

God with us in Harmony
Second Sunday of Advent
December 4, 2016
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Texts: Isaiah 11.1-10,
Psalm 72,
Romans 15.4-13,
Matthew 3.1-12

At the risk of speaking sacrilege this morning, I confess that I was wishing we had screens in our sanctuary. “Perish the thought, I know!” The reason is because without intending to I have been curating a multi-media art exhibit in my mind as we come to these texts and this theme: *God with us in Harmony*. Any one see that theme for this week and say “Yeah, right! If that is the only place where God is with us we’re in trouble...because there is not much harmony flowing these days anywhere that I can see!”

That is one of the purposes of art: to help us see what we are struggling to see. Short of technology at our fingertips in this space, I invite you along in your imaginations with me as we stop at each piece in this theoretical exhibit.

The first is a still shot from Instagram that I saw this week.¹ It’s a picture of a sculpture by Ukranian artist, Alexander Milov, entitled “Love.” It’s a wire sculpture of two adults sitting with their backs to each other with their heads in their hands resting on their knees. I see them in that moment after an intense conflict when they have turned their backs and the fight has gone out of them but the anger remains and the disconnection feels enormous. So that’s the wired part of the sculpture. But inside are two small children facing each other hands touching. The best images are taken at dusk when you can see through the outline of the disconnected adults to the inner child in each of them reaching toward each other glowing in light.

¹ https://www.instagram.com/p/BER5oDOj_Ek/

Where is God in the midst of our stubborn disconnection? Right there in the middle of it if we could just see. “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.”²

The second piece in the exhibit is a commercial that has gone viral all over the world since its release by Amazon Prime. Have you seen it?³ An older Iman knocks on the door of someone who is clearly an old friend who invites him inside for a spot of tea. It isn't until they are sitting together in the living room that you can see the old friend is a catholic priest. You can't hear any of their conversation but you can feel the warmth of it. And you can see through the body language that they are commiserating over the pain in their aging knees. As the Iman leaves he stops in the street, pulls out his phone, goes to Amazon prime (this is a commercial after all) and orders something. You see the priest inside doing the same. Each of them receives a delivery that is clearly a surprise. They did not order it for themselves. As they open it you can see that it is knee pads. And they laugh as they put this gift from their old friend on under the robes so no one can see. The last scenes are the priest genuflecting before the altar. And the Iman kneeling down in morning prayer. Beautiful.

I saw interview about the commercial. These are real clergy. The priest is Gary Bradely, vicar in Paddington Green. The Iman is Zubier Muhammad principal in a school in Leicester. He said: “The Muslim community is portrayed in the wrong way and this was my way to show that the community does work together, we don't have any issues, and we can work in harmony.”

Where is God in all of our angry disconnection? Calling to us from right in the middle of it. “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God!”⁴

The third piece of the exhibit is the texts themselves from Isaiah and Romans. I don't know whether it should be another piece of visual art like

² Isaiah 11.6, NRSV

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ouu6LGGIWsc>

⁴ Romans 15.7, NRSV

a Joel Schoon Tanis rendering of the text or if it should be a performance piece like a mashup of the two texts performed in slam poetry style.

What I hear, and what I want others to hear with me, as I set these texts side by side is God in the middle of religious life even as people battle for their place and prominence. Isaiah is speaking to an internal struggle within Israel as their fears for their future survival have corroded their sense of compassion and justice. The prophet himself is embroiled in conflict with his own people as he rails against this corrosion. The people themselves are embroiled in conflict about what to do with the rising Assyrian Empire. Romans is given to a church that is embroiled in conflict over the place of the unclean Gentiles trying to find their place at the table with the Jewish believers in Jesus.

In this exhibit whether it is a visual piece or a performance piece, I want people to feel the intensity of the conflict raging all around coming from every corner. And in the middle of all this chaos I want people to grasp this vision that out of stump of a tree that is dead and long gone a shoot has come up, and a branch is growing out of its roots: a person. As Christians, we see Jesus as the fullest embodiment of this prophecy. But it is not just about Jesus. This is work God has been doing with the people of God for millennia pouring out the “spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and fear (awe) of the Lord.”⁵ Presbyterians invoke these words at every time they lay on hands: at a young person’s profession of faith or the ordination of an elder or deacon or minister in the church.

