

THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK RELIGION

Yes, we can celebrate. Just do it differently.



Karen Garland, left, and Elizabeth Petrides, both of Grand Blanc, kneel in prayer as they receive a blessing from the Rev. Joe Krupp and Deacon Denny Pennell in a procession throughout the Bella Vista neighborhood on March 22 in Grand Blanc. During the COVID-19 pandemic, worship practices and places have had to adjust for health and safety. *Jake May, MLive.com*

Unity and strength: Religious faithful can unite to get through difficult season

Douglas Kindschi *Guest opinion*

I remember Easter Sunday celebrations. Brass instruments accompanying the processional, choirs singing the Hallelujah Chorus, churches filled with extra seating brought in for the service, the new outfits and Easter bonnets. I even remember some of the sermons. Sometimes the day began with an Easter sunrise service at dawn. Once, while traveling in Europe, we attended an Easter midnight vigil where the cathedral was darkened as we approached midnight. Then a single candle was lit and from it others ignited their candles until the whole church was bathed in light and filled with singing.

But not this year.

As a child, I remember Easter egg hunts with the extended family or at some public event. There was also the dyeing of Easter eggs. As a parent, we would have the fun of hiding the eggs, often plastic ones filled with candy. It was a day of families gathering, churches filled, and public events.

But not this year.

And it wasn't just that one day. Holy Week began the previous Sunday on what is known as Palm Sunday, where Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was celebrated. Sometimes children would become part of the procession, waving palm branches. As the week progressed, some churches had Maundy Thursday services commemorating the Passover meal Jesus

spent with his disciples, which we now refer to as the Last Supper. The wine and the bread, which are central elements in that Jewish meal, called the Seder, were used by Jesus to represent his blood and body and became the central elements of the Christian Eucharist.

But not this year.

This year, churches are closed to the public. Some services are livestreamed from the sanctuary with just a few clergy and sometimes a musician or two present (separated from each other by the recommended 6-foot standard). For others, the participants remain in their homes and remotely come together through online technology to create an event.

The coronavirus is not just attacking Christians and Easter celebrations.

Even though the Jewish calendar and the Western Gregorian calendar are somewhat different, Passover and Holy Week occur during the same general time of the year.

This year, Passover began on April 9, the same day Christians recognize the original Last Supper. Our Jewish brothers and sisters would normally get together to celebrate on this very special occasion.

But not this year.

Our Muslim friends and neighbors in a couple weeks will begin their month-long

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Richard Rohr, ecumenical teacher, Christian mystic and Franciscan monk

SEE CELEBRATE, A4

Celebrate

FROM A1

celebration of Ramadan, one of the five pillars of Islam. While Ramadan is a time of fasting each day from dawn to dusk, it concludes after sundown with a joyous ceremony and meal called iftar. This is often shared with friends and family, and often with the whole religious community.

But not this year.

What are we to make of this particular crisis when an invisible microbe has brought the whole world to its knees? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of Great Britain, notes that religions and nations have faced crises throughout history, but not at the same time and not by a common enemy.

Will this global pandemic bring us together as we face our common enemy? Will it give us a new appreciation for science and medicine as we care for those affected

and search for a cure? Will it help us to look beyond religion, race and nation to see our common humanity?

Crises do have the potential for negative response. We could fight over needed resources; we could blame others or look for some scapegoat to hold responsible.

But crises like wars can also bring people together. It could remind us of the need to stick together and to share. It could remind us of our lack of power to control everything. It could teach us humility.

The famous religious leader and Protestant reformer Martin Luther called for action, not mere acceptance. Back in 1527, a deadly plague hit Luther's town of Wittenberg, Germany. In a lengthy letter to fellow pastor and friend Dr. John Hess, he addressed the question, "Whether One Should Flee from A Deadly Plague."

Luther wrote: "I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence." Sounds like advice coming from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention almost 500 years later.

Richard Rohr, a widely recognized ecumenical teacher, Christian mystic and Franciscan monk, sees our current situation as an opportunity for our coming together.

He wrote, "If God wanted us to experience global solidarity, I can't think of a better way. We all have access to this suffering, and it bypasses race, gender, religion, and nation." He calls it a "highly teachable moment."

Rabbi Sacks also sees hope in our situation.

In a recent interview on BBC he said, "We're coming through this feeling a much stronger sense of identification with others, a much stronger commitment to helping others. This, in a tragic way, is probably the lesson we needed as a nation and as a world."

He believes that we cannot go through an experience like this without being changed. He sees it as an opportunity for good.

How will we celebrate Easter this year? Let us come together, no matter our religious traditions, and seize the opportunity to affirm one another and work for the common good of all humanity.

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