



CAN WE REBOOT?

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... *Living in the midst of a pandemic and protests* ▶ By Kelly Ng

Oh, what a year it has been.

I often wish I would wake up tomorrow and realise the 2020 I've lived through thus far is but a long nightmare. I don't think I'm alone – all around online we see memes, tweets, reddit threads airing aloud desires for a “reboot” of the year.

From a virus ravaging communities and unveiling inequalities across the world; to widespread protests – in the middle of a pandemic – against police brutality and systemic racism in the United States; and closer to home in Singapore, an election peppered with personal attacks, the events of this year must have stirred discomfort, even wrath, in many.

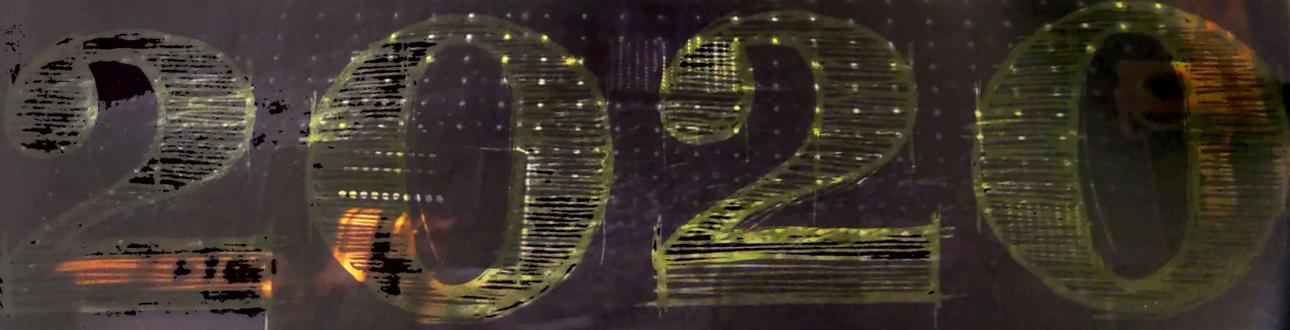
Many of us are personally experiencing various forms of injustice too.

As Christians, we often find ourselves at a loss as to how to respond.

Often, bearing witness to injustice bogs me down into hopeless, fatalistic thinking – will justice ever, ever be served? Other times, I'm at the other extreme, where my zealous quest for “justice” is tarred by desires for vengeance or self-glorification.

To be sure, terrible injustices have been present since time immemorial. They are the result of a world corrupted with sin (Rom 5:12, 8:20-21).

But how do we seek justice and mercy in a way that is motivated heavenward?



OUR FALLEN WORLD

While living in the States last year, I spent a week at the Philadelphia detention centre with a performing arts workshop called Shining Light Ministries. Through various art forms, the inmates opened up about their past and shared their hopes for the future.

Many of the 30 men we worked with have repeatedly passed through the “revolving door” of incarceration – by the time we met, each of them had been jailed or imprisoned an average of eight times.

I had many conversations with them and one, in particular, stuck with me.

Will, who overdosed up to 16 times in a month, told me his current incarceration was of his own volition. He robbed a bank because he wanted to be arrested and thrown into jail again – that was the one way he knew that could curb his drug addiction, at least for a season, he said.

Without shelter over his head nor employment to work toward that, and because family had left him, peddling drugs and shooting himself up was what Will would turn to each time he was released.

Jeffrey Bohn, who directs Shining Light Ministries, shared about systemic injustices that may have fuelled the offending ways of some of the men. “Many of them have had such difficult lives that I look at them and say, if I had that, I would very likely be in their shoes today,” he told me.

Earlier this year, I was struck again by our lopsided world while assessing college applications (another gig I took up as a hustler in Manhattan). I read one where the student reported no extracurricular activities and wrote an entire essay in one paragraph, with no punctuation marks. Even his teachers’ recommendation letters had spelling errors.

His parents knew no email addresses and attained their highest education in secondary school. They were also never married, one of them reported no occupation, no mobile number, while the other is a cleaner.

I looked up where he went to school in Ahoskie, North Carolina – a town with a poverty rate of 35.4 percent and a median household income at US\$30,000 (compare this with New York City at US\$63,800 and Scarsdale, NY, at US\$250,000). Ahoskie is also rated poorly for its public schools and crime rate.