In the middle of our embroiled conflicts these shoots spring up and the Spirit keeps being poured out into the middle of it. We need to bring these texts alive for as Romans said to us today: “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.”⁶

⁵ Isaiah 11.2, NRSV

⁶ Romans 15.4, NRSV

This fourth and final piece in the exhibit is most definitely a piece of performance art; sort of like the Moth radio hour where people just come out onto a stage and tell a story from their life.

At the top of the stage I want one of those scrolling digital screens with quotes from John the Baptist on a loop so as people listen to the story being shared they are reminded of these words: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near...Prepare the way of the Lord....You brood of vipers!...Bear fruit worthy of repentance...One who is more powerful than I is coming... One who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

This piece, like the ones that come before it in the exhibit, is a picture of God with us in harmony. But you have to wait for it because like John the Baptist there is some ferocious truth telling that has to come first.

Here is the story you would hear at this last stop of the exhibit. It is the story of something that really happened to someone named Michael Anthony-Nalepa who has given permission on social media for his story to be shared⁷. This how he tells his story:

"On Wednesday, I was standing in line at the grocery store. It's the day before thanksgiving, so it is quite literally a 45 minute wait. I'm standing by those dreaded magazines with all the horrible headlines, which I always try to ignore.

Everyone is keeping to themselves mostly, except for... Behind me, stands the personification of privilege -- a white male (I'm assuming cisgender and straight.) He (a total stranger, mind you) has the audacity to elbow, points to.....the cover of one magazine, and quite loudly state: (Folks, I can't repeat what he said - it was abusive and full of expletives) Then he laughs heartily.

When I say that he spoke loud, I mean bellowing. I look around -- and everyone not only in my aisle but the aisle on both sides of me has heard. They grimace...and then they look down. Men, women, white, black... They look down.

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/dovie/posts/10210927390448843>

I suddenly flash to a remembrance of me as a 6-year-old child. A family member once owned a home that was part of the Underground Railroad. We'd sit behind this concrete slab under their deck and talk about what happened here. Even as a small child -- a young, white man myself -- I said I would die before I let that kind of open hate live in my world. I made the same resolution when I learned about the holocaust in junior high. And I felt that exact same fire now -- in the grocery store.

I found myself, like everyone else, looking down...but I couldn't continue to do that. After about 30 seconds, something in me snapped. I put down my basket, turned around and looked that man in the eyes. I was shocked by how badly I was shaking, but words began spilling out of my mouth, loudly and fiercely.

I asked everyone: "I'm sorry, everyone, but I must ask for some support in addressing this hateful and ignorant man. Look up, please. Someone look up because I can't do this alone."

People began to look up. I began to cry and I don't know why but I couldn't stop. I continued staring the man down... "Those comments were inappropriate and i will not allow them in my world."

His reply? "Dude, calm down. I wasn't calling you a c*** or a n*****."

By now, everyone was looking up. I continued, shaking uncontrollably. "You will stand in this line and you will keep your mouth shut. You won't speak. You will not address any of us. You will pay for your items and you will leave."

He kept trying to respond, and I kept cutting him off by calmly repeating "You're done. Shut your mouth." By now, people were clapping. Eventually, he got quiet and looked down. We were all looking up and now He was the one looking down.

Immediately, everyone began talking. Not about him, but the holidays. Joyous, laughing. And it wasn't out of embarrassment or to pretend what happened didn't just happen.... But it was because we were instantly bonded in this weird but beautiful way.

I openly talked about the Friendsgiving my partner and I were prepping at home for our LGBT family, as well as the pre-Thanksgiving we had earlier in the week for transgender youth who weren't invited home... Us strangers even hugged upon checkout.

Together, we silenced ignorant hate. We made the choice to look up. And we shared a moment. I was overwhelmed with emotion and fear before I decided to speak, but I asked for help...and help came forth, strongly and beautifully."

At the end of the exhibit, as you leave, will be a beautifully lettered sign:

"May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another...Go in peace."

Amen.