Voices of Sisters
Horizons
Spirituality



(Unsplash/Prometheus Design)



by Sr. Colleen Gibson

Columnist

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

July 29, 2022

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

As I made my way to the beach on an early June morning, the glint of a shell caught my eye. I smiled at the snail that bore it on its back, stuck to the vertical face of the stairs leading up to the boardwalk. "It looks like we're headed to the same place," I thought as I smiled to myself and scurried up the steps to the boardwalk and the beach beyond.

The morning sky had only begun to lighten, bearing the promising marks of the sunrise yet to come. In the stillness of dawn, the world seemed to pause before daybreak. No children dotted the sand. No planes cut across the sky, and no boats disturbed the sea.

Watching the sun come up over the Atlantic, I marveled at the beauty of a new day dawning as I walked the shoreline, sinking deeper into the serenity of the salty surf with each step. As the sun rose higher and burned brighter, I turned to make my way back to where I was staying. The day had begun and, with my heart at peace, my head had begun its foray into the day ahead.

Dusting off my feet as I crossed from the beach to the boardwalk, I saw the glint of a shell at the top of the boardwalk stairs. I doubt that the snail had come to see the sunrise, but still I rejoiced in its ascent. Stopping at the top step, I set aside my plans to head home.

With a soft, fluid motion, the snail made its way over gaps in the boardwalk and shards of stone and glass scattered in its path. This is a snail's pace: an almost imperceivable motion that gets it where it's going with minimal friction and fullness of presence as it searches its way to wherever it's headed.

Watching my little invertebrate friend, my mind began to get frustrated. *Come on! Let's get going! The day has dawned, and you are watching a bug!*

The beauty of my morning walk had burned off, and yet still I sat there, watching the snail slowly sail along. Despite my mind's impatience, my attention remained intently focused on the action unfolding around and within me. The question that surfaced within me was that of the psalmist in Psalm 13: *How long, O Lord? How long?*

Advertisement

With everything happening in the world, this lament felt fitting. How long can this war, this drought, this virus, this suffering, this dissension go on?

If we continue at this pace — in religious life, in public discourse, in our church, and in our world — will we ever make the turn? That is, will we find our direction? Will we pivot to the point where the dawning light is one we can embrace and not a series of should-haves and could-haves?

As Nan Merrill translates the middle of Psalm 13:

> How long will fear rule my life?
>
> Notice my heart and answer me, O my Beloved;
>
> enlighten me, lest I walk as one dead to life;
>
> Lest my ego fears say, "We have won the day;"
>
> Lest they rejoice in their strength.

This, I fear, could and perhaps has become a part of our movement. That we might say, "This pace" — be it too slow or too fast — "is fine." We must remember, after all, that a snail's pace is fine ... for a snail.

We, however, are not snails. We belong to living, breathing communities; we are people seeking the light of dawn and called to press on toward that light. Justice presses us to move faster. It calls us to open our doors wider, to hear voices excluded, and to see who and what is missing. The Spirit assures us that if we follow, grace will never outpace us. Our call is to do this as best we know how and, at the same time, to improve our knowing along the way. This is a call to the church, our congregations, our persons, and our society.

Like the snail, we can't wait. The turn toward the future is not a theory; it's as real as the steps that stand before us. The snail shows us that we must press on, not just dealing with this moment or maybe the next, but the whole staircase ahead of us as best we can know and see it. With agility and persistence, we must face our fears,

interrogate our assumptions, hear laments, and embrace the pace God is calling us to.

We may cry out, "How long?!", but what if God is asking us to pick up the pace and rise to the occasion? To see God's face in the world around us and to discover that God is with us each step of the way? To recognize and embrace the reality that, in fact, we have our home in Jesus?

This is the home that we carry with us in the world, the reality religious life witnesses to, the shell that sparkles in the sun. This home is the love of God. It is the blessing that we (and the psalmist) rejoice in — a steadfast love in which our hearts rejoice, a total union with God, a safe shelter we are called to share with all the world.

Carrying that love with us, we await those whose heads are buzzing with all our present day holds. We make space so that they might find a home in God too, and perhaps slow themselves long enough to sit beside us at the dawn of a new day and embrace the beauty and peace that a pace not unlike that of a snail has to offer us.