Blog
Coronavirus




Snow begins to fall on Bryant Park's ice-skating rink in New York City. (Celina Kim Chapman)



by Celina Kim Chapman

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***Editor's note:*** *Notes from the Field includes reports from young people volunteering in ministries of Catholic sisters. A partnership with Catholic Volunteer Network, the project began in the summer of 2015.*

Although the winter brings darker days and colder nights, the warmth and glow of December usually brings the promise that such a season isn't all bad.

The "-bers" of the year, as I like to call the last four months — September, October, November and December — typically speed by with all the different holidays, events and changes. In New England, where I grew up, the "-bers" mean bonfires, apple and pumpkin picking, cozy sweaters, and warm cups of tea. It also means dressing up in costumes, having large family gatherings and singing well-known hymns and carols in packed churches.

Unfortunately, this year, I didn't pour candy into pillowcases or hug my grandmother next to a plate of stuffing. I wasn't greeted by jolly St. Nick when the clock struck midnight the day after Thanksgiving. Like the other holidays throughout the year, Christmas began as a figment of my imagination.

"Could it be?" I thought. "Is it already the end of 2020?"

In the news and throughout social media, there has been a phrase thrown around called "COVID time." This seems to describe how no one knows what day it is because we're all stuck inside doing the same thing every day.

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"COVID time" defines the way our society has slipped from the song our calendars used to sing when we woke up every morning for work or school. Even with my current service site, I've sent emails saying, "Have a good Thursday," only to be promptly corrected afterward with the response, "It's Tuesday."

How do we recover from this slip of time? Can we have Christmas cheer when COVID-19 cases are rising?

New York City, in usual times, is its busiest during the holidays. The real residents of the city claim to despise the way their streets get overcrowded and the surrounding

noise gets even louder than the usual bustle of the rest of the year. New Yorkers are said to go into "holiday hibernation" once the tourists land at LaGuardia or JFK, gleaming with excitement to see the Rockefeller Center tree or ice skate in Bryant Park. Some say you will never see a real New Yorker between the end of November and mid-January, but living in the vibrantly diverse and family-friendly neighborhood of Washington Heights has proved otherwise.

Good Shepherd Volunteers follow the four tenets of spirituality, social justice, simplicity and community. The latter is supposed to reference the community you live with and work alongside, but working from home has expanded my need to include more than just my inner circles.

I partially chose Good Shepherd Volunteers because I love the city: the smell of the grayish air, the faces of thousands of strangers, and the never-ending sounds of buses, cars, bikers, dogs and children. Everything about the concrete jungle has captured my heart and made me want to stay.

Sadly, "COVID time" has made me forget this feeling of love. Staring out my window at the same brown brick apartment building every day as I sit in front of my laptop for hours on end has actually caused me to try and get away from it all. For most of the "-bers," all I wanted to do for the weekend was either go on a hike or find a space that wasn't filled with pigeons and a horizon of towering buildings.



(YouTube/Global Catholic Climate Movement)

I remember feeling confused and unsettled when December arrived. I didn't accept that this month was here, and I was skeptical on how we got to the end of 2020 in the blink of an eye. Yet it hit me quickly: At the fourth floor of an apartment building about five blocks north from my apartment, there on the fire escape was an array of Christmas lights like I've never seen before.

In the suburbs, I always drove around every year to look for awesome Christmas lights, and I thought I had seen it all, but there on 181st Street was an awakening.

Now, to say these lights should be world-famous would be a complete exaggeration. To another eye, these were no different from the next person's fire-escape decor, but for me, in that moment, I saw a community with hope. I felt a community in my heart that didn't get lost in "COVID time." I saw the light at the end of the deep, dark 2020 tunnel. That night, seeing the beginning of everyone putting up their Christmas lights brought me back to real time.

A couple of days later, I noticed that a small park that divides Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue had all the trees dressed in beautiful yellow string lights. What was once a park filled with half-drunken men and trash everywhere now looked like a Christmas dream. My eyes fluttered with glee, and my heart began to stir even more.

As the days went on, New York City started feeling like a place to call home again. I saw more and more apartments every day fill their tiny windows with tinsel, string lights, and the good ole classic Christmas tree. Even our adjacent neighbor, whose apartment we can see from our living room window, had their tree up and lit for all to see — or, at least, us and them because our windows face an alleyway.



The Christmas lights that began it all: the lights from the fourth-floor apartment (Celina Kim Chapman)

In the second week of December, my community of volunteers finally put up our own Christmas tree and decorated the whole apartment. We blasted holiday music, ate those Pillsbury sugar cookies with the snowman prints on top, and sang our hearts out so every New Yorker in our vicinity can also get in festive mood.

Last week, I decided to help my hometown parish beta test a new online church program. In all honesty, I have been slacking on going to online church, so this was a good excuse to attend. I logged on at 9 a.m. and began going through the service almost like I was in person. It felt good to say the prayers I've said since I was almost 5 years old, and, also on this program, I was able to see other parishioners I used to love and know.



Very 2020: Our Christmas tree fell apart, and we had to piece it back together. (Celina Kim Chapman)

During the sermon, my reverend talked about the "pink" Advent candle (officially called "rose red") that is usually displayed in an Advent wreath. He joked about how we have this unique-colored candle in the middle of Advent season, blaring its difference among all the purple. This candle represents hope and joy. As much as the Advent season is about the birth of Jesus, it is also supposed to be a time of reflection, repentance and sacrifice. It is the season to prepare for the coming of our lord savior, Jesus Christ. With that, the pink candle is a pause in the preparation, or maybe even a reminder about how this is a joyous time. There is hope coming.

I may not have enjoyed the "-bers" like I used to, but there are a lot of blessings in my life to be thankful for. My family and I have been safe and healthy, my community and I are continuing to bond and grow together, and I have a service-year position with an incredible nonprofit doing work that I love to do. I also have still been able to go ice skating in Bryant Park and see the Christmas lights glistening through my frosted windowsill. In a year of complete chaos, where life was completely flipped upside-down, finding new community and a home in New York City has lit my pink candle and showed me that the end is not near — only new beginnings.

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This story appears in the **Notes from the Field** feature series. View the full series.