

December 10, 2023
“Honoring Our Pain for the World”
Psalm 126 / Mark 13:24-37
Pastor Tim

(sung) I read the news today, oh boy:

Israel-Hamas Fighting Fills Street of Gaza Strip's Second-Largest City

As Gaza Fighting Rages, Refuge Proves Elusive

Antisemitism, Islamophobia, Hate Crimes on the Rise Worldwide

2023 Will Be Hottest Year on Record

OPEC Urges Members to Block Action on Fossil Fuels at COP28

Russia Launches New Winter Missile Barrage at Kyiv

Republicans Block Ukraine Funding Over US-Mexico Border Despite Biden Pleas

Campus Shooting in Las Vegas Leaves 3 Dead, 1 Wounded

Trump Pledges Not to Abuse Power 'Except for Day One'

The High Cost of Growing Old

Former World Bank Chief Warns of Global Slowdown

Philly's \$100,000 Gap Shows Income Disparities

City on Verge of Banner Year for Vehicle Thefts

School District Warns of Proposed \$407 Million Deficit

(sung) I read the news today, oh boy.

Now that's not to say that the news is all bad. There's plenty of good news out there if you look for it. But you get the point. I don't need to tell you.

Even in the midst of all of this ... trouble on the news, no peace within. No peace without.

I rarely preach a sermon series, but I'm doing it this month as we continue our journey through Advent. And our journey working with the theme, "Nurturing Resilience, Practicing Active Hope."

If you were around for worship last week, you know that the theme is based on the book, "Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in with Unexpected Resilience & Creative Power." Co-written by ecophilosopher and Buddhist scholar, Joanna Macy, and physician and specialist in the psychology of resilience, Chris Johnstone.

That is, after all, our calling every Advent season, to re-activate our individual and collective hope that another way, another world, is possible. That another world, none other than the kingdom of God for which Jesus lived and died, is coming.

And as we sang earlier, even in the midst of all of this, it's drawing nearer.

If you were around last week, you know that the book introduces Joanna Macy's life's work – what she calls the "Work That Reconnects." The work that reconnects us to each other and to the Earth, that helps us reclaim awareness of our interconnectedness and interdependency WITH each other and WITH Creation, and our belonging TO each other and TO Creation.

Macy describes a "spiral" of the Work That Reconnects, inviting us into a continuous journey – coming initially from GRATITUDE, moving to a place of HONORING OUR PAIN FOR THE WORLD, then SEEING WITH NEW EYES, and then GOING FORTH.

A journey which ultimately, in the spirit and active hope of Advent, moves us from what economist David Korten calls the "Great Unraveling" to what Macy and Johnstone call the "Great Turning."

Moves us beyond our "Business as Usual" responses to the global mess we find ourselves in to actually making way for the "Great Turning." Making way for what Jesus called the kingdom of heaven.

And if you were around last week, you also know that we kicked that spiral off looking at gratitude. Coming from gratitude. Whenever you're struggling, feeling disconnected, find your way back to gratitude to re-enter the spiral. Find your way back to connection and interconnection. Gratitude is the key that unlocks possibility.

If you weren't around last week, I'd actually encourage you to hit up our website and take a read or a listen to last week's sermon. Like I say, this is a sermon series so these four sermons come as a package deal!

Just go to allmeansall.org/sermons. That's allmeansall.org/sermons. Once again, allmeansall.org/sermons. Available for a limited time only. OK, that part's not true! End shameless plug.

THIS WEEK, we look at the next step in the spiral, "Honoring Our Pain for the World." Facing the mess we're in.

It is not easy to face the mess we're in. The authors are talking ultimately about the increasing impact of climate change, climate chaos, but the mess, of course, runs deep. I don't need to tell you.

Raging war and violence. Crippling poverty. Hunger and starvation. Homelessness and forced displacement. Racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia, antisemitism, Islamophobia, xenophobia. Social, economic, educational inequity and inequality. Politics in the pockets of corporations.

It's easy to feel overwhelmed. It's easy to turn away, to shut down. In fact, to be true, there's some need for that within the balance of self-love and self-care.

The authors highlight a psychology study examining factors that influence our response to potential danger. You may be familiar.

Subjects were asked to wait in a room and fill out a questionnaire – while at the same time, a steady stream of smokelike vapor was pumped in through the vents.

