**God Himself Will Set Me Free from the Hunter’s Snare**

**Lent in the Shadow of COVID-19**

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The title of this reflection comes from the Liturgy of the Hours, the structured prayers that all clergy and many consecrated religious are obligated to pray each day, at certain hours of the day. One feature common to Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer, the two principal “hours,” is a brief responsory. When prayed in common, one side of the community says the first part, and the other side answers with the second part. Throughout Lent, the responsory at Morning Prayer goes as follows:

*God himself will set me free from the hunter’s snare.*

* *God himself will set me free from the hunter’s snare.*

*From those who would trap me with lying words*

* *and from the hunter’s snare.*

*Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit*

* *God himself will set me free from the hunter’s snare.*

This beautiful expression of trust in God’s protection is based on Psalm 91, which portrays God as a rescuer, who keeps us safe from all of life’s dangers. In verse 3 of that psalm, the Psalmist metaphorically refers to the pray-er as a bird that is being hunted by a fowler, and God as the one who saves it from the snare that the hunter has set out to trap it. Since we always pray this responsory during Lent, when repentance is uppermost in our minds, I normally think of the hunter’s snare as our bad habits, negative attitudes, and destructive ways of thinking – in other words, all of those things which typically lead us into sin. It is very comforting to realize that the grace of God can free us from all of those snares, if we are willing to repent and turn to the Lord for mercy, healing and conversion of heart.

In the shadow of the current COVID-19 pandemic, however, the hunter’s snare seems to take on several new meanings, for we are faced with several new dangers. The following is a partial list of some of the more serious ones.

**The snare of fear.** This is a dangerous virus, even for the young and healthy. It is even more deadly for the elderly and those with pre-existing medical conditions. It is right to be concerned about the consequences if any of us or our loved ones should contract COVID-19. That is why we must diligently maintain our new habit of “social distancing” until the medical experts tell us that the threat has passed. Extreme vigilance is required, but fear is not. Fear is destructive and unnecessary. When we feel afraid, we should recall how the Lord has always cared for us in the past, how he has brought us through many trying times before. With confidence, we can commend ourselves to God’s care and protection, and pray that he will set us free from the snare of fear.

**The snare of impatience.** We have been living under a “stay-at-home” order for only a few days, and many of us are already growing impatient. Americans are not used to having our freedom of movement and assembly so drastically curtailed, and we are not used to spending 24 hours a day, every day, with our families. Sure, we love these people dearly, but the sense of togetherness can wear pretty thin after being cooped up for a few days. Those same old annoying habits which used to bother us a little bit now seem greatly amplified, because we can’t get away from them as easily. Like it or not, it is a safe bet that these restrictions will remain in place for several more weeks. So, it would be wise to stop complaining that things are not as they used to be, and start adjusting our daily and weekly routines to the way things are and will be. In the meantime, the more our family members get under our skin, the more we should pray for them and for ourselves. We should ask the Lord each day to deepen our love for them, and to free us from the snare of impatience.

**The snare of loneliness.** As difficult as it is for families to be stuck at home together, it is far more difficult for those who are alone and isolated from loved ones. We have all seen pictures on social media of people finding creative ways to connect with grandparents in nursing homes, where visitors are no longer permitted. At a time like this, we really need to be intentional about reaching out to people – by telephone, social media, text, e-mail and other means – to let them know that we care or that we ourselves are feeling lonely. This is no time for stoic self-reliance or for self-absorption. What is needed is community. And since we can’t get together physically, we need to find other ways, including praying for one another. One of the best ways to bring people together in spirit is to pray for each other and to let others know that we are praying for them. And, if you are feeling lonely, or if you know someone who is, pray that the Lord will free you and them from the snare of loneliness.

**The snare of financial worries.** A lot of people have suddenly found themselves unemployed and uncertain about how they are going to provide for their families. Compounding those worries, many have lost their health coverage along with their jobs. Employers, too, are suffering. Many have had to lay off workers and shut down their operations. And, in some cases, they may face bankruptcy before they have a chance to recover. These are very real and legitimate concerns, and some people will try to convince us that they should be our primary concerns. But that is not true. Health and safety must come first. Whenever we find economic matters becoming more important to us than the need to contain the spread of this virus, we need to stop and reflect on our priorities. The Lord knows all of our concerns. Let us hand over all of them to his mercy and ask him to keep us focused on the things that matter most, and to free us from the snare of financial worries.

**The snare of disappointment.** The sudden onslaught of this pandemic has forced the cancellation or postponement of many major events, including once-in-a-lifetime events like graduations, weddings and baptisms. Many people are deeply disappointed that their dreams have been thwarted. After looking forward to that special day and imagining how it would play out, everything fell through at the last minute. It all seems so unfair! This is a time for grieving, which means letting go of something that is dear to us. In some cases, the events that we had anticipated with such joy will go on pretty much as planned, but at a later time. In other cases, our celebration will have to take on a different form because of the delay or the changing circumstances. In still other cases, we simply have to say, “It was not meant to be.” In all cases, however, we need to let go of our expectations and count our blessings. Life is still very good, even if it does not conform to our dreams. Now is a good time to reflect on our blessings, to remember how good the Lord has been to us, and to ask him to free us from the snare of disappointment.

**The snare of disinformation.** In the midst of a national and international crisis, we need to be very careful where we get our information. Right now we should be taking our advice from medical experts, not from social media influencers, cable news pundits, opinion writers or politicians, unless they are faithfully repeating the advice that they have received from those who have dedicated their lives to the study of infectious diseases. People like Dr. Anthony Fauci of the Centers for Disease Control had been sounding the alarm about COVID-19 for several weeks before any government officials started to pay attention. He and other medical experts have been unequivocal and unanimous in their advice. The best and fastest way for us to get past this crisis is to continue our social distancing and careful handwashing for several more weeks, until the spread of the virus has been brought under control. Anyone who says otherwise is trying to “trap us with lying words,” as the Lenten responsory says. Let us pray that the Lord will give us a spirit of discernment, and free us from the snare of disinformation.

With the Lord’s help, we can get through this crisis. It will not be easy, and it will not be quick, but we will get through it. God himself will set us free from all of the hunter’s snares.