

Come and See
2nd Sunday after Epiphany
Season of Reconciliation
January 15, 2017
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Texts: Isaiah 49.1-7;
 Psalm 40.1-1;
 1 Corinthians 1.1-9;
 John 1.29-42

On Friday I was listening to a piece on NPR interviewing one of our state senators. She made a comment I had never really thought about before: the way that term limits in our state legislature has attracted what she called Type A legislators. These are people looking for the quick fix so that they can point to some accomplishment for their district in their short tenure. Their eye is on re-election and then legacy more than the wide lens and the slow-going work of improving life for all of us in this state of Michigan. It reminded me of Pastor Gordon's comment a few weeks back that he no longer believes that progress is an inevitable, forward moving linear project.

As we come to our national observance of Martin Luther King Day, that insight becomes all the more clear. On the one hand, I think if Dr. King could have lived a full life time - he would have been 88 today had he not been assassinated at the age of 39 - I think he would be amazed at how far we have come in that lifetime. To watch the Obama family preparing to leave the White House after 8 years in office...I don't know if in his prophetic imagination he could have seen that kind of progress in what could have (should have) been his lifetime. But on the other hand, we have seen a rise in some of the ugliest forms of hate speech, acts of violence, and overt injustice in ways that suggest very little progress has been made to shift the psyche of our nation when it comes to race.

I find myself needing to acknowledge today that when it comes to being part of God's ministry of reconciliation - to the work of actively breaking

down the dividing walls of hostility as we hear of it in Ephesians¹ or becoming ambassadors of reconciliation as we hear of it in 2 Corinthians² – I have to acknowledge that this work is not straight forward, easy work, with clear evidence of progress at every turn.

As we listen to the words of the prophet and psalmist, we recognize that ours is not a singular experience but has clearly been the way of God's people for generations. In fact there is this a very interesting tension within the texts today that speaks to both the significance and the seeming futility of our participation in God's work. I'm fully aware as I say it that something cannot both be significant and futile at the same time. Yet we hear the voice of God in the prophet affirming things like: "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified³...it is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel, I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."⁴ It doesn't get much more significant than that!

And yet the prophet laments "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity..."⁵ and the psalmist cries out "I have waited patiently for the Lord."⁶ Either way the experience of the one trying to make an impact is to look around and see very little lasting change. The imagery for this feeling of being trapped and isolated is so vivid: to be stuck down a desolate pit or mired in the muck. And yet there is this hope emanating out of these texts: that the feeling of futility is limited in time while the significance of the impact becomes exponential.

Think about the life and legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. We know he felt at times like he and the whole civil rights movement was mired in the muck. Then think about the impact of their ministry over time. Eventually God lifts us out of the pit and puts our feet on solid ground. And according to the prophet, God gives us (as people of God) as light not just to the those

¹ Ephesians 2.14, NRSV

² 2 Corinthians 5.18-20, NRSV

³ Isaiah 49.3, NRSV

⁴ Isaiah 49.6, NRSV

⁵ Isaiah 49. 4 NRSV

⁶ Psalm 40.1, NRSV

who are close to us in this time and place but in ways that we cannot begin to fathom, God gives us as a light to the nations⁷.

I suppose there are instances of dramatic interventions that people can point to as the moment when God lifted them out of the pit or some grand achievement that catches the attention of the nations. But for most of us it happens as Pastor Beth described it last Sunday: “sometimes all we have is risking the next step, no matter how hard or senseless it might seem....bit by bit by bit.”⁸

I’ve been reflecting this week about what motivates us to take that next step. The work of reconciliation is so stinkin’ hard! Talk about getting mired in the bog. Sometimes the only thing that can help us keep at it bit by bit is when we see someone else taking the risk we feel afraid to take. When hear about someone who was in the desolate pit finally finding their way out again. The Psalmist after experiencing God’s deliverance says in vs 9 “I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O Lord. I have not hidden your saving help in my heart, I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation and have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation.”⁹

When I am finding it impossible to reach across the dividing wall it can make all the difference in the world to hear the story of a time when you were able to do it. Your willingness to tell the truth about your life -- the ways that you struggle and the way that God is working in the midst of that struggle – those stories could very well be the lifeline that someone else is waiting for. I suspect that is why the Witness to Reconciliation that people share this time of year has become such an important part of this season.

The gospel today points to the experiential nature of our faith. We cannot just figure this all out on some purely intellectual level before deciding to

⁷ Isaiah 49.

⁸ Sermon from January 8, 2017: http://hopechurchrca.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/010817_Beth-Carroll.pdf

⁹ Psalm 40.9-10, NRSV

act. Earlier in John chapter 1 the priests and Levites are trying to understand who John is and what he is up to. John has similar conversations with his own disciples about who Jesus is and what he is up to. Jesus puts it quite bluntly: “come and see.”

We will only begin to believe that this work Jesus is doing is good news – this work of tearing down dividing walls and of being called into a ministry of reconciliation – we will only believe that this hard, complicated, messy work is worth it when we have seen it with our own eyes and feel it reverberate in our own bones.

I saw this truth enacted this week on an episode of Chicago Med. One of the docs watched as two boxers came into the ER after having pummeled each other in the ring. They were still fighting it out from their gurneys. Their companions were trash talking each other and you quickly recognized that there was more at play than competition. There were issues of race and religion the mix. One of the fighters tried to calm down his brother who was threatening revenge on his behalf and gave a chapter and verse from the Quran before going unconscious. He eventually fell into a coma and his family gathered round and began praying round the clock. The doctor witnessing all of this was holding his own anger toward the patient who had been spewing hate. When that patient tried to ask how his opponent was doing, the brother came charging out of the room “you are going to burn in hell for you what you did him!” Then his father lifts his head from his prayer rug and silences him: “That’s enough!” Then he walks into the hall and extends his hand to this boxer who put his son in a coma and he said: “Come, pray with us.” And this man who had been raging and posturing begins to weep and joins them for hours in prayer.

And the ER doc? He is amazed by this. He looks up that verse from the Quran and he talks with one of the resident psychiatrists about what he witnessed. She said in the psych world it’s called complementarity: that hostility begets hostility and kindness begets kindness. She told him that what the father did in extending a hand was to “flip the script”. The ER doc said “I don’t know if I could have done it.” And she responded, “Yeah, not many people can.” The episode ends with the ER doc doing precisely what

he had just witnessed: extending a hand to someone he had written off and mistreated.

When Jesus says come and see, he is describing the whole of our faith. God is at work pulling us up out of the pit.

As we listen to the stories of those around us,
as we bear witness to the stories unfolding within us,
as we come and see all that God is doing between us,
we will find our way.

Jesus said, "Come and See."

Thanks be to God!