As will not surprise you, individuals in the room ALONE acted quickly – leaving the room, looking for help. But when three or more people were in the room, they tended to look and see how others were responding. Even when the room became filled with smoke, with some coughing or running their eyes, nearly two-thirds of subjects continued to fill out the questionnaire.

Filling out the questionnaire, Macy and Johnstone suggest, is akin to some of our “Business As Usual” responses. Whether intentional or not, whether conscious or not.

They name some:

- case in point, we don't want to stand out from the crowd
- we don't believe it's that bad
- we don't think it's our role to deal with it, or we assume that someone else is dealing with it or will
- the problem or the situation somehow threatens our own interests
- the problem or situation is too upsetting so we choose not to think about it; avoidance as a default strategy
- we feel paralyzed – not knowing what to do, we end up doing nothing
- or we fall prey to cynicism, believing there's no point in doing anything because it won't make a difference anyway; the problem is just too big

You no doubt recognize some of these responses. I do.

But the invitation, our responsibility, even in the midst of all of this, is to engage, to HONOR, the pain we carry for the world around us. In addition to the pain we carry in our own lives.

As with all pain, as with all deeply felt emotions, we do ourselves and each other no favors by avoiding them. We have to confront the fear that we may become stuck in such feelings. We have to actually FEEL the pain of them in order to move through them.

And the authors remind us that, rooted first in gratitude, that pain we feel is normal!

Rooted and re-rooted again and again in the life-giving reality of radical interconnectedness, they suggest that, "... pain for the world – a phrase that covers a range of feelings, including outrage, alarm, grief, guilt, dread, and despair – is a normal, healthy response to a world in trauma. ... Our pain for the world arises OUT OF our interexistence with all life."

In this way, they recognize emotional distress as a great motivator for change.

This is what they describe as "open alertness" – considered a strength in Buddhism and other world religions that "allows our heart to be stirred by the suffering of others. Indeed, in every spiritual tradition, compassion, which literally means 'to suffer with,' is prized as an essential and noble capacity. It is evidence of our interconnectedness with all life."

Our gospel lesson this morning speaks to the value of open alertness. Packaged in an urgent eschatological, apocalyptic context, echoing the parable of the 10 bridesmaids we explored a few weeks ago, within an understanding of the coming second Advent, the return of Christ and the arrival of the kingdom of God, Jesus' instruction is to "keep alert." To "keep awake."

To pay attention to the lesson of the blossoming fig tree, to the signs all around us that the world is about to change, though none of us knows the day or hour – because if we DON'T pay attention, if we don't stay alert and awake, if we don't honor the urgency of our concern and pain for the world, the world won't change. The world CAN'T change.

As the authors write, "Honoring our pain for the world is a way of valuing our awareness, first, that we have noticed, and second, that we care. Intellectual awareness is not enough. We need to digest the bad news. That is what rouses us to respond."

Again, they recognize emotional distress as a great motivator for change, but they also recognize how easily the distress can take us beyond what we imagine we can bear.

Coming from a place of gratitude, we are better able to build our resiliency, to build our capacity to engage and honor the pain we feel.

And so Macy and Johnstone suggest a variety of personal practices to do that. As the Buddhist saint, Shantideva, put it, to “let all sorrows ripen” in us.

Without going into detail here, those practices include: journaling, breathing exercises, creative outlets and expressions, rituals, and above all else, sharing our pain with others. Having conversation with someone else, sharing in small groups, reminding ourselves that we are not alone in feeling pain for the world.

If you're interested in learning more, check out the book or the website: activehope.info.

Coming from gratitude. Nurturing resilience and building capacity to honor our pain for the world. Staying alert. Staying awake. Paying attention. Feeling what feel, what we need to feel.

And in so doing, opening ourselves up to play our respective parts as co-creators of a new world. To play our respective parts, as would-be followers of the coming Christ and practitioners of active hope, in ADVENTING the kingdom of God. The kingdom of love.

When, as the Psalmist writes, we will be “like those who dream.” Our mouths “filled with laughter” and our tongues “with shouts of joy.” When “those who sow in tears” will “reap with shouts of joy.” When “those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.”

When the bad news becomes good.

May it be so.

And don't forget to tune in next week for sermon number three in the series: “Seeing With New Eyes.”