

As Coronavirus Affects Mental Health, Celebrating Easter, Passover Can Help

The coronavirus is taking its toll on the emotional and mental well-being of Americans. About 36% of Americans report that the coronavirus outbreak has gravely affected their mental health, with rates of anxiety and depression likely to spike in the weeks ahead. My heart goes out to every American struggling to process this national tragedy. Over half of Americans are praying for an end to the coronavirus, and I join my prayer to theirs. In trying times like these, it's more important than ever to find consolation in the God who loves us.

Next week marks the beginning of Holy Week for Christians and Passover for Jews. These are two of the most important religious seasons for these prominent monotheistic faiths. Statistics say that 70% of American Jews participate in a Seder meal during Passover, while 80% of American adults celebrate Easter. Though Christians and Jews may not be able to celebrate in brick-and-mortar churches or synagogues this year, we can still remember and take comfort in the spiritual lessons of Palm Sunday and Passover.

At their most basic level, Palm Sunday and Passover are celebrations of God's salvific work. They remind us that, beneath and within world history, there is the divine history of God's grace and action. For Christians, Holy Week is a time to remember God's unique action through the person of His Son. For Jews, Passover is a time to remember God's mercy on Israel during the trials of Egypt. The key to both celebrations is memory: the memory of God's presence, providence and love throughout human history.

While we're all stuck inside because of social distancing, we might be losing track of time and forgetting our real connection to God's plan for us. Passover and Palm Sunday are reminders that, wherever and whoever we are, God has never forgotten us, and He never will.

But more than a memory of God's saving grace, these religious celebrations offer us reason for real, transformative hope. We know that God has acted before to rescue His people from slavery to the thrones and dominions of sin and death. In Passover, Jews celebrate God's consecration of Israel as His people set apart from the world, free from the world's tyranny, confusion and oppression. On Palm Sunday, Christians celebrate Christ's arrival in Jerusalem as the hoped-for Messiah, the King of God's people who will rescue them from sin. As we celebrate these holidays again this year, we can have hope that God will rescue us again, saving us from slavery to disease and death.

This hope isn't about *wishing* or *wanting*. Hope is about *believing*. When we have hope in God's care for us, we believe in God's love for us. And when we really believe in God's love for us, we live our lives differently: without fear, without worry and without the inner torment of anxiety. Hope, rooted in faith and blossoming in love of God, is our surest spiritual remedy against the evils of despair, depression and anxiety. As hard as it is to have hope in dark times like these, amid all the chaos caused by the coronavirus, the Judeo-Christian faiths can be a light in the darkness.

Of course, so many of us are hurting because we feel trapped. During COVID-19, a lot of us are left wondering what to do with ourselves. We look around us and see a world battling disease, but so many of us are cooped up at home, helpless to intervene.

But we aren't helpless. Passover and Palm Sunday are our calls to action; through these holidays, we are called to pray, love

each other and trust in God. And through prayer, love and trust, we can become a healed people who spread God's healing to the world. We are all hurting; our religions remind us always to turn to the God who heals.

Judaism and Christianity share the same commitment to God's salvation history and His providential care for us. There is one single fabric of grace beginning in the Garden of Eden, extending through the Exodus from Egypt and culminating in God's care for us today. That history continues right here, right now. The coronavirus can't and won't stop God from continuing His mission to save His people. In the end, God will triumph over all evil. Through this shared faith, and as we enter into a week of shared religious celebration, Jews and Christians can unite around the strength that comes from God and take heart. {eo}

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