We do not understand what is happening in the world. We don’t understand God’s vision for us. We turn to God in a time of despair for answers. Sometimes the answers surprise us. We learn our assumptions about life and about faith are false. All three of our scripture readings for today challenge the false assumptions of religious people.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is challenging a fundamental, but false assumption of the religious people of his time. For people who lived in Jesus’ time, leaders of the church had to be men. They had to be men from the right families. For most people in Jesus’ time, the leaders of the church had to be men who were not disabled, men who carried great honor from their families.

It is surprising to me that some Christians hold a similar sort of view today, because Jesus sweeps aside this false assumption, like the sweep of a broom. When you read the Gospel of John like a book, one chapter after another, you notice most of those who are witnesses to the revelation of God in Christ Jesus are not powerful men from the right families. In the Gospel of John those who recognize Jesus as the Messiah are women, plus a few men, like the blind man from last week’s Gospel, who were considered to be lower class characters.

In the Gospel of John, the first five characters who testify to the power of God revealed in Christ are: Jesus’ mother, the Samaritan woman, the blind man, Martha and Mary. Today it is Martha’s turn. Mary responds to Jesus question with this testimony: “I have had faith that you are the Anointed, the Son of God who is coming into the cosmos.” This is the strongest statement of the power and relevance of Jesus’ words and actions up to this point in the Gospel. As we listen to Martha’s words, Jesus and the Gospel writer are sweeping away the false ideology that asserts the superiority of men over women. Jesus sweeps away a false assumption and brings hope to those who have been excluded.

Paul has a similar mission in his letter to the Romans. Prior to St. Paul, the dominant assumption within many faith communities, including within the emerging Jesus movement, was that physical practices are a fundamental element of the religious life. One of the most obvious of these physical practices was circumcision, but there were many other physical practices such as ritual purity bathing, not only in Judaism, but in the emerging Jesus’ movement and in other religious movements of the time.
Paul addresses this false assumption in Romans and most of his other letters. Paul is explicit about this in a way that seems embarrassing to us. He keeps talking about circumcision. Paul argues circumcision means nothing in his first letter to the Corinthians. The topic of circumcision is still front and center in his letter to the Galatians. In chapter five Paul writes, For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision, nor uncircumcision counts for anything, the only thing that counts is faith working through love. This point is so important Paul restates it just a few verses later in chapter six.

That’s because most everyone around Paul assumed the religious life was enacted primarily through physical practices. At times Paul seems a little crazy as he makes his argument. That is because Paul, pretty much on his own, is attempting to sweep away the false assumption that physical practices are an essential part of religious life. Paul is like the tiny tugboat pushing on a giant ocean liner. He is working furiously.

In today’s reading from Romans Paul writes, To set the mind on the flesh is death. Sometimes Paul sounds like he is crusading against anything that happens in the physical realm. His actual point is that we move deeper into the spiritual life through spiritual activity, like prayer, not through physical activities, like diet or washing. Those of us who pursue the spiritual life primarily through spiritual activity, through stillness, through prayer, through music, have Paul to thank for setting us on course. Paul swept away the false assumptions of his time and gave hope to those who are seeking a conversion of the heart and the mind.

In a similar way, Ezekiel swept away the false assumptions held by the majority of the people. In Ezekiel’s time and place most people in Judah held onto two false assumptions. The first assumption was that God had made an eternal, unbreakable promise to uphold and protect Judah through maintenance of the monarchy and the descendants of King David. Katheryn Pfisterer Darr puts it this way: “The Davidic King’s rule was the earthly manifestation of Yahweh’s heavenly rule. The people were expected to give their total loyalty and support to the king.”

The second assumption had to do with the location of the Temple in Jerusalem. As the centuries progressed after King Solomon, the role of the Temple in Hebrew religion grew larger and larger. Eventually all of the other cultic sites were eliminated and the Temple became the only place for religious ceremonies. The second assumption was that God was, in some real sense, dwelling in the Temple in Jerusalem. People assumed God would protect Jerusalem against any foes, no matter what.

