Third Sunday of Advent All Saints’ Church

December 14, 2014 Year B

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Psalm 126 Gospel of John 1:6-8; 19-28

I applied to seminary in my late 20’s. I was responding to a conversion. I like the Greek word for conversion- *metanoia*, which means, “a turning, responding, toward a beckoning, a type of repentance.”

I was working at the Fred Hutchinson Research Hospital in Seattle, WA, and we were in the midst of many clinical, experimental trials for patients who needed bone marrow transplants. I know now those trials in the 80’s are saving lives in 2014. Then no one was sure. But no matter, there were so many courageous families- doing all they could to LIVE.

My conversion did not come with words, or prayers, or even worship, but rather through hands and feet, mine and others; through sweat and blood, mine and others.

I read charts, found pitchers of ice water, found family members, especially when there was bad news to give, walked with patients down hallways, back and forth, and into cat scans. I waited outside rooms, held hands, met social workers, found blankets, played checkers, drew with crayons, and put on lots of “moon suits.” We needed to cover from head to toe in protection, in order to enter isolation units, and not endanger the patients with infection.

It was the closest I ever got to a war zone. The whole floor became a family, rooting for life, crying over death. I never knew, from day to day, what I would meet when I entered the floor.

In places of desolation, I think it is easy to feel God’s presence, surprising, but true. You also face your demons and your weaknesses but not as judgment, rather as a path to God.

We prayed a lot- yet often grief transcended words.

I read a lot of Parker Palmer, as well. I learned by his own account that he had suffered two great depressions in his life. He had many people praying for him and encouraging him, but his greatest consolation came when a friend, faithfully, came every afternoon and massaged his feet. This friend hardly said a word, but the touch and the steadfast consistency was solace, like a salve for Parker. He knew he was not alone, no matter how deep the pain descended.

In the midst of all this, I was applying to seminary. It really didn’t make much sense. I was a Catholic woman- what was I going to do with a seminary degree? But then, nothing made much sense with the leukemia patients as well.

I was responding, *metanoia*; I was repenting, converting, and turning toward a beckoning.

One cold afternoon in November, I was upstairs in my room, in a house I shared with two other roommates. I was writing answers to the questions posed on the seminary application, and I was nervous, insecure, even skeptical. Who was I to be doing this? In my fear and anxiety, I fell back on “religious speak”- I wasn’t answering through my real voice, but rather with words that “sounded” theological and pure and right.

The doorbell rang. I ran downstairs, almost thankful for the interruption, and opened up the door to the porch and there stood a homeless person. He had wild hair, and my first thought was that things alive must be growing in it. He had shabby clothes, with a rope as a belt around pants too big. Twine held his shoes together.

I did think, “Hmm, John the Baptist.”

My response was to close the door.

“Wait, I have a note for you.”

“Jamie, this is Henry, my friend. He will be staying with us for a few days. I’ll explain later. It will be ok.”- Karen.

It was her handwriting. O LORD. Really? Begrudgingly, I let him in, showed him to the living room.

“Stay here till Karen arrives. Don’t go anywhere else.” I offered him no drink, no food, no invitation of rest, no hospitality. I was stern.

I went back upstairs to finish my application about the “LOVE OF CHRIST.” (Oh my, this is embarrassing to admit, but it is so true.)

And then I heard music. Where could that be coming from? Such a beautiful sound- piano notes, solemn, haunting, jazz-like, George Winston-like. Was Henry playing our piano?

I went downstairs, and there he was on the piano bench. I sat down on the couch and he played for 45 minutes. It was stunning. He then turned to me after he finished.

“Who are you,” I asked?

He began to tell me about his life- he had been a concert pianist, a professor of music at the University of Washington. He had a nervous breakdown, became paranoid, and began to roam. The only food he would eat was on airplanes. He traveled by air, coast to coast for his meals and went through all his money and became homeless.

“Friends are helping me, like Karen. I am returning to the living.”

“Is this music yours; is it original?”

“Not really- the notes are given to me; I just listen carefully, and they just come. I pray without ceasing. Divine presence, eternal values, just are. They just are. Available always. Transparent- I try to absorb the notes. The experience becomes a kind of fourth dimension in my three dimensional world. It takes no effort, not really, but I have to practice AWARENESS.

“I am not homeless anymore, but I am afraid to wear normal clothes, not yet anyway. I was dressed like this when I became AWARE. I am afraid I might lose it, if I lose my wildness.”

What did I learn from Henry?

Henry was not homeless, crazy or threatening, though he experienced all these states at some point in his life. But these experiences did not DEFINE him. He was much deeper- a pulsating, passionate, gentle soul.

My encounter with Henry taught me to be patient with myself and with others- to look for life beyond anyone’s presentations of it. Dignity is to be found in all.

And he defined for me forever, “to pray without ceasing”- to be aware of the divine presence all the time, no matter the circumstances, good or bad, as a spontaneous part of all reality.

In the gospel verses this morning on who John is NOT, we learn something of who Jesus IS.

John the Baptist is clear, especially in this Gospel of John, that his identity is related totally to the Coming One. He is witness to this Coming. This is his Mission.

In all the other gospels, John is the forerunner, but in the Gospel of John, Jesus comes first as the WORD, as TRUE LIGHT. The significance of John the Baptist as a witness is stressed because he is calling us to claim our mission as Witnesses to the TRUE LIGHT. And it comes in so many forms, so many ways. We just have to look and see.

In the Gospel of John, the WORD made flesh to live among us, now stands among us. But John reminds us, “as one whom you do not know.”

Our mission is to recognize not Jesus, but God incarnate, the one we must come to know again, this Christmas. This is our life’s journey- to live this faith.

After Henry left, I started my application to seminary, all over, by writing, “John the Baptist knocked at my door.”

He’s knocking on yours as well. Let him in.

(the Rev.) Jamie L. Hamilton