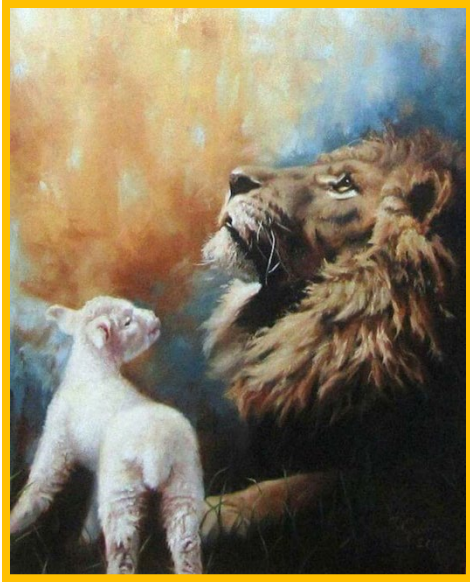


REFLECTIONS FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT ~ 04 December 2022

The Mount ~ The Residence at Litledale

“For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord” – today’s readings from the Liturgy of the Word for the second Sunday of Advent describe the world which God wants for Earth and for us. It is a world marked by hope, peace, joy, and love. It is a world in which each person and each Earth being feels and is safe, protected, and repeated. It is a world in which each one is expected to live into their own integrity to bring healing to the whole. It is a sacred communion of all creation.



In the first reading from the second part of the book of Isaiah, we hear an image-filled picture of that world. Humans are filled with the spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might, and of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. Animals, usually seen as predator and prey, live in the same space – the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling, the cow and the bear, the lion and the ox, the child and the asp and the adder. Not only do they live in the same space, but they relate intimately to each other – they lie down together, they eat together, they play together, they dare to touch each other. And the wonder of all – a little child leads them – not the strongest animal or the wisest adult but a little child! This new world is truly a transformed world in which right relationship defines communion, vulnerability becomes strength. What a strange world!

Psalms 72 continues this imagery. Righteousness, justice, and peace are interwoven and showered abundantly on Earth and people, “In these days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more. . . from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. . . For the chosen one delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. The chosen one has pity on the weak and the needy and saves the lives of the needy” (Ps 72:7-8, 12-13).

Paul reminds the Romans of the gift of his Bible (the Hebrew Scriptures and our Old Testament), “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” (Rom 15:4). The gift of the Scriptures is not just the recording of the history of a group of people or a presentation of diverse literature. Rather it is, for believers, a source of steadfastness and encouragement, a source of hope. For what is that hope? Hope is exactly as Isaiah imagines it – harmony within the sacred communion, “May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another” (Rom 15:5). The steadfastness and encouragement which the Scriptures bring are the distinctive marks of the God who created and sustains us, the One who wishes for us the harmony described in Isaiah 35.

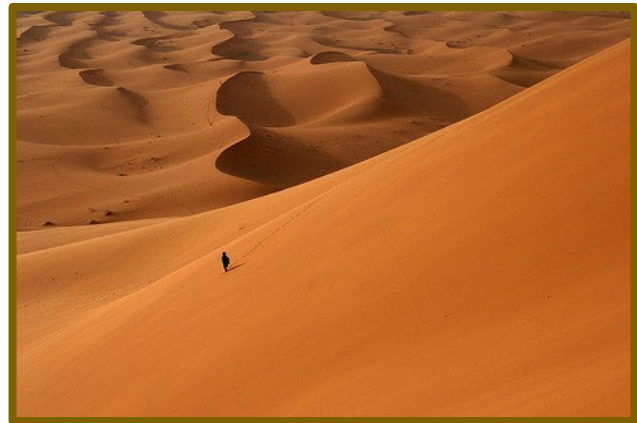
Ponder these two words. “Steadfastness” echoes the one word of the Old Testament which describes God’s relationship with us – “hesed” or “mercy” or “loving kindness” (as we once translated it) or “steadfast love” (as we now translate it). In Exodus 34, God describes Himself with these words, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (“hesed”) and faithfulness” (Ex 34:6). Notice “abounding”! God’s love

continues in abundance no matter how often we turn away or follow less healthy ways of finding happiness.

In the Old Testament, the word for encourage or encouragement is “hāzaq” often translated as strengthen, prevail, harden, be strong, become strong, be courageous, be firm, grow firm, or be resolute. There is one verse from the book of Joshua which describes this so beautifully. God is preparing Joshua to lead the people into the Promised Land – the realization of their dream for the past forty years of wandering in the wilderness, “I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Jos 1:9). The source of the encouragement is God’s faithfulness, steadfastness. What a wonderful commandment!

