

Sometimes I worry that God has abandoned me. It's the times when I know that I need to feel the presence of Jesus most clearly, but I can't find it. It often creeps in when my mental health is at an especially low point. It nags at me when tragedies happen in our world, when suffering is so great that it physically hurts to hold space for it. This feeling of abandonment ebbs when I'm surrounded by people who are lifting one another up and flows when we tear one another down out of selfishness.

Sometimes I wonder if I can summon the presence of Jesus by being a better Christian. By following the rules that have been laid out, from the commandments that Jesus commends to his disciples in today's Gospel reading to the unwritten tenets of American Christianity that carry the nebulous promise of "blessings" to those who pray enough, believe enough, give enough.

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Those words from Jesus stir the part of myself that desperately seeks the structure and accountability of rules. Systems of agreements and expectations that promise success if you just stick to them. Delineation between right and wrong. Consistency, predictability. The knowledge that, if I just follow the rules, things will turn out the way they're supposed to.

I can't speak for you, so I'll just speak for myself. I get a sense of satisfaction from having things go just the way they're supposed to when I follow the rules. When I spend time training my dog to respond to certain commands, and then he actually listens to me, we're both rewarded for following the rules. Despite my tendency to end up killing plants that are usually fairly hearty, I know that if I water it and give it the sunlight it needs, it will grow, because that's just how plants work. When a traffic light turns yellow and I slow to a stop, but the person in the next lane speeds ahead, and that sneaky red-light camera flashes, I feel morally superior and delight in the knowledge that I won't be the one getting a \$75 ticket. And when I stand on the red dot as I wait in line at Target, the red dot that is six feet away from the one in front of it and the one behind it, I can literally breathe easier knowing that I'm at less of a risk for giving or receiving droplets that carry the coronavirus.

We have all been trying to follow a lot of rules lately. We're staying home more than ever. We're initiating phone calls and video chats when we would rather be embracing someone we love or sharing a meal with them. We're wearing masks when we go to the store, or to our jobs, or to the park for a walk and some fresh air. We're canceling trips, and performances, and medical procedures – things we had been looking forward to or were even just looking forward to getting over with. All in the hope that it will stop the spread of this pernicious virus.

But following the rules doesn't always lead to success.

At the beginning of the stay-at-home order, I decided that I was going to try something that I had been wanting to try for a few years: making my own sourdough starter. I know, I know. I probably should have predicted that everyone else had also been wanting to try it and now found themselves with a routine that permitted the regular care and feeding schedule that a starter requires, but I was a little slow on the uptake, and by the time I was ready, the shelves of every grocery store in my zip code had been depleted of whole wheat flour. So I used the power of social media to connect with a friend who had some to spare, but was looking for yeast, which I happened to have in abundance. We arranged a contactless trade and the flour was mine. I found our largest mason jar and put it through the dishwasher on the sanitize cycle. Our house runs a little cold, so I bought a fresh oven lightbulb so the starter could thrive off of its ambient heat in a closed-up environment. I used a kitchen scale to measure out my ingredients to make sure I was adding precisely the right amount of flour at each feeding. I went through our entire inventory of long-handled spoons and spatulas every day, making sure to use a clean one to scoop out my discard and then a new one to combine the fresh ingredients, scraping any residue off the sides of the jar and fully incorporating the dry flour into this living, breathing, bubbling bit of biochemistry that promised to make a loaf of delicious, chewy bread wrapped in a crispy, protective crust.

On the last day, the day that King Arthur Flour promised I would be able to move my starter to its permanent home, I opened my jar to the horrifying sight of mold. I Googled and prayed, in that order, determined to figure out how to save this starter that I had so lovingly tended for the past week. My trusted friends at King Arthur said that a starter can stand up well against mold. The online forums offered varying experiences and methods of mold remediation, so I picked the submission that seemed the most promising and attempted to piggyback off of their success to rescue my beloved starter. After three days, when the bubbles hadn't returned and the tangy aroma had faded completely, I sighed and literally poured all of my hard work down the drain.

I followed all the rules, and I still failed.

After some time away from treating my kitchen like a laboratory, I'll try it again – thankfully, my mother offered up a largely-unused bag of that precious whole wheat flour as a backup. I'll take what I learned from my first attempt and I'll try a few new things to nurture a starter into life that yields delicious baked goods.

Jesus promises us that because he lives, we also will live. But humanity isn't a sourdough starter. We don't all get the opportunity to have a second chance at following the rules and seeing if our adherence will work out in our favor this time around.

Our siblings of color know this truth more deeply than I do.

The community at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Manhattan has lost nearly 40 members of their largely-Latinx population due to COVID-19 – many of them dying not because they weren't following the rules, but because they worked in essential businesses, like delivery and maintenance, without the benefit of proper protective equipment.

A health center that cares for Native Americans in the Seattle area reached out to local, state, and federal agencies requesting tests to help protect their community and received instead a shipment of body bags.

Ahmaud Arbery went for a run by himself, and Breonna Taylor went to sleep in her own home – things that many of us would do without a second thought, things that neatly and uncontroversially follow the most basic rules of our society – and they died as a result. Ahmaud and Breonna joined the company of saints that includes Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Philando Castile, the Emanuel Nine, and so many more whose names haven't trended on Twitter. Killed for running, sleeping, walking, playing, driving, or praying while Black.

Friends, we can't follow the rules into God's grace. Not one person in the whole history of the world has fully lived up to every commandment Jesus lays before us. And so we realize that the rules aren't what bring abundant life – it's Jesus. We follow Jesus' commandments because we love him, but not because we're trying to get him to love us back – we do it because our love for him can't help but overflow and reach others. Which means clothing and feeding them; supplying them with protective equipment and adequate testing for devastating illnesses; advocating for changes in our way of life that not only seek justice for wrongful deaths, but eradicate the systemic sinfulness that causes them in the first place; and being a compassionate, caring human who takes seriously the pain of your neighbor.

Sometimes I worry that God has abandoned me. I feel like I think the disciples might have felt when Jesus told them he was leaving. How do I *know* that I know the Spirit and can recognize her? In this time that feels confusing and unsettling and, frankly, like I don't know anything that I thought I once knew, I am afraid that I

don't know what's the work of the Spirit and what's the work of my anxious mind. But the promise is that we *do* know it. That we can trust our gut. That it might be a familiar nudge, or feelings of calm or excitement; or it might be the encouragement and love of a friend who is attuned to the Spirit's rhythms and yours. As Jesus says, an Advocate – sometimes translated as companion or comforter.

In the moments where I have had trouble believing that God, Jesus, the Spirit, really any combination of the Trinitarian crew, was present with me, that is when the Advocates in my life have stepped in and believed it for me. They held that space – they held me – until I could believe it for myself again. Too often, we are effusive about the ways the Spirit works in and through the people we love and, at the same time, unwilling to believe the same about ourselves. We see all of our flaws, all of our shortcomings, all of the ways we fail to follow the rules up close, and it might even cause us to wonder if we can really say that we love Jesus at all. But what Jesus promises his disciples – what Jesus promises *us* – is that he has not left us orphaned or abandoned, and he has not only advocated on our behalf to God, but has sent us living, breathing Advocates to accompany us throughout our lives. In the cloud of witnesses that surrounds us and in the Spirit that we might not be able to see, but that we can feel surrounding us and holding us in the most difficult moments. And if you can't believe that God is with you right now, loving you and holding all of the pain and sadness and confusion that exists in you, that's okay: we'll believe it for you until you're ready.