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When a child heads off to preschool for the first time, a parent may wonder, “What comes after this?” As the child ventures into the world, she learns new ideas, exploring possibilities for her life, discovering new potentials within herself. As she graduates from high school, she may wonder, “What comes after this?”

College graduates face the challenges of leaving behind the educational system that has nurtured them for many years, facing unknown futures and wondering what comes next.

When young couples have their first child, they explore this question all over again as they ponder how to care for their newborn, for soon they learn that no instruction manual was included with the arrival of their child, and even with all the best training, they discover that each child is unique and seems to follow his own pattern.

When the last child leaves home and parents face an empty nest, the question comes up once again, “What comes after this?”

As retirement morphs into our older years and our health begins to fade, the question becomes

even more urgent as we draw closer to death: “What comes after this?”

It’s an ago-old question: what comes after death? Religions throughout history and around the globe have offered visions of what may come next, with many reassuring us of some kind of afterlife, whether called heaven, *samāwāt* in Islam, or enlightenment or *nirvana* in Buddhism. In the Hebrew scriptures in the first portion of our Bible, writers spoke about *Sheol*, the place of the dead. It was a shadowy place where all people went after they died, and it’s what Job referred to as he cried out,

But a human dies and lies there;

a person expires, and where is he?

¹¹Water vanishes from the sea;
a river dries up completely.

¹²But a human lies down and doesn’t rise
until the heavens cease;
they don’t get up and awaken from sleep.

¹³I wish you would hide me
in [Sheol] the underworld,
conceal me until your anger passes,
set a time for me, and remember me.¹

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After Job had lost everything—his wealth, his family—three friends tried to comfort him by asking Job to recognize that his sin had brought this suffering upon him. Job argued with them, disagreeing that he had done anything to bring such suffering, but he struggled to make sense of why he suffered, something we all do from time to time

He noticed that trees had new life after being cut down, for sprouts brought forth branches and leaves once again. “What comes after my suffering?” he wondered. “Trees have life after being cut down, so do I have the same hope? Can I sprout again?”

Isn’t that the same question we wonder today? What comes next for us after we die? Even young children may encounter the mystery of death, as did one girl attending her grandmother’s funeral.

The five-year-old girl came home from her grandmother’s funeral in a car with her other grandmother. “Where did Grandma go?” she asked.

“We believe she went to be with God,” the other grandmother replied.

“How old was she?” asked the girl.

“She was eighty years old,” her grandmother replied.

“How old are you?”

“Eighty-three,” said the grandmother.

The little girl thought a bit, then said, “I hope God hasn’t forgotten you!”²

Disciples pastor Serene Jones, serving as the president of Union Theological Seminary in New York, suggests that a large portion of Americans have been struggling with this question about what comes next, for many of us have faced the possibility of death on a massive scale during this pandemic. It’s forced many of us to wonder about the purpose of our lives. In an interview she said,

People ask, “What does it mean to live a good life and be good to people?” These are deeply religious questions, and will have a profound impact on the spiritual sensibilities of an entire nation.³

Greg Sterling, the dean of Yale Divinity School, recognizes that, “We all know attendance had been falling in churches before, but people are spiritual, and I think the need to connect to God may be greater after this [pandemic] is over.” He suggests

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that the economic crisis, cases of police brutality, and racial inequality have made us ready for change, and he explained, “I think all these things mean a great deal to people and influence their sense of spirituality.”⁴

Could it be that through this pandemic we’ll see a resurgence in our desire to draw closer to God? Might we learn something more about ourselves and God during this time when we’ve had to place our lives on pause? I’ve heard some tell how they eat meals with families more often, discovering the healthy benefits of homecooked meals rather than the abundance of fast food. Those who spent hours on the road commuting have discovered more space for walks around their neighborhoods, meeting some neighbors for the first time. Our environment seems to breathe a sigh of relief as we humans send less pollution into the air due to travel restrictions. Even the water appears clearer in some parts of the world as our planet begins to heal from our human insistence on using up God’s creation for our benefit.

It's almost as though together we're breathing a collective sigh of relief. Try it: *Sigh...*

Our sigh doesn't ignore those who have died, for we breathe with those families who have lost loved ones. *Sigh...*

Our sigh does not ignore those who have lost jobs, for we breathe with them as they long for new opportunities. *Sigh...*

Our sigh does not ignore those who have been discriminated against for the color of their skin or sexual orientation, for we breathe with them as they long for acceptance. *Sigh...*

Our sigh breathes in the pain of the world, and together we exhale God's Spirit of hope that moves within each of us, for even during Job's isolation and his struggle to understand God, he also learned a great deal. His trust seemed to grow stronger, for he could proclaim,

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I know that my Savior lives,
and at the end
he will stand on this earth.
²⁶ My flesh may be destroyed,
yet from this body
I will see God.
²⁷ Yes, I will see him for myself,
and I long for that moment.⁵

Job longed to know what would come after his suffering, just as we long to know what comes next after this pandemic. We may not know the details about when a vaccine will arrive, or when the number of infections will decline and remain level, or when life will be normal again, We do know that God remains among us, giving us hope in this life and the next, just as God has done from before Job was born, in our lives, and into the generations after us. What comes after this? I can't wait to see.

⁵ Job 19:25-27, CEV

¹ Job 14:10-13, CEB.

² Hodgins, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #193.

³ Alfred Lubrano, "Could COVID-19 inspire the faithful?" *The Elkhart Truth*, August 8-9, B3.

⁴ Ibid.