

When Peace Blooms, When the Kingdom Comes

Isaiah 35: 1-2, 5-7. Matthew 11:2-5

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Today's vision of peace from the prophet is of a desert in bloom, a perfect text for the third Sunday in Advent, Joy Sunday:

The wilderness and the dry land

shall be glad,

The desert shall rejoice and blossom.

I

Sometimes peace comes as a desert suddenly in bloom, that is, as grace. We work and work for peace, then here it comes! By sheer grace.

Have you ever seen a desert in bloom? Sue lived for 8 years in the desert expanse of Alice Springs, Australia, right in the center of the country. When the December rains came every year suddenly the desert became vibrant in color as the grasses and flowers bloomed.

...like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly

and rejoice with joy and singing.

Or, this, you are walking along a path in the woods and suddenly come upon a meadow, a field of wildflowers in full bloom. Who planted those wild flowers? They are the gift of God, the “glory of God” Isaiah says, in more colors than your eyes can take in.

Sometimes our lives can feel like a desert, then comes the grace of God, falling like rain on our parched souls.

There was a young couple in a former church who had been trying in vain for a long time to have a child. They were close to despair. Then one night the young woman had a dream of being in a beautiful green and verdant meadow, full of color, bursting with life. What was the meaning of the dream, she asked? Shortly after she conceived their long hoped for child. For unto them, a son was given.

Is this the purpose of Isaiah’s dream for us? To bring hope? The rains will come, the sun will shine, and your world, our world will become as a garden in bloom. Thomas Merton, the famous monk wrote:

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity...a hidden wholeness.¹

I believe that, hold onto that. From hidden places will come wholeness, peace like a desert suddenly in bloom.

Peace comes as healing too:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
Then the lame shall leap like a deer
and the tongues of the speechless sing for joy.

Healing will come like “streams in the desert.”

And this healing is not just bodily, but of mind and spirit too. To quote the poet e.e. cummings.

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)²

Our hearts will leap for joy like the deer leaping across the open path.

Sometimes our eyes see what they’ve been taught to see. We need to *unname* things that have been named. A man in a former church told me that his mother, suffering from paranoia, had taught him to look at the world with paranoid eyes. He was working day by day to see the world aright. Sometimes we walk with a limp no one else can see, our lives crippled by past trauma.

But then healing begins, sometimes in such small measure we at first do not see it. It starts from deep within, and it comes by grace as free as the sun that shines and the rains that fall from the sky. The writer Annie Dillard describes

those moments when she is given just the right word or phrase. It is like any moment of, in her words, “unmerited grace.” Hear her description:

It is handed to you, but only if you look for it. You search, you break your heart, your back, you brain, and then—and only then—it is handed to you. From the corner of your eye you see motion. Something is moving through the air and headed your way. It is a parcel bound in ribbons and bows; it has two white wings. It flies directly at you; you can read your name on it. If it were a baseball, you would hit it out of the park. It is that one pitch in a thousand you see in slow motion; its wings beat slowly as a hawk’s.³

III

Jesus had peace as healing in mind when John the Baptist’s disciples came to him with a question. John was in prison, having offended King Herod by writing an Op-ed. in the *Jerusalem Gazette*, attacking his policies and his personal immorality. When the word got to Herod, he cast him into prison. Prophets sometimes find themselves in prison. The powers-that-be cannot bear the truth. George Orwell, the writer of *1984*, said, “The further a society drifts from the truth, the more it will hate those who speak it.”

In prison John had been hearing about the mighty acts and miracles of Jesus. Here is the question he sent to Jesus:

Are you he who is to come [that is, the Messiah] or shall we look for another?

“Or shall we look for another?” It is the question we all have to answer. Is this for real? Shall I stake my life on him, or look for another? It may be the quintessential Advent question: “Shall I look for another?”

Jesus sent this word back:

Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them.

