

One of the hardest things to accept in life is the fact that everything that is precious to us will, in some way, eventually be taken away. Right now, we are seeing that in a huge way in our experience of this pandemic. So many things have been taken away – the way we interacted with one another, church as we once knew it, gatherings for any kind of family event, travel, dining out, shopping, etc., etc., etc.

But it's there in many other ways too. Our kids grow up and leave home, friends move away, loved ones die, we lose our health, and eventually we die too. Moreover, even what is precious to us in terms of faith and values suffers in the same way: things change, thoughts and feelings shift, rock foundations that once anchored us give way, doubt creeps in, the bottom falls out, and we are left wondering what we really believe in and what really can be trusted.

Happily, this is only half the equation: Everything we lose is eventually given back to us, and in a deeper way. Our life may never be the same after Covid, but it just might be more simple, uncluttered, purer. Our kids become wonderful adults who begin to parent us, new bonds of friendship form across distance, we reconnect in a deeper and more permanent way to our loved ones who have died, we find something deeper and more permanent than physical health, death opens us up to the infinite, and the bottom falling out of old beliefs sends us free-falling to a place where we land on bedrock, on a foundation secure that it can never be taken away.

This pattern is found in the scripture in the story of the Babylonian exile. Here is the background: After arriving in the Promised Land, it took a number of generations to establish control over the land, unite all the various tribes into one nation, and build a temple in Jerusalem as the center for worship. The great kings, David and Solomon, accomplished this and the people were left with a great sense of security, both political and religious. They felt strong. God had promised them a land, and now they had a land; God had promised them a king, and now they had a king; and God had promised them a temple, and now they had a temple. They saw in these 3 realities: land, king, and temple, sure proof of God's existence and God's providence for them. God's promises were empirically verifiable.

But just when they were most complacent inside of that security, the Assyrians came and conquered the land, deported all the people to Babylon, killed the king, and knocked down the temple. With that, the loss of land, king and temple, the bottom fell out of their world, religiously and literally. Everything that had once anchored their security had been taken away from them and they felt exiled – not just from their homeland but also from their God and their religion. If God's presence was assured in land, king, and temple, and these have been taken away, where is God? How do you continue to believe, trust, and live in joy when all that once anchored these has been taken away?

God's answer was this: You will find me again, when you search for me in a deeper way, with your whole heart, your whole mind, and your whole soul. God gives us that same answer today whenever we feel lost, betrayed, orphaned, and disoriented. Search deeper!

And this is the deep lesson in terms of our faith and values – everything that isn't God, be it ever so true and wonderful, will eventually be taken away from us. Why? They aren't God. They might serve wonderfully for a time as icons, but icons held too tightly or held too long become idols from which we need to be purged.

This is true even for what is most precious to us religiously – scripture, the creeds of our faith, the church itself, great saints, great moral mentors. In the end, wonderful as they are, they aren't God. They can be wonderful vehicles towards God, icons, PowerPoint presentations about God. But they aren't God – and always, eventually, somehow a needed iconoclasm will occur and we will, not without deep pain and disillusionment, learn this through bitter experience. All good spiritual literature, including scripture itself, makes this clear.

Icons help lead us to God. Idols block access to God. An idol is simply an icon that has been held on to for too long. And so there is a purifying dynamic written into the DNA of faith itself: We are given certain things to hang onto for a time, a certain language, certain rituals, certain creeds and dogmas, certain spiritual practices, a certain understanding of our faith, holy men and women as models, spiritual literature that nourishes us, and, not least, a certain inner sense of trust and security that all of this is good, is right, and is in some way God.

And this is good, for a while. But the day comes, usually occasioned by deep pain and loss, where the bottom falls out and we go into a free-fall where, no matter what we try to grasp onto will not hold us until eventually we land on something solid, bedrock, God Himself. (Help from Ronald Rolheiser, posting of 28 June, 2009)