The words which follow in the verses from Romans are startling! How do we live out that harmony, how do we find the hope? Paul says it plainly, “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you” (Rom 15:7). Inclusion is the way which we are expected to follow if we can ever achieve the harmony described in Exodus and echoed in this letter. In the parable in Matthew 25, Jesus cries out, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matt 25:35). At our table of plenty, whom do we refuse to invite to the empty chair? At our table of plenty, whom do we invite to the empty chair? When was the last time you reached out to the stranger who may actually be someone you know but choose to ignore, who may be one of God’s other-than-human creatures whom you choose to ignore? “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you.”

In Matthew’s Gospel, we meet John the Baptist, one of the key figures of the Advent season. John is certainly a man of Earth who lives in the desert of Judea. As Veronica Lawson rsm reminds us, “Desertification of earth is becoming the norm in these troubled times of fluctuating flood and fire and desert features powerfully in today’s gospel reading. The desert is the biblical place of encounter with God, the place of beginnings and of testing.” John dresses and eats as a man of Earth – he “wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey” (Matt 3:4). The images he uses to convey his powerful and unequivocal message are Earth images – wilderness, the way, paths, brood of vipers, trees, fruit, fire, water, winnowing, wheat, threshing, granary, chaff.



John calls for repentance (*μετάνοια, metanoia*), a transformative change of heart. Jan Richardson says about him, “John appears in the gospels as a wildly liminal figure, a character who lives and works in a threshold space. He dwells in the wilderness; hangs out by a river; offers the ritual of baptism, which is an initiatory rite, even in this pre-Christian context; and devotes himself to preparing a way for the one who is to come.”

This repentance, this metanoia, is essential if we are to achieve the image of the communion of all creation in Isaiah, the harmony among us and welcome to all described by Paul. We cannot do this alone. John offers baptism with water to give us the strength and the encouragement to live this vision. But he promises that “the one coming after him” (Matt 3:12) will go further and baptize with water and the Holy Spirit. Our response is well stated by Veronica Lawson rsm, “We prepare the way by constantly expanding our vision and turning our lives around in the direction

of God's reign of compassionate care for all God's people and for all creation." The Irish spiritual writer, Bairbre Cahill, dares us to respond, "Incarnation invites us into a radically different relationship with the world, a relationship where everything and everyone matters. This Advent, how would it challenge and shape my faith to accept such an invitation?"

Just as the little child leads them in the transformed world that God imagines in Isaiah, so too a little child leads us into our metanoia. Ron Rolheiser omi says, "The power of God revealed in Christmas is the power of a baby, nothing more, nothing less: innocence, gentleness, helplessness, a vulnerability that can soften hearts, invite in, have us hush our voices, teach us patience, and call forth what's best in us. He just lay there, waiting for anyone good or bad to come to him, see his helplessness, feel a tug at his or her heart strings, and then gently try to coax a smile or a word out of him. That's still how God meets us."



On this second Sunday of Advent, our Cosmic Advent Wreath focuses us on incarnation in the birth of the solar system and our Earth. In Brian Swimme's words, "This vast ocean of our solar system is like a womb, that has unfolded over some five billion years to become galaxies and stars, palm and pelicans, the music of Bach and each of us alive today." Lighting our green handle, we pray:

Come, Wonderous Community of Infinite Love. Today, as we light the candle of the birth of the solar system, we pray "Triune God, wondrous community of infinite love, teach us to contemplate You in the beauty of the universe, for all things speak of You. Awaken our praise and thankfulness for every being that you have made. Give us the grace to feel profoundly connected to everything that is" (*Laudato Si'*, 246). Come, waken us to praise.

We conclude our reflections with wise advice in this simple prayer-poem from Steve Garnaas-Holmes about living metanoia, finding that transforming change of heart:

"One who is more powerful than I is coming."
John isn't just hyping. He's tapping
into your already surging longing
for the Holy One to be Present:

the Loving One, who has shown you the Way,
the way of love and courage and forgiveness,
the way of trust and gratitude.

Yes, you want to greet the Chosen One,
to be among the angels singing
"Glory to God in the highest."

So how do you prepare?
How do you make a way for the Beloved,
and get ready to join the great Hallelujah?

As all the angels do. Practice.



John Baptizes Jesus, Cameroon, Jesus MAFA



The Lion and Lamb