

**“What Can We Be Thankful For?”: Facing COVID-19 with Hope**

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Although the whole process had its own challenges, it was the section in the middle of every Unit that was the most demanding. It required each author to include reflections on, “What Can We Be Thankful For?” Now, this was exceptionally demanding, even for the most creative among us. And we had many creative people, many of whom were to go ahead to become distinctive leaders in their different career paths.¹ The convenor, Musa W. Dube, would not let us leave this part too quickly. “What must we be grateful for?” she would insist. This was in early 2003, in Mokolodi Nature Reserve, some 30 kilometres out of Gaborone, the capital city of Botswana. The task: writing and finalizing material for *AfricaPraying*². In this beautiful setting, we were to reflect on the positives in the middle of a devastating epidemic. Without the antiretroviral therapy many of us now take for granted today, AIDS was killing people at a staggering pace. We were truly in the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23: 4). As the work of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians has continued to remind and challenge us, HIV has been the ultimate test of faith for many people of God.

So, in our rooms, with frogs scaring many of us, we wrestled with the question, “What can we be thankful for?” in the era of HIV and AIDS? That section in *AfricaPraying* is as demanding and applicable then as it is today. In the valley of the shadow of death wrought by COVID-19, “What can we be thankful for?” Indeed, the question looks misplaced and ethically problematic. When many families have buried their loved ones due to COVID-19, does it not sound absurd to talk about being thankful for anything? When cases of sexual and gender-based violence have gone up due to the lockdowns, can we really be thankful for anything? At a time when the lockdowns have locked down livelihoods, surely we should not be referring to the need to be thankful? When our freedom of movement has been curtailed, can we be grateful for anything?

I would like to submit that these questions are legitimate and that we must not rush to massage them with responses that minimise their significance. In order for any healing to take place, the depth of the pain must be acknowledged. That our world is reeling from the effects of COVID-19 must be admitted. We must lament and mourn. In anguish, we are allowed, like Jesus on the cross, to plead, “Our God, our God, why have you forsaken us?” (cf Mark 15: 34). Collectively, we must wrestle with God as we seek to make sense of the apparent senseless of the COVID-19 pandemic. We must resist the temptation to proclaim, “peace, peace when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6: 14). Individually and in community, we must pause and be provoked by the cries of the children whose mother has to cook stones in the hope that her children will fall asleep, even as the stones take forever to complete the miracle of becoming food.³ Yes, we must be disturbed by the millions of people in the world’s informal sector whose livelihoods are being threatened by the lockdowns due to COVID-19.

However, the hope to which we are called does not allow us to refuse to see the signposts of God’s love and mercy during COVID-19. Musa Dube’s insistent and even logic-defying question must force us to sit up and ask, yet again, “What can we be thankful for?” I submit that there is, indeed, much



that we can be thankful for, even within the uncertainty brought by COVID-19. The blessings are many: counting them one by one would require a longer narrative. Here, I shall signal only a few.

First, we can be thankful for how COVID-19, like the ongoing HIV challenge, shines light on what we need to straighten in our world today. Painful as it is to acknowledge, COVID-19 is like a mirror that reflects the many uncomfortable truths about ourselves and ways and doings. Therefore, we appreciate the pandemic for, once again, exposing the ills of our world. The devastation aside, we can be grateful that we have nowhere to hide. Our iniquitous systems are being called out for what they are. We are a world where billions must work every day of their lives for them to have a fighting a chance. We are a world where millions do not have access to food and clean drinking water. COVID-19 has reasserted that we are a world that is arrogant, unequal and violent. Thanks to COVID-19, we are reminded that most of the declarations regarding making poverty history, having health insurance for all, strengthening social safety nets and other hyperbolic statements we have made have ended in our lofty conference venues. These are the same venues we can no longer use today in fear. We must be thankful to COVID-19 for laying bare our hypocrisy, insensitivity and ability to ignore the gross inequality in our world.

We are thankful to COVID-19 for proclaiming and forcing a Sabbath on the world. COVID-19 has struck a highly effective “pause” button on a madly peripatetic world. We have been in a mad rush...to nowhere! God’s creation is breathing yet again while we, the humans who are supposed to be living in harmony with God’s creation, have been sequestered. We are thankful to COVID-19 for having a dramatic effect on pollution. Urban skylines, almost permanently clogged due to our stampede to produce and profit, have been liberated. What can we be thankful for? That COVID-19 has shown us that at periodic intervals, we need to have planned lockdowns that will not have adverse effects on the more vulnerable among us, but will allow the world to rest. Perhaps the United Nations will, through a consultative process, initiate a process where a scheduled global lockdown becomes a reality? This could take place by region, but is particularly critical for the global North, the most culpable part of the world when it comes to pollution.

One of the most consistent features of global capitalism has been its insistence on its inevitability and alleged viability. It is driven by the ideology that there is no alternative (TINA). Like sheep led to the slaughter, we have been forced to accept this ideology and to live within its promptings. The majority of us have been so enslaved and brutalised that we have come to accept its terms and conditions. What can we be thankful for? That COVID-19 has taught us, eloquently, that another world is possible. That planes might not fly for some days and the world will still go on. That some conferences, meetings and conversations can take place online without everyone having to fly to somewhere. Crucially, COVID-19 has enabled us to see that another world is possible. Going forward, we will need to imagine and reimagine the contours and possibilities of this new world that is beckoning us.

COVID-19 has instigated an outpouring of compassion and solidarity. Communities of faith are going out of their way to surround the more vulnerable members of the community with support and love. We can be thankful to COVID-19 for enabling us to recover the human spirit and to appreciate those things we previously considered simple. COVID-19 has reminded us of our shared vulnerability as flesh and blood human beings, and as needing each other. For this, we must be thankful. We are a world that has gravitated towards celebrating only an imaginary ‘talented tenth’ that is responsible for innovation, while relegating the rest of us to expendables. COVID-19 has taken us back to a world where the voices of neighbours are not noise to be shut out, but sweet melodies to be cherished. Marooned and fearful, we have been schooled that we belong together. COVID-19 has taught us



what the beautiful African concept of Ubuntu has insisted throughout the years, namely, “I am because you are; since we are, therefore I am.”⁴

Faced with the devastation caused by COVID-19, we have every reason to be unsettled and upset. We are well within our rights to question if we shall ever be able to return to our earlier world as we knew it. Perhaps the pandemic marks one of those turning points where things actually turn. Yet, in all these processes, we need to pause. If asked, “what can we be thankful for in the face of COVID-19?” we should be confident to reply, “Yes, there is much we should be thankful for” and proceed to count our many blessings, one by one.

¹ Participants included, in no particular order, Dube herself, Isabel A. Phiri, Gideon Byamugisha, Tinyiko S. Maluleke, Cheryl and Prince Dibeela, Sarojini Nadar. For contributors, see, note 2 below, iv.

² Musa W. Dube, ed., *AfricaPraying: A Handbook on HIV/AIDS Sensitive Sermon Guidelines and Liturgy* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2003).

³ “Coronavirus: Kenyans moved by widow cooking stones for children,” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52494404> (accessed 01 May 2020.)

⁴ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969).