

# In Global Crisis, Our Growth from 'I' Thinking to 'We' Thinking

The coincidence of the church's season of Lent and the pandemic of the COVID-19 virus has created a unique intensity to the kind of reflection that is encouraged at this time of the year.

Our Sunday School class began the Lenten season by studying the testimony of the covenant pilgrimage of Israel.

We reflected on its progression from the poetic portrait of human nature in the Garden of Eden story ("Who am I?") to the identity of the covenant family in the call and response of Abraham ("Who are we?"), to a call to worship and an admonition to justice - Psalm 95 ("What are our responsibilities in this covenant relationship?").

Remaining lessons are now yielding to more virtual opportunities for worship and study as we adjust to the needs of the present health crisis.

Had we continued the series, it would have followed Israel's covenant journey up the mountains of faithfulness and down into the valleys of corruption and idolatry, and finally to the devastation of the exile - a timeless and timely paradigm of the pilgrimage of faith.

An odd series, perhaps, to use as a guide for Lenten reflection, which seeks to retrace the journey of discipleship from the call of Jesus to follow him through the progression of his ministry and down to the cross.

And yet, the parallels are easy to see as we think about how the faith born in the covenant promise and in Christ's call to discipleship meets the challenges of life and is refined by them toward a maturing covenant partnership.

One of the many things to note in the testimony of Israel's journey is the evolution of consciousness in understanding the covenant as personally, tribally and nationally significant, but also as more expansive and inclusive than it was first experienced to be.

Simply put, what begins as an affirmation, "I am God's child, made in God's

image” (Genesis 1:26), becomes “We are God’s people, called into covenant partnership ‘through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed’” (Genesis 12:3), and on to the exilic prophets’ broad vision of a covenant family that transcends all boundaries.

What seems evident here is a portrait of a people who embrace a covenant promise, which calls them to move from self-centered thinking and believing to a more community-centered perspective – from “I thinking” to “we thinking.”

The gospel portraits of Jesus and his disciples seem to reflect this same pattern.

The call to follow Jesus is portrayed as transformative (they “left their nets and followed him”).

Yet, the journey presented them with challenges to their commitments and their ways of thinking, calling them to embrace wider horizons than what had been their world to that point.

Their life of discipleship was an evolution from the “I thinking” that was their natural initial response to his call, to the “we thinking” of the discipleship Jesus was nurturing them to embrace and live.

Israel’s covenant testimony and the gospels’ portrait of discipleship seem to reflect a very similar process.

But what does a virus have to do with this?

It has been hard for me not to notice, in this Lenten season in the context of a global pandemic, another example of what seems to be a timeless human paradigm of response to crisis.

Early responses seemed to focus on whether it was actually a crisis; the polarized perspectives of our society bantered back and forth with alarm and denial.

As it became clear the reality was more substantial than various posturing, the responses took the form of whether my family and I would be safe and adequately provided for (read, “Not my problem” and “Let’s get toilet paper” and “Can’t I still go by Starbucks on my way to the gym?”)

Gradually, and harmfully slowly on the part of high-level leadership, we began to

listen to health professionals.

As a result, we are beginning to understand the question is not about me and mine and our immediate needs and conveniences, but about the well-being of the entire human family.

I must confess this confrontation of my “I thinking” with the need for “we thinking” has had a new intensity for me, as the importance of adjusting life on a personal and local level for the sake of the larger human family has become clear in a profoundly new way.

I am more than a little embarrassed by that discovery because I have always personally and professionally advocated for the well-being of all, especially the vulnerable and marginalized.

It is not comfortable to realize how easily the veil of distance and relative security can blur one’s vision of the bigger picture.

Maybe this discovery is where our ancestors’ covenant journey, the journey of Jesus and his disciples toward the cross, the current challenge of a pandemic and the season of Lent come together - our need constantly to seek to grow from “I thinking” to “we thinking.”

How different would our personal and public life be if we stayed focused on that process?