

The 3rd Sunday of Advent, December 10, 2016. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Isaiah 35:1-10, Canticle 15, James 5:7-10, Matthew 11:2-11

I recall at a meeting at the Vancouver School of Theology some years back having a conversation with Marcus Borg. For those of you who don't know or haven't read anything by Borg he was (until his death last year) perhaps the most prominent progressive New Testament scholar of the late 20th and early 21st century in the Western Church - a contemporary interpreter of Jesus and Paul unlike any other. Marcus had once said to me that he thought Jesus one of the two most remarkable human beings who ever lived – explaining that the other was Siddhartha Gautama: the Buddha. In conversation after the meeting one of us asked Marcus what he thought was the most distinctive thing about the human Jesus. His reply? "Above all else, he was a healer."

It there's a theme to this Sunday, and perhaps to all of Advent, that theme is healing – not in a passive sense, that we are being healed – though I believe that's always a part of our spiritual journey – that Advent is a pathway into wholeness for us. But more accurately and appropriately, I think, Advent is about our healing actions, about a hope-filled transformation in which we are at the center as active participants.

All of today's readings in some way focus on that theme.

Isaiah's reading is really a song or several songs, singing about the restoration of that which in some way wasn't whole; or perhaps singing into being that restoration. There's the restoration of the earth: "the wilderness and the dry land **shall** be GLAD, the desert **shall** REJOICE and BLOSSOM." And there's the restoration of human beings: the blind **shall** see, the deaf **shall** hear, the lame **shall** dance, and the speechless **shall** sing.

Isaiah describes a "fabric of interdependence" (Bruce Epperly) between humanity and the rest of creation. So it is, Paul later says in Romans, that when the whole creation groans it is reflecting our own inner quest for healing.

In an age when the whole creation is groaning – when we're living with significant global climate change, when we live amid what some scientists have called the sixth mass extinction event in the history of this planet – healing of our planet has to become a core concern for all of us, not just for our planet, but because the violence we see being done to the non-human part of creation spills over into our human relationships – it's a symbiotic relationship; harming other humans also leads to the destruction of the environment.

The good news is that the healing of nature and the healing of the nations is also a symbiotic relationship: working for the healing of one also works for the healing of the other. Isaiah calls us to seek both; to work for healing with each other so that we can also work for the healing of our planet.

In the canticle today (which we sang as a hymn) there's another sort of healing described, another song seeking to sing into existence the joy of God's reign. God, Mary sings, hears the cries of the poor and responds with "***liberating intentionality.....God's joy and our well-being are***

interconnected.” (Epperly). Her song raises all sorts of contemporary questions, as theologian Bruce Epperly has described:

“When will the mighty let go of their largesse for the simple survival of millions? When will those who have, sacrifice for the half-nots? When will our nation place the health and welfare of the multitudes above a preferential tax and legal option for the wealthy and powerful? When will we focus more on the entitlements given to wealthy corporations and individuals than modest entitlements given to unemployed single parents?”

When will we all figure out that the health of some of us ***who have*** is directly related to **and dependent on** the health of those ***who have not?***

Both Isaiah and Mary lay out for us a vision of what is needed for humanity and for our world. That vision isn’t for someone else to implement. Advent’s call isn’t to passivity, to watching and waiting on the sidelines while God makes it all happen on the field. **The transformation of governments and economic systems is the work of people of faith; we are God’s hands in this endeavor.**

That’s essentially the message in today’s gospel, that our mission is to participate in the healing of humanity and of our world. When God’s good news is present, Jesus says, bodies are healed, outcasts are welcomed, and the impoverished are given hope. Jesus tells all willing to listen that when we respond to God’s call, when we become the agents of God’s healing and transforming grace, the world and everything in it – everyone in it – moves forward on that divine healing journey toward the wholeness of all things. That’s a sacred calling; that’s our calling this Advent: to heal, to welcome, to restore; to live toward a vision of God’s wholeness and God’s equity.

This season of Advent and these readings all remind us that another world is possible. ***New life can emerge from the ruins; the dessert can bloom....lives [can be] restored.”*** (Epperly)

In just two short weeks we will again celebrate the story of God’s coming to us, of the inauguration of God’s “Shalom” in human history. It’s not for us to wait passively, either for this moment to come, or as a result of its coming; God calls us in this event to act with intention, with grace, and with persistence for the well-being of the planet and its peoples.

Are we willing to hear that charge, to take up that responsibility, to join with our God in the work of helping restore the broken, heal the sick, welcome the outcast; in helping save our planet?

Let us pray: O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: be present in us, that we may join with each other and with you in the work laid out for us. Help us to proclaim to the world the truth we have dimly glimpsed and now brightly see: that things which were being cast down can be raised up, and things which had grown old can be made new, and that all things can be brought to wholeness by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.