This is what happens when the kingdom happens. When the kingdom comes, yes, eyes and ears are opened, you lose your limp and walk strong. Lepers are cleansed, the untouchables are touched and the cast-outs are invited in. And yes, the poor receive good news, *real* good news. And, this, the dead are raised up! Not just Lazarus. Us too! The North Carolina novelist Doris Betts has a novel entitled *Souls Raised from the Dead*. She got the title from a sign in a shop window in a run-down part of Atlanta:

Keys Made

Knives Sharpened

Palms Read

Souls Raised From the Dead⁴

I've seen souls raised from the dead, people who have felt their souls, their spirit, their spirituality shriveled up and dead. Sometimes it's because of what life can do to you. Some great loss, some tragedy, some great loneliness. Loneliness can be a killer. Or depression with our brain chemistry all out of whack.

In novelist William Styron's memoir on his depression, *Darkness Visible*, he writes:

My brain, in thrall to its outlaw hormones, had become less of an organ of thought than an instrument of registering, minute by minute, varying degrees of its own suffering.⁵

Our souls can become a desert. Then here it comes, God comes, Christ comes, help comes, love comes, or the arms of a church you never expected to have. And a soul is raised from the dead.

Anne Lamott was a young brilliant writer in California. She had had some remarkable early success but her inner life was a wreck, struggling with alcohol addictions and eating disorders. Then something began to happen. Grace began to happen. She found a little ghetto church across from a flea market in Marin county. Maybe God found *her*, through this church community of faith. "It was where I was taken in when I had nothing to give", she writes, "and it has become

in the truest deepest sense, my home. My home base.” “That’s where I was when I came to”, she writes. “And then I came to believe.”

As she writes about her coming to believe, she says:

I didn’t mean to be a Christian....My first words upon encountering the presence of Jesus for the first time 12 years ago were, “I’d rather die.” I really would rather have died at that point than to have my wonderful brilliant left-wing non-believer friends know that I had begun to love Jesus. I think they would have been less appalled if I had developed a close personal friendship with Strom Thurmond.⁵

It happened on her houseboat. She had come home recovering from an abortion. She was weak from loss of blood and in a kind of haze produced by a combination of pain killers and booze. Then she suddenly sensed Jesus’ presence in the room with her, “watching me with patience and love”. She turned away. “I would rather die.”

She wondered the next morning whether it was a hallucination, “born”, in her words, “of fear and self-loathing and booze and loss of blood.”

But Jesus persisted in his presence to her. A week or so later she was coming home from church, having been overwhelmed by the music and singing. There he was again. She opened the door to her houseboat and said to Christ, “I

quit.... All right. You can come in.” This, she says, was “my beautiful moment of conversion.”⁶

Souls raised from the dead. This is the peace that comes when grace knocks at your door.

Conclusion

This peace is Christ’s gift to you this day and always. You may have heard of the great black theologian, mystic, pastor, teacher Howard Thurman. He inspired a generation of black leaders including Martin Luther King, who carried a copy of his book *Jesus and the Disinherited* with him. At one point he taught at Boston University. And at another point he moved to California to begin a new experiment in church, an inter-racial church named Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples.

In such a world as ours, he wrote, we need a strong inner peace, to get in touch with our mystical center. Hear his words:

There is in every person an inward sea, and in that sea there is an island, and on that island there is a temple and an altar, where God dwells, not the God of the creed, the church, the family, but the God of one’s own heart.

This, he says, is “the island of peace within one’s soul.”

It is to that inward sea and island and temple and altar where Christ leads us today.

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1. Thomas Merton, "Hagia Sophia", in Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Masters: The Essential Writings* (N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1992), p258.
 2. e.e. cummings, "thank you," *100 Selected Poems*. (N.Y.: Grove Press, 1954), p.114
 3. Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1989), p.75
 4. Doris Betts, *Souls Raised From the Dead* (N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), Author's note, frontspiece.
 5. William Styron, *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of a Madness* (N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 58
 6. These are variously from Anne Lamott, "Word by Word: Spiritual Chemotherapy", February 13, 1997, Salon.com and Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (N.Y.: Random House, 1999), pp. 44-50