The Church and COVID 19

by Steven Goings

When Jesus returns from praying at Gethsemane only to find Peter, John and James sleeping instead of keeping watch, he laments, "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

From a Christian point-of-view, there are times when we are forced to acknowledge the weakness of our flesh while maintaining the strength of our connection to spirit. The Church during the COVID 19 pandemic is one of those times.

The temptation for many church communities will be to be to pretend that we are ***only*** spiritual beings and that faith in God or the Church will protect our bodies from the coronavirus just as Daniel was protected in the lion's den. But the case of Daniel was of course a miracle, an exception to the rule -- not a blanket promise of protection from physical harm for the entire community of believers.

Not even living the holiest and most sin-free life humanly possible is necessarily an indicator of divine favor or a guarantee of protection from physical harm. Before returning to his sleeping disciples at Gethsemane, Jesus pleads with his Father, "Everything is possible for you. Take this cup away from me. But not what I will, but what you will."

The cup was not taken away and the body of the Son of God was not protected. Not long after this prayer, Jesus was arrested. His body was tortured in the most infamous and gruesome example of state sanctioned capital punishment the world has ever seen. He was tried and crucified the next day.

How fortunate we all are that it was the will of the Father, not of the Son, that prevailed at Gethsemane! For God's plan of salvation was accomplished first by lifting up for all to see the reality -- and weakness -- of the flesh. And then finally transcending the flesh altogether to show that even death is not the final word, but the eternal life of the spirit shall have the final say.

The mystery of Jesus Christ was that he was both fully human (the Son of Man) and fully divine (the Son of God). Salvation was not accomplished despite his bodily humanity, but through it.

Our first challenge is to except the physical limitations of the body and do everything we humanly can to protect ourselves and our community from COVID-19 by practicing the physical distancing recommended by physicians and mandated by the government and to recognize that this physical distancing includes church gatherings.

Our second challenge is to remember that although we are physical beings, we too are more than just the flesh. We are spiritual beings as well and we must take advantage of every opportunity for spiritual communion with each other especially now when we are forced to be physically apart.

Our third challenge is to accept that we are not in charge of the grace or will of God. Some of us, like Daniel, may be cast into the lion's den and come out miraculously unscathed. Some of us -- despite every prayer and precaution-- may be struck down.

No matter how our personal stories end up playing out during this global pandemic, we would be wise to use this crisis as an opportunity for spiritual reflection and growth. In this new season of COVID-19, an excellent demonstration of the commandment to love thy neighbor as thyself is to practice frequent hand-washing and physical distancing.