All Saints’ Church Third Advent

December 11, 2016 Year A

Isaiah 35:1-10 James 5:7-10

Psalm 146:4-9 Matthew 11:2-11

A story is told of St. Francis of Assisi:

He is wandering through the Umbrian forest, as was his practice, with the wolves and the birds who are his friends. He gets lost in his wandering; he is also hungry.

He emerges into a grove and sees a little house, and in the window of the house is a sign that reads: “Fresh bread baked here daily.”

He knocks on the door and is greeted by a kind woman. He asks, “Would you give me some of your bread?”

The woman smiles and says, “Oh, we don’t make the bread here; we only make the signs.”

We see the signs, pointing the way; we get the vision that Jesus has gifted the world with love and forgiveness; mercy and hope. But sometimes, we just say, “Really?” Where’s the bread Jesus? Show us the money!! We’re hungry! Don’t just point the way, asking us to embrace faith and freedom. Give us answers. Protect us. Fix things…. now.

John the Baptist is shut up in prison. Of all things, he has criticized Herod Antipas for divorcing his first wife in order to marry the wife of his half-brother. Not a very smart thing for John to do, especially if you want to keep your head.

And so John, in his own anguish, is full of doubt and foreboding. And then, when hearing what Jesus is doing- forgiving, loving, showing mercy, healing everyone, not just those who deserve it, John sends his disciples to ask Jesus,

“Are you really the Messiah for whom we wait- you who are meek, nonviolent, patient, forbearing and forgiving of all?” Really? Can you be the one? I’ve been your front runner, out in the wilderness confronting the rich, and the powerful and the greedy who use their own position in society to take care of themselves and abandon all others. There are brood of vipers in our midst, with a morality that has not respect for human life, with poisonous bites aimed at the sorely oppressed.

Change the political corruption, overturn the system that keeps people alienated from their dignity and hope, confront, name what is right, attack, and fix. C’mon Jesus, there is work to do.

Jesus’ answer: “Go tell John what you hear and see: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the poor receive good news, the dead are raised.”

But wait, Jesus, John’s in prison, and he knows he is not walking out. Jesus, how is your answer helping him?

Can you think of ways you have been shut up in a prison? Let’s enter behind our own prison bars, when we have experienced acute suffering and worry and torment and fear?

***For Instance:*** A pain that comes with a great loss- the death of a loved one, or the loss of your home or your career or your reputation; or losing a fight against an injustice. Something you valued deeply was taken away from you.

***Or:*** A fear that comes over worry with your children or your close friends- who are making bad choices with drugs, or people they hang out with, or who refuse to take your good advice and you are helpless as they walk down a path that is only going to bring heartache and sorrow.

***Or:*** A deep longing that you never realized, maybe with an opportunity that slipped out of your hands forever and you feel unfulfilled, with something that never came to be, and it continues to nag at you; somehow there is this constant reminder that you feel less than.

***Or:*** A searing anguish over being ridiculed, teased, dismissed, or shamed for who you are; people have called you names because of how you have acted or how you have looked. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me” is not true. These wounds of shaming words can last a lifetime, stifling your spirit of hope and promise, forever.

There are so many other examples….We’ve all been in our own prisons; trapped under the weight of suffering. What is Jesus’ answer to our pleas for help?

It’s fairly simple and profound. No matter what, the presence of the Living Lord is with you. No matter how dark the cross of your own pain, God will never abandon you. In your darkest night of the soul, the Spirit that created all Life is engaging you, breathing with you, holding you close, bringing you light. And you feel the Divine. Resurrection is everywhere; life is rising out of the dead, just as Jesus did. You just have to look for it, expect it, and live in its glory.

The problem is that this gift did not come the way you had hoped that it would come or the way that you hope it will come. So there’s this small mighty step you have to take: We need to surrender ourselves, our own ego, to the complete abandonment of a baby sleeping without fear in its mother’s arms. The Mother of all Life is carrying us always, the Divine Furnace of Love burns within us. God lives in us because we live in God.

Jean-Pierre de Caussade, one of my favorite spiritual teachers, speaks of this abandonment as the “sacrament of the present.” The Present is the Eucharist. If we have abandoned ourselves to God, there is only one rule for us: “the duty of the present moment.” Look and See. Let go of the EGO. A friend quipped to me once, Ego is “***E***dging ***G***od ***O***ut,” so let it go; when you do the present moment is full of God.

I received some very sad news lately. Tracey Lind, one of my close friends from seminary; we’ve known each other over 30 years, an Episcopal priest, who is the Dean of the Cathedral in Cleveland has been diagnosed with Frontotemporal Disintegration, which means that the part of her brain that controls executive functioning is literally disintegrating. A very rare disease that attacks people in their mid/late 50’s to early 60’s. She has just announced this news to her parish and she will be stepping down in January of the New Year.

What’s doubly painful about this news, is that my colleague from Exeter, whom I cared for intimately for the last two years of her life had the same exact diagnosis. Really!! Not Again!! She literally disappeared right before my very eyes.

Tracey’s wife called me, right after the diagnosis, knowing my own experience, asked me straight out, “how bad is this going to be?”

“Emily, it’s going to be bad, but all of your friends and loved ones are with you and with our help you will provide Tracey with much dignity and love. You are not alone.

And then there will these moments, the sacrament of the present, when you will really feel the Divine in a way that is extraordinary. There will be many of those moments. I experienced them.

I remember arriving at my friend’s beach home, late August; it was hot and I was going to steam lobster for her. I knew that the next week, I would be moving her to a home for people with dementia and that this was going to be our last time in her home. I had just accepted the call to All Saints’ to be Rector and I was there to share that news with her, however she was going to understand it. She hardly had any words left, with her behavior bizarre; she was losing her mind; she was losing herself.

As we sat down to feast, I told her my news and she held up her hand in the air and I moved to give her five, but then she grabbed my hand, interlaced her fingers within mine and grasped hard and held on. I don’t really have words for it, (something shifted) and it’s the closest I ever felt to being literally grasped by God. I was lifted out of the ordinary into a glimpse of the extraordinary and all life felt so fleeting, temporary, even illusionary and that the Real Thing was the grasp.

You are going to have a lot of moments like this because you are going to be clinging to God in a way that you’ve never done before. And with that, we both began to cry.

I think this is what Jesus means when he says, “go tell John what you hear and see: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the poor receive good news, and the dead are raised.”

AMEN