



James C. Peterson

# Cell Time

**I**t is interesting how many Christian classics were written by authors in prison. Paul wrote Philipians while under guard. Julian of Norwich wrote her theological study *Showings* (about 1373) from a walled-in cell with one small window into her church sanctuary and one to the street to give prayer and counsel. Martin Luther did his translation of the New Testament into German that is still the standard for the language, in a Wartburg Castle cell to hide from the Pope's death sentence. John Bunyan, jailed in Bedford, England, for preaching the good news, used his time there to write *Pilgrim's Progress*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from a Nazi prison. Martin Luther King's *Why We Can't Wait* started with his letter from a Birmingham jail. It appears that confinement can be productive.

I do not know how many of you now reading, are doing so from a prison cell, but it is probable that physical distancing will still be in place for many of us as this issue of *PSCF* is published. Some may be telecommuting or home schooling, but I would venture that, for most, there is more time for quiet and focus than usual. Now may be the time to write that classic that you have been considering, maybe in the form of an article for *PSCF*. Or maybe the first step will be to catch up on reading your past issues. They may have been tantalizingly out of reach under the crunch of time pressure, but may be more reachable now.

Let's consider a little more from Julian of Norwich's cell work. Julian lived through several waves of the black plague that killed two-thirds of the people in her town. Her neighbors would not receive a theological essay from a woman, but she could report a vision that she experienced that gave much needed reassurance. She vividly recounted what she saw, in detail, of Jesus suffering on the cross, dying for them. God who would come to live among us, and even allow himself to be tortured to death, somehow on our behalf, must have undying love for us. Even as the plague strikes, God does not hate us; she says, "See how he gave his life for us." That greatest of all mysteries does not change in any circumstances, no matter how dire or puzzling.

In another vision, she saw God holding gently, in the palm of his hand, a walnut that she recognized as the

entire world. As large as our problems may loom, they, and all the world, fit in the palm of God's hand. Our world and sufferings are close to God's attention, but are never overwhelming to God who cares for us. God is not threatened by the novel coronavirus, nor ultimately do his people need to be. We take all due precautions, but we are not living in fear.

History does not just repeat itself, it often rhymes. Julian reminds us that we have been through worse times. There have been plagues before. The repeated pattern of the Psalms is to begin with a lament of how dire the author's situation has become, then think about how great God is and how God has eventually delivered before. That is not to downplay the seriousness of what we may face, but rather to remember who is with us and has always provided for us. Jesus does that when he cries out from the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). This is the opening sentence of Psalm 22. With no chapter markings in the Hebrew scrolls, Jesus was using the standard method of directing attention to a particular Psalm by quoting its first line. Psalm 22, having honestly expressed the horror that the psalmist is experiencing, goes on to remember that God is still present: it ends with a promise of deliverance for the psalmist and God's work continuing. How fitting for Jesus to be reciting this Psalm to himself in such a painful hour, and directing his disciples to remember it as well. That is model and motivation for resilient hope for ourselves, and more, for living out God's kingdom for others. We can look for ways in difficult times to fulfill the prayers and hopes of the people around us. Does that neighbor two doors down have a way to get food? Is another isolated by physical distancing? Maybe they would appreciate a phone call or a conversation from six feet away. There are new opportunities to serve for each of us in this time.

As this editorial is being written, we have such limited data on the pandemic. We know that we have lost many to it, but we do not know its future course. Whatever that might be, God is, and we are God's. Thanks be to God. +

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