

LIFE IN A BLOOMING DESERT

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Isaiah 35:1-7 – The desert shall rejoice and blossom

Matthew 11:1-6 – John's question about Jesus

Luke 3:1-10 – Peter heals a crippled beggar

We're celebrating again the gift of Jesus Christ and the foundation it lays for our lives. We all face a dilemma, a struggle that's at the centre of our lives. On the one hand we hear that good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ and what it has done for us in our lives. On the other hand we live in this world that can seem so contradictory to that wonderful message and the good news that is there as a foundation for our lives. The truth is that as I talk to people--to you and to others--about living in the world today I hear more and more people saying in one way or another that the world seems disorienting as they listen to what is going on in the world, whether it's in the news or just doing the ordinary daily things in their lives. People say things like "I don't really understand what's going on in the world; it seems out of control." It's that sort of feeling of not knowing what is happening around us and certainly not knowing where it's going or where it's all leading. But that's not new. There have been times throughout history when people have felt disoriented or lost or confused about what's happening in the world. We live with some of that in the church, too.

There is a sense in which for many of us the church twenty or thirty years ago had a familiarity and a security about it and a sense of clarity. We knew what it was to be the church and to come together as a church, and we knew all the things the church did. In a sense that doesn't seem to be working today as it did then. The people have changed and the times have changed and the world has changed. I was reading this past week a book that Mary Ann and I have been sharing about the church and where the church is going. It talks about how in ministry there is a deepening crisis among clergy because of the sense that what we were trained to do doesn't work the way it was supposed to. And it talks about the lack of clarity about the role of clergy and what we as clergy need to be doing with the church because of the changing times.

I wanted to begin by laying all that out because it is true on so many different levels of life, from the very personal to the social and to the level of our church itself. Of course we're at a time in the life of this congregation when we are looking for a way to guide ourselves through the turmoil of our immediate future. That seems to me to be one of the most important things for us to be about. One of my goals in this regard is to try to bring together the depth of our faith--the empowering, guiding, enabling power of our faith--and the very day-to-day business of directing the life of our church. The purpose is to enable that energy which we celebrate in song and so many different ways, that power of the spirit that we know is there, to flow in an enlivening and directing way in the life of our church. This is needed because the church itself experiences that disorientation.

One of the ideas that I have been hearing more and more of late is that the church is in transition. This is the entire church. The church is in transition, especially the churches that have been known as “mainline.” The churches have been going from “mainline” to “sideline.” Historically, the church has been an established, central, cultural entity joined with the places of power in our culture. Increasingly, however, that is becoming a thing of the past; the church is moving from being this central element in our culture to being something more on the sideline of our society. That is very familiar because it’s the way the church started out. And in times, historically, when the church has been sideline it has sometimes been most powerful. So the people who are working with this kind of thought are trying to say there is a way we can find our power, as a church on the sideline, in our faithfulness. And this is very different from the way it is as a church on the mainline. How do we do that? One of the answers that comes out of the literature on church development is to say that our sense of who we were in the past in that mainline mode was focussed on membership--that the church had to have many people, be really big, embrace everyone. That was at a time when the vast majority of people in our society went to church, and the membership was the foundation of the sense of who we were.

That works in the mainline, but in the sideline people are saying we need to understand ourselves in terms of discipleship rather than membership. I suspect that’s an idea we’re going to talk a lot about in the years to come; and an order to understand who we are, what we are about, what is our purpose, we’ll be developing our understanding of what it means to be a discipleship-centred church rather than a membership-centred church. This means that our purpose is more about what God is calling us to do and be, rather than about filling the pews, getting bigger, and having our finances all secure and that sort of thing. That’s the situation, that’s the struggle in the midst of which we find ourselves. There are ways in which that is so true of our individual lives as well, because in our individual spiritual lives we have a tendency to want to establish our security--to be safe and secure in our lives. That’s in keeping with the mainline membership way of being the church. There is always that pull between our longing for security and God’s call to discipleship, and discipleship always means letting go of something of our security and moving into more of a risking way of life.

Now we turn to the scriptures in order to find something in the historical roots of our faith that can guide us. In a sense it is a search for something to replace that security for us, in order that we can let go and follow in the way of discipleship both as private individuals and as a church. What does our scriptural tradition offer to replace that security in our lives as we move to a risking way of life? It’s this idea of the kingdom of God or the reign of God which God promised through Isaiah. The symbols, the images, that he used to indicate the time that was coming when God’s reign would be in the world is the picture of the lame walking and the blind seeing and the deaf hearing. Those are the symbols, part of the rich symbolism of our heritage. And so, when Jesus was doing his ministry and John was doing his ministry (John was very dedicated to this sense of the day of Yahweh, the reign of God coming), John was in prison and sent a message to Jesus asking “Are you the one we’re waiting for? Has the time come? Is the messianic age upon us now? Is this really it?” And Jesus said “Tell John what you see.” He didn’t even say “yes” or “no.” He just said “Tell John what you see.” The lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear. There’s no proof in that, there’s nothing secure in that. But for

someone who knows that beautiful rich tradition of God's word and God's acting through the prophets throughout the centuries, for someone who knows the pictures that people like Isaiah gave the people including someone such as John who was rooted in that tradition--as Jesus knew John was--that was all that needed to be said.

