

God Saves by Claiming Us as God's Own

That the World Might Be Saved 5

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Sunday, March 21, 2021

Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33

A Year of Wilderness

This weekend marks a full year of our country moving to shut downs and our church moving to worship online due to the pandemic. As I noted in my newsletter article last week, it's been a year of wilderness for most of us. Almost all of us know someone touched by COVID, almost all of us can name someone we know lost to this virus. It is hard for the human mind to comprehend the loss of over half a million lives just in the United states.

Other losses are perhaps less visible – seniors isolated for months at a time in congregant settings or at home, children faced with an education model untested and created on the fly, parents (and mainly women) trying to work and care for children now home for the whole day. Our faith community has been tested to “find a way” out of no way.

Getting on the Road

It is indeed no accident that the earliest descriptions of the Christian faith were “the way.” It is something that the gospel of John talks about in several places – Jesus in a couple of chapters further along says to the disciples, “You know the way to the place where I am going.” (John 14:4) and also “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Set in context with Jesus' remarkable statement in the gospel passage today that “Anyone who loves his life loses it; anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life,” (John 12:25b-26) we see that the search for meaning and truth almost always requires that we give up our preconceived notions of our own lives in order for something new to be made.

Going on the way, although it requires sacrifice, is about being transformed into something new, something that God wants. Our lives can become full of meaning, hope-filled vessels in which the work of the divine can be lived through and lived out.

Dragged Along the Way

Sometimes, however, we have to be taken kicking and screaming into the new transformation. We are our own worst enemies at times.

Author Parker Palmer tells the story that he once took a job because of the prestige attached to it – in my memory, I think it was the President of a college or something like that. He got on the job and soon realized that he was fantastically wrong for the job – because it required him to do a lot of fundraising, and that’s not what he was good at. He left defeated. And then he entered a long period where all the opportunities that he sought out were dead ends, all except for one. It wasn’t his first choice by far, but once in it, he realized he was a perfect fit for what they needed.

That’s what finding the way is like at times. The more we run into obstacles and challenges along the way, the more we are called upon to trust the God who is right there with us. A growing trust of the indwelling God builds the further we walk. The Jews called this indwelling part of God the Shekhinah. Jurgen Moltmann, a contemporary reformed theologian writes about the Shekhinah that “the God who in the Spirit dwells in his (sic) creation is present to every one of his creatures and remains bound to each of them, in joy and sorrow.”³

I think this is the kind of thing that Jeremiah was trying to communicate in the passage read today. After the Hebrews had been on the journey of exile in a strange land, it may well have been overwhelming to think of returning home, of coming to their old places, of finding the new normal for their lives and communities. Surely the past had been traumatic enough to leave scars for a lifetime. Surely the crises they had borne were the kind of crises that require a heart full of wisdom and courage. Surely God would not desert them now that they were going to be freed for new life.

Marianne Williamson writes, “There’s nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within in us. It’s not just in some of us; it’s in everyone. . .As we’re liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”⁴

³ Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 15.

⁴ Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of a Course in Miracles*, (HarperPerennial, 1900).

And so God promises to provide the teaching that will reside in their hearts, the kind of teaching that will be so natural to us, if we are willing to hear it and obey it, that we can come to our senses, and find the healing that needs to happen to continue the journey on the way. The poet Ann Weems puts it this way in her poem “God’s Graffiti”⁵:

We’ve splashed our rules
 all over the sanctuary walls. . .
 So many rules we don’t have time
 for dancing. . .
 Our graffiti
 defiling the house of God.
 God’s graffiti is different:
 God writes LOVE
 upon our hearts. . .

What we do when things get our lives are at risk can reverberate for generations. A young Japanese girl, Sadako Sasaki, contracted leukemia stemming from radiation poisoning related to the World War II atomic bombing in Hiroshima.

Confined to a hospital, the 12-year-old began folding origami cranes in hopes of reaching 1,000, since legend had it that the folder of this many cranes would be granted a wish. One story says that Sadako completed only two-thirds of her goal, so her friends finished the task for her and placed all 1,000 cranes in Sadako’s casket.

The story of Sadako’s cranes continues to inspire generations of children to work for peace. For example, 10-year-old Nina Geist, who attends First Presbyterian Church of Anchorage, has been creating origami cranes with plans to sell them at her church’s holiday gift market this year. The market supports local and global missions. The money Nina makes will be sent to PC(USA) mission co-workers Ryan and Alethia White, who are working to bring peace to the lives of Iranian immigrants and refugees in Germany.

Last year was the first time that she sold the cranes at the gift market, but she also makes custom-colored ones for friends and church members throughout the year. She sells some cranes individually, but most are part of a mobile that has multiple cranes attached. So far, Nina has sent \$300 to the Whites in as they work for peace.

This is a story of who we become when God inscribes our hearts with the teaching of his love. It is the story of those who discover that they are the beloved too.

⁵ Ann Weems, “God’s Graffiti” from *Kneeling in Jerusalem*, 32.

Discovering the Indwelling God

In Sue Monk Kidd's book *the Secret Life of Bees*, the young white protagonist Lily Owens runs away from home to find shelter in the home of black women August, May and June, who are South Carolina beekeepers. Lily doesn't really know whether the Divine really exists. She certainly doesn't know what to do at first with the mysterious image of the Black Madonna that the sisters have named "Our Lady" and imbue with special powers. Lily sees it as the worship of an old ship's masthead. (The eldest sister August knows that it functions to help people remember rather than having divine powers of its own.)

Finally, August tells her that she needs to discover the wisdom of the Divine that resides in herself. "Our Lady is not some magical being out there somewhere, like a fairy godmother. She's not the statue in the parlor. She's something *inside* of you. . .You have to find a mother insider yourself. We all do. Even if we already have a mother, we still have to find this part of ourselves inside. . .You don't have to put your hand on Mary's heart to get strength and consolation and rescue, and all the other things we need to get through life. . .You can place it right here on your own heart. *Your own heart.*"⁶

This is the crucial discovery – that we can find that consolation for our times, for our losses. In a world where we aren't sure of the direction, inside our heart is a compass that God has placed there, a way to follow, a way which will require sacrifice, and even death of some parts of our lives that we treasure. But only then will we find the new life God wants us have.

So I invite you now to place your hand over your heart. Listen to it beat. Treasure its strength, hear its confident beat that God has provided today. God has placed the teachings of the world in it– will you dare to follow the way?

Amen.

⁶ *The Secret Life of Bees*, 288.