



CELEBRATE ... in the midst of Pandemic?

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COVID 19 continues to consume and ravage our lives with its unpredictable and senseless spread, exhausting and fatiguing us, grieving and overwhelming us.

Can we celebrate in the midst of a pandemic? Can we give thanks in the midst of pain and suffering?

It was in jail chains when the apostle Paul sang hymns of thanksgiving. It was in prison when Bonhoeffer wrote his words of reflection and praise. It was in the midst of hurricane Ike in Houston, when the congregation I served gathered for its largest celebratory gathering. It was in the midst of war in Beirut when we gathered just to sing, lament, and give thanks.

I have come to believe that *celebrating* is a spiritual practice. The word *celebration* means to perform rites, to commemorate or honor with demonstrations of joy. Ancient people called it worship.

In our complicated and messy world we have lost the practice and power of celebration. Abraham Joshua Heschel expresses it in these words - Instead of celebrating we are seeking to be amused or entertained. Celebration is an active state, an act of expressing reverence and appreciation. To be entertained is a passive state, it is to receive pleasure afforded by an amusing act or a spectacle.

Perhaps this is why religions and cultures around the world take celebrations seriously, as does God. In the 23rd chapter of Leviticus God is very specific about festivals and celebrations to be observed. Weekly there is the Sabbath. In the spring there is Passover and Unleavened Bread, First fruits and Pentecost. In autumn there is the Feast of the Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Festival of Tabernacles, each with a specific purpose.

Passover is to remember salvation. The First Fruits is about abundance and fertility of the land. Pentecost marks the summer harvest in thanksgiving, and the Christian celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Feasts of Trumpets calls people to Sabbath rest. The Day of Atonement is to repent, turn around, and make things right. The Feast of Tabernacles is to remember the shelter God provided in the wilderness.

Each celebration is a holy day, a day to ponder the Holy One and the Sacred in our lives, a day to remember what God has done. Hence we celebrate Thanksgiving and the Christian Holy Days of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, to remember, not forget what God has done!

Celebrations are usually done in community. But when life is endangered and everyone is at risk physical community is not possible. In that case we celebrate the gift of zoom, electronic and virtual connection, and thank God for the gifts of technology and phone, of internet and the world wide web.

So just because we cannot gather does not mean that we give up on celebration, thanksgiving and singing. In fact, we celebrate in spite of restrictions, we give thanks despite limitations, and we sing whole heartedly to the One who continues to give us reasons to celebrate – life and breath, grace inexhaustible and gifts unnumbered. So, celebrate and create rituals you can do on your own or with your household. Give thanks. Count your blessings. Find the joy, or put the joy in the moment. Take time to play and pray, lament and sing, creating new ways of celebrating. Yes, in spite of the pandemic.

This Thanksgiving will we have to celebrate without physical community. We will have to remember and give thanks trusting that next year will be different!