

DO YOU NEED TO CHANGE IN SOME WAY?

Isaiah 40: 1-5; Matthew 3: 1-11

Kelli Kieley never thought she'd ever feel suicidal. But last year, she lost hope. Her marriage had ended, her health was precarious, her career hit a road block and she had two children to feed. She wished she could just go to sleep and never wake up. She was baffled, depressed and scared. She had always managed in the past, but now her best laid plans had failed. She was a filmmaker and entrepreneur. She ran small businesses and facilitated a college course mentoring entrepreneurs. But suddenly, the college program was cancelled and her other business pitches weren't being well received. On top of all this, she had health problems related to anemia which she had downplayed while raising her children. Now they were starting to take their toll. Where would it all lead?

Before we continue with Kelli's story, let's reflect on our own. What would it take for you to hit a wall or the limit of what you can handle? Maybe you've already been there. Life can put us there all too often. We're all vulnerable. We all have a limit beyond which we break in some way. If we haven't discovered our limit yet, we will at some point. So, how do we find hope? Is there a way to hope that's real? What did Kelli find?

Well, Kelli went to a therapist. Therapy was helping, but it was also costing money, money Kelli was finding it hard to come up with. So the therapist recommended that Kelli find a 12-step program. Some of you may know about the 12 steps, usually associated with alcoholics anonymous. But these steps have also been applied to any number of addictive behaviours in our lives connected to destructive patterns in our relationships. (our bulletin insert lists the 12 steps).

But Kelli couldn't believe her therapist would recommend a 12-step program for her. She wasn't an alcoholic. Maybe there were people she had cared about who were, but what she was suffering was burn out. The problem in some of her more challenging relationships was other people, not her. A 12-step program wasn't serious therapy. And besides, there were religious foundations to the 12-steps, and Kelli had had very negative experiences of religion growing up.

But things kept getting worse for Kelli. The stress was killing her from the inside and she felt like she was hitting rock bottom. Desperation can become a powerful motivator. So what did Kelli do? Before I continue with more of Kelli's story, let's reflect on ourselves and let's ponder our scripture readings in search of revelatory guidance. Have you ever felt life

pushing you to the edge? Have you ever struggled with your sanity, overwhelmed by stress, by anger, by helplessness, by an addiction or compulsion behind which there is an avoidance or fear of facing something or someone in your life? I've struggled, and I'm sure many of you have too. It is part of life, like it or not.

The people of Israel had also hit rock bottom. They had been overrun by a brutal empire, suffering multiple losses of land, home and loved ones, forced into exile in a foreign land, separated from home and family, treated like slaves. And compounding all this tragic cruelty suffered, prophets had warned the nation over many years that they had broken faith with their God and their ethical and spiritual traditions. And so, they were responsible for their suffering in some way even though it was cruel and overwhelming. Imagine suffering something terrible but also carrying a sense of responsibility for it too. It makes the suffering a lot worse. Even if it's a lot bigger than our responsibility alone, the worst kind of suffering is the suffering for which we carry some responsibility.

So what do we do about it? You would think we'd try to do something positively constructive to remedy things, no? But all too often, the opposite happens. Even though we may be somewhat responsible or complicit in what's happened and is happening, we flail outwards emotionally, blaming everything and everyone else, hurting other people even as we ourselves are hurting. We abuse, neglect, dismiss and push people away, especially those closest to us. We focus on everything that we are not responsible for because it's too painful, too confronting and too overwhelming to face the wrong choices we have made, or choices we have failed to make because we've closed in on ourselves.

Israel was broken, they had paid a heavy price for their sins, maybe too high. Things had happened to them, but they had also done things or neglected things making it all worse for themselves.

But here's how hope opens a door. The prophecy of Isaiah from chapter 40 onwards is a new chapter for the nation. It begins with words of comfort and tender compassion: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received... double for all her sins." In other words: "It's enough, my people!" declares God. Let's begin again. Let's heal your wounds by healing our way into a new relationship with each other. And together, let's rebuild life." How do we rebuild life in a way where we learn from our mistakes, let go what is toxic emotional weight, and open our hearts to compassion, care and justice? How do we do that?

Well, The prophecy continues: "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God...'" In other words: there is a higher power that can help you my people. I can become healing and transforming energy in and

through you, declares God. But here's the thing: "for this to work, we have to do it together. I can do something in and through you only if you open the door. You need to clear a path for my power to come and work in and through you." This involves some hard choices and concrete action. Divine energy and inspiration can heal and transform, but people need to be ready for that. They need to rise up to that, otherwise the healing and transformation can't happen.

And this is exactly the message of John the Baptist in our gospel reading. John proclaims: "Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near." To repent means to change. John is telling people to get ready for change. You can join a divine fellowship called the kingdom of heaven. Join this group and begin to find empowerment for healing transformation.