Now we enter into a mystery here, and it's a mystery that we can understand and see and grasp more and more fully throughout our lives. However, our understanding of the mystery doesn't dispel the mystery. The mystery remains; as a matter of fact it deepens. What do we see? We see the lame walk, we see the blind see, and the deaf hear. If we could only get back into the mind of someone like John with that rich faith that he had, and hear those words the way he heard them, the way the rest of them heard those words.

Then we move up into Acts, and the story of Peter and the disciples involved in this marvellous new adventure. People who were deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition now felt God calling them into this marvellous new adventure, this church coming into being, still just a mission and not yet a church, disciples out there preaching the word and healing. Peter meets this person in the temple and just feels guided, feels led. There's no manual for him to follow yet. You can't say "Well, here's what you do. You find some lame guy lying in the temple, and here's how you . . ." There would probably have to be some kind of release form to be signed if we did that today! What Peter felt was the reign of God; he felt the power of the spirit moving. The disciples were just discovering it. They were just out there experimenting with following this power and letting it take them wherever it would take them, and this guy was healed. These ancient symbols from the time of Isaiah, the ones that Jesus had used in response to John's question, were now being lived out. Peter and rest of this early Christian community were discovering discipleship, and they were discovering the kind of power that flowed through them as they lived in the promise of the kingdom. What they were doing was living in faith that the kingdom was now, not something far off in the future. There wasn't any proof, but they lived and found that if they lived as if the reign of God were real, now, this amazing power kept flowing, kept moving, simply by living as if the reign of God were already here.

So that's the challenge of discipleship for us to look at our lives, to look at the life of the church, and to ask ourselves how we would be living our lives if the reign of God were already here. Or we can say it differently. We can say Jesus came to declare that the reign of God is here, is established on earth, and even if we don't see the evidence of that we may ask how we would live our lives if we really believed it. How do we live our lives as an expression of our belief that the kingdom is already here, living according to that truth despite all the evidence in the world around us to the contrary--despite all the cynicism, despite all the hatred, despite all the people who look at us with disdain and say "Come on, get real, be realistic." What these people mean is to be cynical, what they mean is live as if the kingdom of God never came and never will. That is what they call "being real."

Faith has to do with making a choice. We can choose to live according to the reality of the cynics, or we can choose to live according to the reality that the kingdom is already with us. There is no evidence that can prove one way or another. It's a choice. It's a free choice for each one of us to decide which reality will govern our lives. But life becomes an adventure, it becomes fun, it becomes energized, when we are living

according to the kingdom, according to the reign of God, because then a power moves through us and leads us despite what is going on around us.

I want to share a thought with you from another one of the books from the Alban Institute. This book by well-known author Loren Mead, *Transforming Congregations for the Future*, has been for the last ten or twenty years a very important piece in this field. Mead is talking about this idea of “kingdom,” and I want to read you a brief bit about this mystery of the kingdom at hand.

*I think the task of the local congregation is to help ordinary people become engaged in that mystery. People willing to make the leap from the known to the unknown as Peter did, people who act on the basis of the new society, who claim the power of that kingdom, who then act for peace and justice and love and healing. The congregation's task is to call that faith forth in us and to send us to act with no positive assurance that anything at all will happen.**

Doesn't that sound like an exciting adventure? Are you catching the excitement? I'm teasing you, but I think that's exactly what Jesus was doing. He was teasing people into catching the excitement of how they could let go of that static security, with its assurance and proof, and live in the power of the spirit. When we begin to feel that power we know there is no need ever to go back. And I think that all of us at one moment or another have recognized this in our own lives. And we probably have had times when we've felt that spirit move in the church.

What we need to do as a church is to organize ourselves, with the first priority being to organize in such a way that allows the spirit to move as freely as it can. We need to have, as people at the heart of directing of the life of the church, those who are reading these words and who are gathering these thoughts; people who are thinking all the time of what it would mean for us as a congregation to be living in that powerful spirit, what it would mean to be living as a purely discipleship church, and what it would mean for us to live according to Jesus' declaration that the reign of God is already established in our midst. That's the truth that the gospel offers us. We need only to find a way to weave that continually into the heart and the centre of our congregational life so we can be a church that teaches everyone within that church how to weave the spirit of discipleship into the centre of his or her life, and to be our salvation simply by the promise of the reign of God, a promise that's already fulfilled and there for us to live in the power of the spirit.

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor

* Loren B. Mead, *Transforming Congregations for the Future* (New York: The Alban Institute, 1994), pp. 44-45.