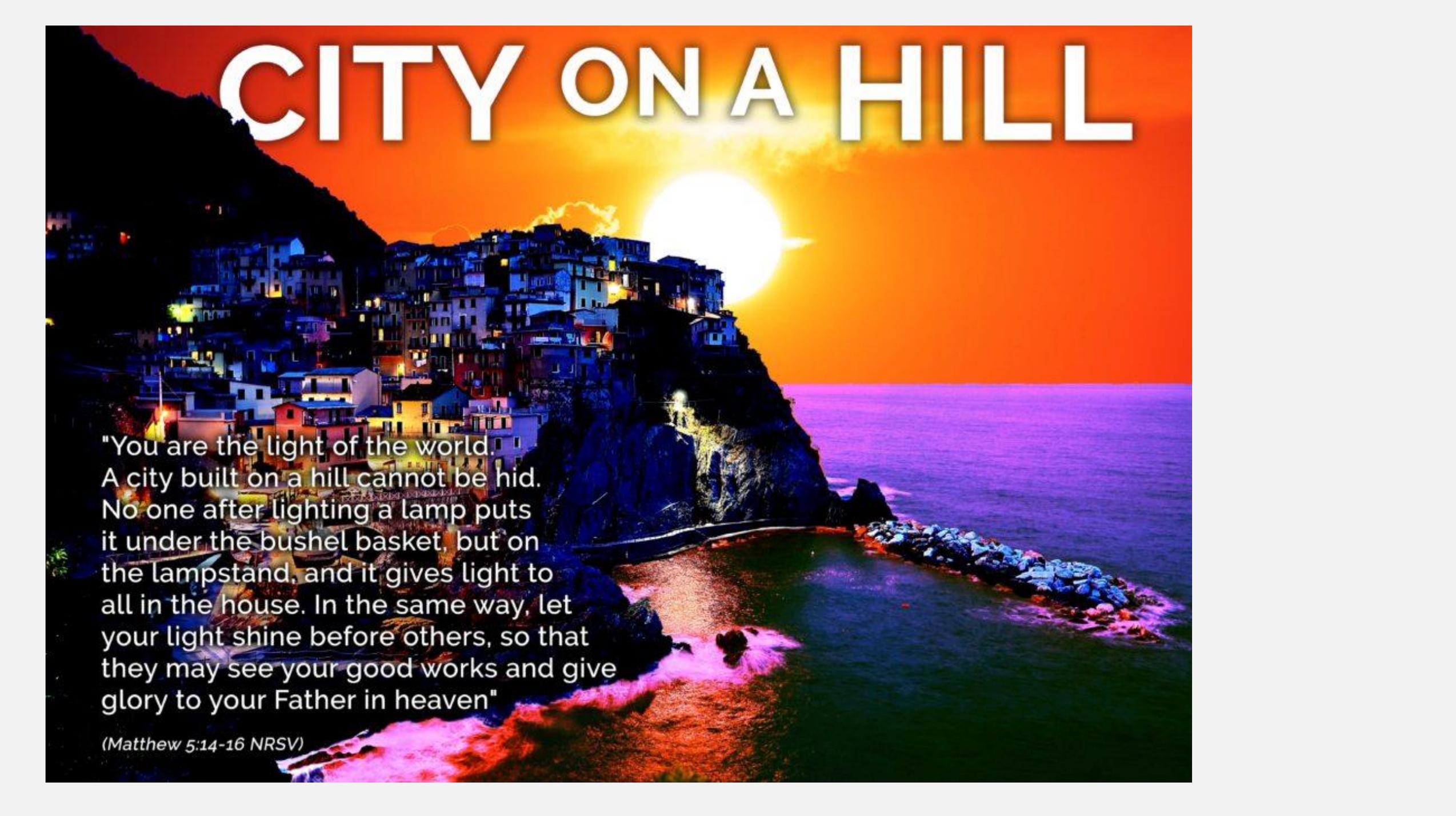
**Nations
shall walk
in your light.**

ISAIAH 60:3

**You must live
the faith
and
share it well!**

- Pope Francis

CITY ON A HILL



"You are the light of the world.
A city built on a hill cannot be hid.
No one after lighting a lamp puts
it under the bushel basket, but on
the lampstand, and it gives light to
all in the house. In the same way, let
your light shine before others, so that
they may see your good works and give
glory to your Father in heaven"

(Matthew 5:14-16 NRSV)

IS THIS COVID-TIME A DARK NIGHT?

Q and A ... let's talk about it

FAITH GROWS IN THE DARK NIGHT...

What did I learn tonight?

**What ONE thing stays with me
that I am going to try?**

OUR MOVING FORWARD PRAYER...

We give you thanks and praise, Beloved One, God of our longings and deepest desires. You are in our world, one with us, moving with us through this time of troubling chaos yet deep creativity. You are touching many souls with your unconditional love. Protect us from becoming discouraged or unduly saddened by the darkness and violence in our world. We are not alone. We are connected to the Source of all love, all goodness, all truth and light. Continue to beckon us to dream new dreams - *“infinitely more than we can ask for or imagine”*. We make our prayer in Jesus' name. AMEN.

Let us go now living in the peace of Christ...



Prepared by
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