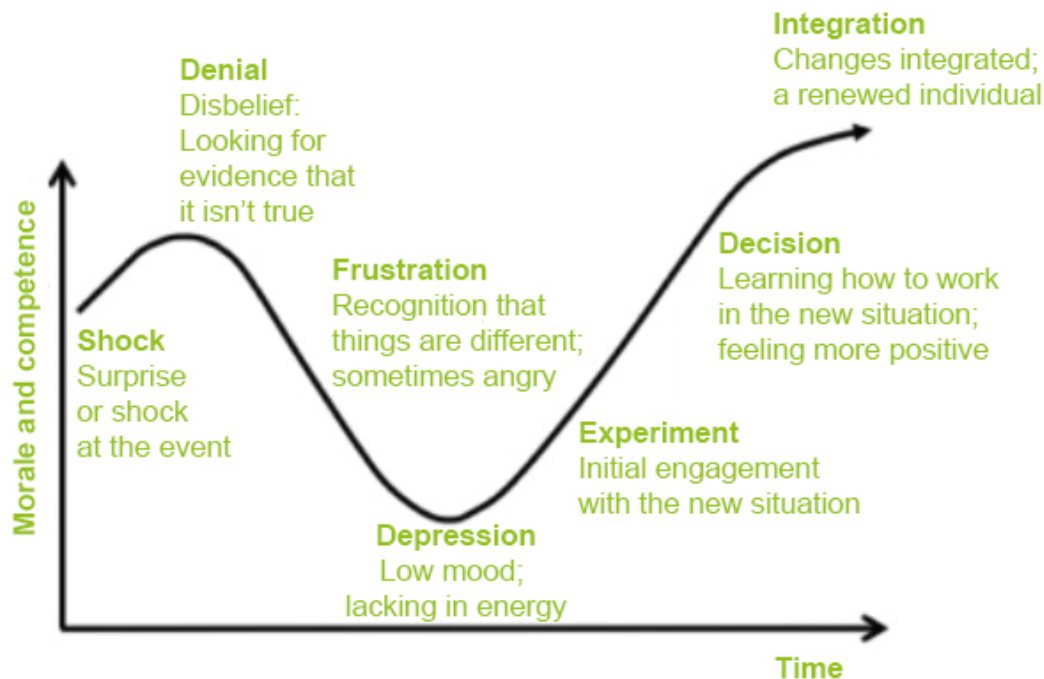


Covid-19 Week 5
Good News of Hope
Bishop C. Andrew Doyle

There is an old Kubler Ross graph that helps us understand how people are managing the stress of new and changed situations.

The Kübler-Ross change curve



Our lives are changing, they have changed, and the choices we make today are going to impact our lives well into the future.

Some people have had the virus, others are presumed positive, many are under quarantine, and now a host of you are under “shelter at home” or “stay home – work safe” orders-. Your clergy and your diocesan staff have been working hard. All of us are in different parts of Kübler-Ross’ graph. Some are still in shock, others frustrated, some grieving the loss of the expected. Meanwhile others are getting a sense of the future, grabbing hold of innovation, and taking control and agency over life, work, ministry. All of us in this moment are ready to seize hope.

In all of this we are buoyed up by our Christian faith. It is true that there are many without certainty, some with curiosity, and still others who are without hope all around us. This makes navigating what we hear so difficult.

The one thing we all share is the notion, the myth, that we can protect ourselves through wealth, working hard, the right friends, the right prayers, or even being good. Bargaining with God is an ancient practice, so is believing that we can be victorious without God and God's help.

Myth that we can be saved by our own work, or saved by the structures which surround us or uphold our life, are all concepts that are quickly fading into the rearview mirror. The COVID-19 virus, as with death itself, is an equal opportunity illness.

St. Paul lived and ministered in a similar time. He bears witness in Colossians 2:8 to the fact that myths were crumbling and belief in the dominion of gods, demigods, and the structures that depended upon them were ending. But that the faithful understood that in Christ there was hope. That death, and the virus, will not have the last word. That light will reign. That love and hope will prevail on the last day and in our day. Heaven is not empty and we do not have to put our trust in the world but instead we put our trust in God and in the hope we have from Christ.ⁱ

Does this mean we don't need to follow the very best science, social distance, quarantine, or follow the directions of health officials? Of course not. We do not believe in a faith that magically protects the faithful from a disease.

We do the things our best science and health officials expect us to do in order to save as many lives as possible.

We also believe in prayer. And, we know that this virus will not be victorious over creation. We know that we won't have to be in our homes forever. We know that we have agency and wisdom given to us by God to do what is best for ourselves and others. We know this season will come to an end. And, we know that when it does, we want to have acted out of hope and the very best of Christian virtue for the world and our neighbors. We want to look back and say we did everything we could to help heal our communities.

What we discover in the art of sarcophagi and on the walls of the catacombs is the good shepherd. This is not merely a reminder of the images of scripture – for surely it is that. It also replaces the image of Caesar, philosopher's, and mythic gods which were featured so prominently in public spaces in the first centuries after Christ's resurrection. It reveals the pronounced understanding that Christ the shepherd was where our hope lay. In death, in suffering illness, in plague, famine, war, and persecution. It is upon Christ and in hope that we place our trust. As in the scripture, the good shepherds crook staves off danger in the dark of the night. While others flee, it is the image of Christ our shepherd who faithfully stands by us.

Another figure seen in early Christian art is the figure of Lazarus. He is our foretaste of resurrection. He is often pictured holding The Gospel in his hand.ⁱⁱ

As we think about our God we easily come back to Psalm 23. "The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want ... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, because you are with me ..." We remember the shepherd from the gospels who knows us, calls us by name, comes after us, and leads us into green pastures. Our hope in Christ is a comfort for those who grieve the life misplaced for this short time. Our hope in Christ is a comfort for those who

worry for those who are ill and facing this dreaded disease. Our hope in Christ is comfort for those who are compromised and we fear may soon have it. Our hope in Christ is comfort for those who stay and seek shelter in their home. Our hope in Christ is comfort for those who are alone and who are waiting for us to call on them. We say the words together, Christ's "rod and staff comforts me", in him "I fear no evil."ⁱⁱⁱ

As we ponder what we can do, and how we can do it, let us take up the work of shepherding together. Let us shepherd together our families and our friends. Let us shepherd our neighbors. Let us shepherd our co-workers, school friends, and loved ones. Let us shepherd, as Christ, in this time.

Pray with me that we find our hope in Christ as the world swirls around us. Pray with me that we may rest in Christ's shepherding care. And, pray that we may be examples of Christ's presence in the world around us. Help us to beat back death with Christ's shepherd's crook. Help us to be the friend in the dark night of the soul. Help us to find missionary ways to be guide our neighborhoods and communities to safety during this time of trial.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

ⁱ I am doing a little biblical jazz here and riffing off of Pope Benedict's translation and exegesis of this text. Pope Benedict exegetes this passage playing off with reality of difference between understanding the words for property as the words in Greek *hyparchonton*—Vg. *Bonorum* and the word for possessions *hyparxin*—Vg. *Substantiam*. Benedict writes, "We must not overlook the link between these two types of 'substance', between means of support or material basis and the word of faith as the 'basis', the 'substance' that endures." PP. XVI. "Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi* of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI to the Bishops, Priest, Deacons, Men and Women Religious, and All the Lay Faithful on Christian Hope." The Vatican, The Vatican, 30 Nov. 2007, www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.