

“Restoring Joy”

Days before hosting the International Summit on Climate Change/Carbon Control in Beijing, the Chinese government ordered the shut-down of schools, businesses, public buildings and banned vehicles from the streets. The results were dramatic. The smog lifted. People saw something amazing in the sky that they had not seen for a long time---the sun. The air cleared. People took off their surgical face masks and breathed in the joy of fresh air. For the first time in years neighbors talked and laughed together on the sidewalks and in the streets. After the summit the ban was lifted and it was back to business as usual. The sun disappeared and the city dwellers masked their faces again. When one reporter challenged a government official with the question: “After seeing how wonderful the clean air was won’t the people be dissatisfied when the smog returns?” The official replied, “Oh no. They will get used to it just as they did before.” I can’t help but wonder: What if what the official said is true? Will human apathy be the undoing of creation?

Psychologists tell us that apathy is a lack of feeling, emotion, interest, concern, motivation, and passion that occurs naturally short-term as a way to deal with negative emotions. When it becomes a long-term or even lifelong state, however deeper social and psychological issues present themselves. A long term apathetic person (as well as a whole society) may lack a sense of purpose or meaning in their life; they may feel that they do not possess the level of skill required to confront a challenge; they may perceive no challenge at all (the challenge is irrelevant to them); they may have internalized a sense of learned helplessness.

In ‘Two Faces of Advent’ author Fleming Rutledge wrote: ‘In 1968 the Catholic Interracial Council of the Twin Cities produced a remarkable Christmas card. The outside of the card was red-orange, and featured the words of the Benedictus: “From on high our God will bring the rising Sun . . .” Then you opened the card to find a stark black-and-white photograph of a small African-American child caught by a ray of sunlight as he sits

listlessly in the shadows of a slum courtyard. Along with the photo was the rest of the verse: “to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.” The contrast between the outside and inside caused heads to snap back.’ (Christian Century, Dec. 1, 1999) So what do you think? Was the Beijing official correct? Will apathy prevail? Or, will Advent faith cause such a contrast between apathy and joy that souls feel a yearning to care for the world? Each week when we sing, ‘Cast me not away from the Spirit O God and take not thy Holy Spirit from me, restore unto me the joy of thy salvation and renew a right spirit within me’ aren’t we affirming the power of joy? Personally, because I’ve never been a fan of apathy and hate being stuck in it, I’m glad that on this turn around Sunday of Advent our scriptures come alive with spiritual practices for the thickening of our souls with joy.

When we take a close look at psalm 126 what we discover is that if joy is to win its battle with apathy the starting place within is our grieving place of pain and sadness. Here in verse 5 we build trust in faith’s words: ‘May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.’ It is a prayer place of lament in which we ask for the help of God, the Holy One of Israel who is mighty with restorative power. From the city folk who had lost it all came the cry in verse 4 ‘Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb (river). What I like about this part with its metaphor of river is that it points people of every faith to the restorative power of creation. This verse suggests that when grieving over the loss of beautiful earth, a Ute Indian tribe will turn to Mother Earth for help and pray: Earth teach me stillness as the grasses are stilled with light. Earth teach me suffering as old stones suffer with memory. Earth teach me humility as blossoms are humble with beginning. Earth teach me caring as the mother who secures her young. Earth teach me courage as the tree which stands all alone. Earth teach me limitation as the ant which crawls on the ground. Earth teach me freedom as the eagle which soars in the sky. Earth teach me resignation as the leaves which die in the fall. Earth teach me regeneration as the seed which rises in the spring. Earth teach me to forget myself as melted snow forgets its life. Earth teach me to remember kindness as dry fields weep with rain.

From Isaiah we are given inspiring words of personal testimony about keeping the faith that God will raise up prophets who will speak for the larger purposes of our Creator. Remember what Isaiah said of himself: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me, God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn . . . ' (vs. 1-4) Commenting on the follow up promise in Isaiah's next verses, John Hayes wrote: Those mourning in Zion would possess new symbols of their status replacing the old symbols: flower garlands rather than ashes, oil to soothe the skin rather than mourning, mantles to wear rather than a fainting spirit. The consequences for those blessed would be a new status: they would be a new planting for a new day. In turn, the new status would bring a new task---the rebuilding of the cities and the restoration of the ruins to remove the results of years of devastation. Advent is our time for looking and expecting to find apathy defying prophets active among us today. In a television interview Tesla CEO Elon Musk was asked why he allows anyone in good faith to use his patent for his electric car. In reply he said that he imagined the world to be like a sinking boat and that it was essential that everyone have the best bucket for the bailing out of the water.

Apathy always thinks itself the victor until of course it encounters a soul who is full of grace and can't stop singing about miracle. In an Advent devotional Rev. Caldwell wrote: 'Jesus speaks in metaphor a lot because he knows that pulsing under and through everything we see and experience is the life and power of God. Breaking through every moment of every day, just below the surface, is the realm of God, the future shaping the here and now. Empirical observation cannot detect it. Objective testing will not uncover it. Literalism can never apprehend it. It is usually not obvious. The best we can do is to feel it and then talk about it in simile and metaphor. I think that overly literal people miss (the God of grace that is all around them). They look at the story of Jesus' birth, and they see two people trying to cover up some extramarital hanky-panky and an unexpected pregnancy with stories of angels and miracles. They look at bread and cup, and they see-bread and cup. They look at the cross and see-two pieces of wood. They look at a newborn baby and see-carbon. It is a dreary way to move through the world.

Today, practice seeing in metaphors. Look deeper than the surface. Try to see the world deeply, as Jesus sees it: full of God. Try singing the impossible with Mary

'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants for evermore.' (Luke 1:46-55)



Prayer

Joyful God, we long to be your Christmas people. but first, help us to be your Advent people. Teach us to prepare our hearts for a joy we can only imagine. And when that joy comes, help us to hold onto it all year long. Amen.