One of the recommenders wrote that the student had always dreamt of going to an Ivy League college and had started projects, at the age of 18, to uplift the homelessness in their town. “This is not something that I’m used to hearing in our very rural, low-wealth part of North Carolina,” she wrote.

It made my heart stir.

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Behind its sea of misspelled words, I read in this application an aspiration that may never be fulfilled. My heart ached for what I suppose are potential opportunities he never knew, for growing up in the “wrong” place at the wrong time, with the odds stacked against him.

I will probably never find out if my “inferences” are true, but my gut tells me that this scant application is the result of how scarcely resourced his education has been thus far. If he’d had a better shot at formative education, he could have been more eloquent; he would have been able to write paragraphs; and he might not be so averse to giving elaborate responses or “showing off” extracurriculars, as others do in second nature.

Unfortunately, based on the assessment criteria we were to use, his was surely my poorest-rated, out of the hundreds of apps I’ve read.

If only he had a chance.

Back at home in Singapore, the ongoing pandemic has unveiled deep inequalities in what many view as a world-class city – not so liveable, unfortunately, for foreign workers, seniors and the urban poor in our midst.

GOD’S MEGAPHONE IN INJUSTICE

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But even as we wait for that day, God does not turn a blind eye to what is unjust in our here and now. And he wants us, too, to seek justice.

Jesus engaged with the Samaritan woman despite cultural, political and social divides (Jn 4); He overthrew tables at the temple and rebuked those who took advantage of the authorities (Mk 11:15-19, Jn 2:13-16); and above all, He served the complete sentence of just wrath that we deserved.

And if we are called to model ourselves after Christ, who loved us so that He gave Himself up, should we not then actively extend the mercy and grace that we have thus received? Isn't that what it means to live up to our mandate as salt and light on this earth – fallen and fragile as it is?

God equips us to be beacons of light that shine on Him instead of us. And I have seen prime examples of such.

Bohn's Shining Light Ministries, for instance, is doing its part in shutting the revolving door of incarceration by empowering the men to do things they never thought they could and pushing for better reintegration into society upon release. A couple at my church has for decades been opening up their home to young people, many of whom come from dysfunctional families and have nowhere to go. I also know of a group of professionals from various

walks of life in Singapore, who gather twice weekly to lament injustices here and around the world and collectively intercede for those suffering because of these.

If anything, I see this year's events as a clarion call to stand up to injustice – in C S Lewis' words, God sends us these pains as His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

We who are equipped with resources must wake up from our slumber. And our fight against injustice must come from a place of love and hope, not resentment or vengeance.

GIVING HOPE

So – how do we seek justice and mercy in a way that is motivated heavenward? I don't think there is a one-size-fits-all approach to this; I'd actually guard against thinking about this too legalistically or scientifically.

But I do think it takes keeping in touch with the world outside our own bubbles, making ourselves available (our time and wealth included), and wearing our hearts on our sleeves. Heart work is hard work; we will be disappointed, discouraged, deeply hurt.

Yet this cannot stop us from caring at all.

Jesus dined with sinners and tax collectors. He was misunderstood,

rebuked, plotted against by those he loved. But He held fast and persevered for the joy that was set before Him. We, too, can run with perseverance in Christ the founder and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:1-2).

And the quest for justice can start right at our doorsteps.

Is there someone in your community wrestling loneliness this season, whom you can call to check on? Have you spoken to those who clean the common corridors to learn more about their lives?

Is there a friend you can invite to a meal during a festive occasion, who might not have an opportunity to celebrate it otherwise? Are there people at your workplace or school who might need help with the English language?

No Christian is called to hammock-living. Let's never stop loving, extending mercy and speaking up for the voiceless. But while we are at it, let's also lament and ask that God acts promptly where injustice prevails. When we find ourselves in dark places, whether as victims ourselves or witnesses walking with others, let's remember that God has promised that He will bring rest from days of trouble, that He will bring justice and not forsake His faithful (Ps 94).

And when God finally deals with injustice, he will wipe them out forever.



Kelly Ng is a journalist and documentary filmmaker in Singapore. She enjoys distance running, being in nature and has a soft spot for snail mail. She attends Redemption Hill Church.