Beginning 11 years before the destruction of the Temple, Ezekiel delivered his prophetic message to the leaders of Judah. Ezekiel’s message called on the people, and especially the kings and priests, to repent, to turn away from these false ideologies
and return to God in humility and prayer. Ezekiel called out the unfaithfulness of the priests, the king and other leaders. Ezekiel warned the people that the walls of the city of Jerusalem would not protect them from an invading army.

The king, the priests and other leaders detested Ezekiel. For ten years the rich and powerful belittled Ezekiel. They assumed they would be protected because they lived in Jerusalem and they supported the king. Then Nebuchadrezzar and his army invaded Judah, laid siege to Jerusalem, looted the Temple and the city and destroyed the Temple. Those who had laughed at Ezekiel, and the king and Ezekiel himself were led away in chains into exile in Babylon in the year 586. Their false assumptions had been swept away for good.

The false assumptions were swept away but a new promise of hope for those who turn to God was delivered. Here, in chapter 37, Ezekiel is delivering a vision of hope. The people did not expect that the Temple and the city of Jerusalem would ever be destroyed. Now, after many years in exile, the people of Judah do not expect God will restore their community to life. The people of Judah do not understand what is happening in the world. They do not understand God’s vision for them.

We are living through a time that is not so different from the exile in Babylon. We are living through a time of grief and loneliness. Some of our old assumptions, about life, about our nation, perhaps about God, have been swept away in the face of an epidemic that threatens our survival and our way of life.

Just as it was for Ezekiel’s people, some of our old, false assumptions are gone for good. I mean that both ways. I hope our false assumptions are gone forever and it will be very good if our false assumptions are swept away during this time of isolation and suffering.

I’ve been spending a fair amount of time during the past week reflecting on the assumptions that might be destroyed by this epidemic. We hold many terrible assumptions, such as racial superiority and American exceptionalism. But today I pray that one of the basic assumptions of the American life will be swept away forever.

It is an assumption that runs deep in America. It is the assumption of self-sufficiency. It is the idea of lifting oneself up by the bootstraps. Have you ever tried it? It is a lie. It is the false idea that you and I are independent from one another. It is the assumption that the rights of the individual take priority of the needs of the community. It is the assumption that I can somehow provide for myself.
For a number of years, I believed it. For years I believed that I could provide for myself, that my choices, my happiness, my independence were the most important thing. I pray to God we will never believe that lie again.

I pray that the falsehoods we have preached to ourselves and our children will be swept away, and I pray we will discover a new hope in this time of despair. This week I saw a vision of hope. I saw the vision at Upper Onondaga Park, in that beautiful spot overlooking the city on the west side.

I have always enjoyed a good walk in the park, but these days it is more important than ever for me to walk in the park. I am working from home now, in fact, this will be one of my last times in this building for weeks, if not months. There is plenty of work to do, but every day when it isn’t raining, or snowing, I take a 45 minute walk through the park.

Last Spring or last Fall, on a sunny day I might see 10 or 15 people walking or running or playing in the park. This past week, on a sunny day the park was full of people, I’m sure I saw at least 50. Yesterday, on a cold, cloudy raw spring day, I counted at least 20.

And it’s not just the number of people. It is in the joy of the people. The people are filled with joy to be outside, in God’s creation. The people are treating each other differently. We are starved to see and talk with another person in real life. In a way that most people are feeling, but perhaps not thinking, we are beginning to see other people as part of God’s beautiful creation. People are walking and standing safe distances from each other, but there is joy on their faces as they greet one another. People are talking with complete strangers. I say at least a few words to each person I pass and they seem eager to respond.

We are learning a truth that most of us have never seen, even though it has been standing directly in front of us each day of our lives. Each person is beautiful. Each person is created in the image of God. Each person is a gift. The words we speak to one another are powerful. Each person is precious in the sight of God. We need one another.

So pray with me that we will let God work among us in the midst of the suffering and grief. Pray that in our vulnerability our nation and our world will be stripped of a lie which is keeping us away from God and one another. Pray we will be changed by the opportunity, by the hope God is giving us.