2 Advent All Saints’ Church

December 10, 2017 Year B

Isaiah 40:1-11 2 Peter 3:8-15a

Psalm 85: 1-2, 8-13 Mark 1:1-8

Three years ago, late August, I was called as your Rector. I can’t believe we are well into our fourth year together. It was a big move for me in many ways, as I had been in a boarding school setting for 20 years. Even though I came in October, I was actively unpacking well into Advent.

I remember vividly this one particularly snowy December day. (Remember how much it snowed that year, winter of 2014/2015…. It seemed as every week we were wondering what day the blizzard was going to hit- often on a Saturday night).

My daughters were home and they were helping me settle in.

We had come across some boxes that hadn’t been opened for years. Over the years they probably had moved from home to home, gathering dust. It was like an early Christmas present (boxes within boxes)- we were finding pictures evoking memories I hadn’t had for years.

One box in particular, held many letters written by members of my family, probably saved by my mother. As we opened up the letters, to read and to enjoy, my eldest daughter found a stack of letters and postcards I had written in the careful script of my nine-ten-year-old self. I had no idea my mother had gathered them back to safe-keep.

One in particular was a letter I had written to my beloved Nana:

Dear Nana (dated Sunday, March 21, 1965- I was nine years old)

Thank you for the dollar. Cliffy loves the dollar holder very much.

Well, the old spelling bee is over, thank goodness. I didn’t win. My girlfriend Barbara won but I made second. If you make second that means that if the girl (or boy) who’s going to the county gets sick, then I’ll go. Well, I guess you’re a little confused so I’ll tell you about it. You see we study and study on words and then three people come from one room and three from another room and have a test. Barbara missed no words and I missed two words. One word is transaction and the other word I don’t remember. The one who won goes to county and has a spelling test there. And if Barbara gets sick, I’ll have to go.

Lots of people have been saying things about her getting sick.

When Daddy found out about the spelling test, He said measles sure are going around, and you’ve had them.

I can’t wait until we go to see you. It will be fun to see the beach.

I have a new girlfriend her name is Connie. I like her very much. She is in sixth grade. Good-by with love, Jamie. Miss you, love you xoxoxoxo. P.S. I have a new little calf. And I pretend she is mine (but of course she isn’t). I call her Daisy, good-by again… love, love, love.

As my daughter read the letter, the three of us laughed so hard - you know, that deep belly laugh, with tears streaming down our faces… a picture into the past… As I look back on that wonderful lazy afternoon, I also realize that there was something redeeming about it. To be so unguarded, with my daughters, with pictures and letters all around us, to be laughing and crying and to feel safe, loved just as I was.

Redeeming, because it was such a difficult time for me when I was nine- we were poor; I was worried about my parents, my mother in particular who couldn’t get up in the morning, and I was anxious. Winning, being smart, fixing things, being the best were ways I was trying to keep the chaos and my fear in some abeyance…. If I were a winner, I would find some kind of order and normalcy. Yet, those voices of “be successful” were not helping. Only making things much worse. I was at best quite lost and afraid.

There’s a great scene in Huckleberry Finn (I was reading in 4th grade), where Huck is realizing that he is probably going to be damned forever for aiding and abetting a black man’s freedom, but he doesn’t know how to act differently, as he loves Jim. Voices of authority which support slavery (the elders from schools, churches, and politics) are haunting him, coming from everywhere.

Then Huck and Jim are lost, one in a canoe, the other in a raft, adrift in a fog, and they are separated, calling out to each other, not seeing a thing:

“‘Away down there somewhere I hears a small whoop and I went tearing after it.’

“The next time Huck heard a sound, it seemed to come from the right and then from the left, so that he went flying around this way and the other and getting nowhere near it. Then he heard a call from behind him. But that didn’t sound like Jim. And it too kept coming and kept changing in place. Finally, Huck gave up, confessing, ‘I couldn’t tell nothing about voices in a fog, for nothing don’t look natural or sound natural in a fog.’”

What a great scene and indicative of how we feel these days…. Describing us, as we float this planet through the space of the endless river of time, unsure of who we are, where we are going, how we will end up… trying to get some orientation of the mist and mystery of our existence, as disembodied voices come our way, and we are befogged as these voices only confuse us further.

These voices only confuse us further because they never address the needs of the heart, our need, like Jim and Huck’s, to be free in love. To listen to your soul and to live by it, and not by the rules that give way to abusive power or racism or greed.

John the Baptist comes to our rescue. He is a well-known prophet and followed by many, but he puts his success aside, and points to Jesus as the real deal. Follow him, not me. I only baptize with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

In the wilderness, in the fog, in the pain of our fear for our friends and family who may be losing their jobs, their health care, their stability, there is a clear voice, sounding out “Comfort, Comfort my people, says your God.”

Or when you are in your own fog, feeling lost, worried about your health, your future, or your finances, and not knowing where you will find relief. A voice from the wilderness cries out: “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.” Listen! Be alert!

The glory of the Lord shines forth and is with you always. John the Baptist points to the power of being baptized by the Holy Spirit- which is the breath of New Life, casting out our demons through the Spirit which is with you, with all of us, in times of trial, always. Our God-companion, not as a king or conqueror, but as one who is a gentle shepherd protecting his flock, is right by our side, redeeming us, walking with us, loving us.

We just don’t know it most days.

Theologian Frederick Buechner writes that in spite of the Bible’s extraordinary variety of stories, there is basically one plot: “God creates the world; the world gets lost; God seeks to restore the world to the glory for which he created it.

“That means that the Bible is a book about you and me, whom God also made and lost and continually seeks, so you might say what holds it together more than anything else is ***us***. You might add to that, of course, that of all the books that humanity has produced, the Bible is the one which more than any other- and in more senses than one- also holds us together.”

The Bible holds us together because it identifies the idea that hope stands as its own force; the life of hope has been weaned away from whether or not we are in the good or the bad of our everyday living. Hope just is. And Love transcends our messy circumstances. And being found is not dependent on our worthiness. And any suffering of another is our suffering. And wholeness has nothing to do with success. And we are saved by simple acts of kindness.

Today’s Gospel story is one of those stories holding us together: John is ignoring the voices about his own importance and his own success, and points for us to see the true way, the true voice, the true path through the wilderness.

Every time our hearts are open; every time we find our voice that reflects hope and joy; every time we go against the naysayers, the false prophets of scarcity and fear and greed, and trust in God’s abundance, we are being baptized by the Holy Spirit, living like Jesus, in the moment, in prayer, in peace, with arms flung open, bringing us into his embrace that includes all the living, no matter what, as glorious.

The Gospel of Mark has no birth story of Jesus. That gives us all room to pull out of our basements, secret boxes, letters of our past, voices of our future, and write our own present-day nativity story…… of how the Living Christ is being born within us, each one of us, day by day, redeeming us as we find our way through the fog to live within the Light that shines in the Darkness. AMEN