But here's the problem John encounters. There are different kinds of people in his audience. There are the privileged religious officials called Pharisees and Sadducees. Their approach is: 'we're just fine as we are. We don't need any change. We're born and bred people of God. We're protected from the bad stuff. We're not losers or those born into the wrong class or race. We're good people not messed up people. We're healthy and whole, not compromised and broken.' John's response minces no words: "You brood of vipers" he calls them! Don't think you're so safe, for misfortune and trouble comes to everyone, even the most privileged.

But there are also others in John's audience. They come forward for baptism, we're told, 'confessing their sins.' In other words, they know they're broken, they know trouble and they're seeking help. The problem is: how is help to come? How does divine help get activated?

Well, society then like society now teaches two ways to heal our troubles. First, there's the perspective that "it's all up to you." You and you alone are responsible for healing yourself and finding the inspiration and courage to make better choices toward change and transformation. "It's all up to you." But what happens when I've sunk low and I'm in deep and I've lost my courage and hope? Are we like the Pharisees and Sadducees believing it can't or won't happen to us? It will. Can I just pick myself up every time then? And if not, do I just beat myself up for being such a failure since others seem to be doing just fine on the surface anyways?

But then there's an opposite way of seeking to heal my troubles, the quick fix way: drugs, surgery, winning the lottery or some magic therapy. We pray for a miracle believing a miracle is like magic and God can pull some invisible strings to just change our situation somehow. Many of the people coming to John were desperate for magic and miracles that way. John was challenging them with repentance: What are you prepared to change in your life if you're going to really dance with God on a journey of healing transformation? If your

not ready to wake up, get up, and get ready to work, nothing's going to happen and you'll remain stuck in the same pit you're in. We do need a power of healing strength and transformation beyond us. But we also need to rise up ourselves as actors on our healing and transforming journey. It's not either or. Both are necessary, divine and human, a higher power and we ourselves. At some point we will fall into some pit. We do need divine help. But unless we ourselves are activated, no lasting and meaningful change can come. The miracle is when we somehow find the inspiration and motivation rise within us to get up and start walking.

So, what happened to Kelli? Well, Kelli was desperate for change. She decided to give a 12-step program a try. She found a group and went to the first meeting. It was being held in a church-basement. This raised all kinds of trigger-bells for her. Church and religion had not been sources of comfort and healing, but rather, judgement and fear. But what happened to Kelli next totally astonished her. It all began at the first meeting she attended. The people there were so understanding. They really listened. Kelli felt this was a place and space where she could safely admit her fears and weaknesses. She had begun step 1: Admitting her powerlessness and the unmanageability of her life.

But then, with some encouragement and trust, she was opened to step 2: a willingness to turn her life over to a higher power. Rather than make her more passive and helpless, such a step surprisingly made her feel more motivated and empowered. Things began to happen in the rest of her life as well. She became proactive with getting help and support in certain areas, and then taking certain initiatives. She became proactive with her health, with work related opportunities, with finding new ways to market her skills, with finding direction in her personal life and parenting. She was then on her way to step 3 and beyond, which included practicing a connection to a higher power as a continuing presence in her life, as well as the importance of spiritual community beginning with her 12-step group.

Over the next while Kelli also began gaining greater insight into destructive patterns that had been functioning in her life. She got in touch with underlying resentments, fears, dysfunctional ways of finding intimacy with others, identifying character defects, cultivating personal integrity and continuing to develop spiritual connectivity in a healthy and loving way. All this was part of the 12 step journey, personalized to her own life, her own struggles and her own relational history.

So what about you and me? Each of us has our own history and our own realities. Change is something we all need, but the specifics of such change are something we need to discern for ourselves. So where do we get our insight, our motivation, our courage and our inspiration that something better can come to be in who we are if we take the steps we need to take to change? Church is not a 12-step group, but the originators of the 12-step program were people of faith belonging to churches. The idea was that church should be a

gentle place where people are loved and embraced so they can be who they are, where they can find enough love to risk exposing their vulnerability, their powerlessness, their need for a higher power and their need for community to be home as they grow into the beautiful human beings they are created to be.

That's you and me too. We are called here to live ever more deeply into who we are created to be. Who are you created to be? What obstacles are you facing in your path? Can a divine presence, power and energy some of us call God open you up and empower you to rise up to a higher and deeper you?

Let us pray: Work in us, O God... work in us repentance in this season of Advent preparation, so that we can rise up into the fullness of Christmas love... It is a journey and in certain ways a struggle, O God. Darkness is present as much as light. May you keep our candle lit, even when we lose faith and hope in what can yet be... Amen.