

December 17, 2023
“Seeing with New Eyes”
Isaiah 61:1-4 / Luke 1:26-38
Pastor Tim

You can hear, you can FEEL, the profound sense of both individual and collective empowerment in these words from Isaiah – as Meg just read for us.

“The spirit of the HOLY ONE is upon me, because the HOLY ONE has anointed me ... has sent me” – ME! – “to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ... to comfort all who mourn” so that “they shall build up the ancient ruins” and “raise up the former devastations” and “repair the ruined cities.”

These are the words that Jesus quotes at the start of his ministry, daring to suggest in his hometown of Nazareth of all places, in the synagogue in which he was raised, with all eyes fixed on him, that “scripture has been fulfilled in (their) hearing.”

These are the words that inspire his preaching and his teaching, right from the start, that another way is possible. Another world is possible. Another kingdom is possible. It's coming.

And it belongs, as much as it does to anyone, to the UNUSUAL suspects – the so-called LEAST, the LOST, the LAST, who have so often been ignored within or left out of the kingdoms of this world.

Another world is possible.

Right from the start, in his childhood synagogue, Jesus pushes those who would hear to identify and acknowledge their blind spots, to question and confront the flaws in their usual ways of doing things. And to see themselves and each and every other with new eyes.

And it almost gets him killed, the crowd in his hometown synagogue so enraged that they try – unsuccessfully, of course – to throw him off a cliff.

You can also hear, FEEL, the profound sense of empowerment for Mary in the gospel reading from Luke. Her extraordinary response, as God's favored one, to an extraordinary invitation to become the mother of Jesus. To nurture in the womb, and give birth to, another way, another world: "Here am I, the servant of God; let it be with me according to your word." More on Mary later.

The call on Isaiah's life, on Mary's life, on Jesus' life, is the call on all of our lives: "to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ... to comfort all who mourn" so that "they shall build up the ancient ruins" and "raise up the former devastations" and "repair the ruined cities."

We pick up there this morning, continuing with our Advent theme, "Nurturing Resilience, Practicing Active Hope." Continuing through the ongoing spiral of what Joanna Macy calls the "Work That Reconnects."

The work that reconnects us to each other and to the whole of Creation, that helps us reclaim awareness of our interconnectedness and our interdependency WITH each other and WITH Creation. Our belonging TO each other and TO Creation.

That is the key, they would argue, to what Jesus calls the kingdom of heaven. That is the key to enlivening and re-enlivening again and again our instinctive CARE and COMPASSION for each other and Creation, the work of building up and raising up and repairing former devastations to new life.

This is the work that nurtures resilience and fosters active hope, empowering us to resist and undermine and move beyond the failed, "Business as Usual" approaches to the Great Unraveling of the world AS IT IS, and inspire us to more fully participate in the Great Turning of the world as IT CAN YET BE.

The Advent of the world as it is meant to be is coming.

We began with gratitude, the first stage in Joanna Macy's spiral. COMING FROM GRATITUDE.

We focused last week on the next stage, HONORING OUR PAIN FOR THE WORLD. The reminder to see the pain we feel for the world, in addition to our own pain, as a reflection of our interconnectedness. To see the pain we feel as evidence of our care and compassion for the world.

And so finding courage to FACE that pain, to let ourselves FEEL that pain, in order to move beyond avoidance or indifference or paralysis or cynicism to action. Rousing us to respond, in some way, to the mess. Playing our respective parts in the GREAT TURNING.

Which brings us this morning to the third stage in the spiral, SEEING WITH NEW EYES.

In the book we've been using as our guide this Advent – again, *How to Face the Mess We're In with Unexpected Resilience & Creative Power* – Macy and her co-author, Chris Johnstone, explain that the phrase, “seeing with new eyes,” is used in two different ways.

First, in reference to the shift that can happen when we open ourselves to different, perhaps unfamiliar, ways of looking at things – including our own capacity. And second, in reference to a shift in our understanding of reality itself – turning from the hyperindividualism of Western culture to a more holistic, ecological, interdependent worldview.

To get there, and stay there – they suggest – involves four “discoveries.”

Now I don't know about you, but when a teacher or preacher or even author throws out numbers like this – you know, like “Today we're gonna look at the seven habits of highly effective people” – my eyes immediately glaze over. I begin to enter a mental fog. I anticipate information overload, boredom, especially if the first point takes awhile: My God, how long is this gonna take!

But if you're at all like me, I remind you that this is not a deep dive. I refer you to the book and the other resources available on their related website for that.

So, in relatively quick summary, here are the four discoveries, all related to each other:

First, a wider sense of self, of who we are. And ultimately, a shift from a separate self to our connected self. Seeing ourselves as belonging to larger circles.

For most of us that begins with family, but the invitation is to expand our sense of belonging and connection to ever-widening circles. Family. Friends. Community. Humanity. The Earth. All of creation. All living things.

Jesus taught and modeled the same.

As the ever-widening circles become part of who we are and how we see ourselves, as our sense of self expands, so too does our access to critical sources of support and resilience. And so too does our motivation to act on behalf of those circles.

The authors put it this way: “The distinction often made between selfishness and altruism is therefore misleading. It is based on a split between self and other, presenting us with a choice between helping ourselves and helping others. When we consider the connected self, we recognize this choice as nonsense. It is from our connected selves that much of what people most value in life emerges, including love, friendship, loyalty, trust, relationship, belonging, purpose, gratitude, spirituality, mutual aid, and meaning.”

That's the first.

The second discovery is a different kind of power. Challenging the old view of power, as the authors define it, “based on having more of something than the competing party.”

They invite us to see power with new eyes. To see power as a verb, rather than a noun. “Power WITH ...,” they write, “is not a property or possession. It arises from what we DO rather than what we HAVE.”

To see power within an understanding of our inherent interconnectedness inspires the question, “What can I give?” rather than “What can I gain?”

In this way we can begin to recognize and use our own power, to see our own power as part of something bigger. This is what they call “emergence.”

No longer underestimating the negative or positive impact of our actions, while also not getting stuck in believing that what we do makes no difference. Connecting our power with each other's power.

As the authors describe it, "The concept of emergence is liberating because it frees us from the need to see the results of our actions. Many of our planet's problems ... are so much bigger than we are that it is easy to believe we are wasting our time trying to solve them. If we depend on seeing the positive results of our individual steps, we'll avoid challenges that seem beyond what we can visibly influence. Yet our actions take effect through such multiplicities of synergy," so that "everything we do has ripples of influence extending far beyond what we can see."

Third, a richer experience of community. An antidote to the epidemic of increasing loneliness and isolation around the world. Disconnection fueled by the myth of self-sufficiency and an individualistic worldview. Disconnection fueled by everyone for themselves.

This discovery kind of goes without saying, and it's evidenced most powerfully by the human tendency to pull together across all manner of social and economic differences in emergency situations – the human instinct even to risk lives helping strangers.

We marvel at such coming together, we celebrate it. And then, you know, we lament why it can't always be that way. But here the authors remind us, as Jesus does, that it can. It can be that way.

The richness of our experience of community deepens WHEN we see ourselves as part of an ever widening, interconnected, interdependent community.

As Macy and Johnstone put it, "What comes into view when we see with new eyes is this interdependence. There is no such thing as a 'self-made person': while we play a role in making ourselves, we are also made by one another and the world. When hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes sweep away illusions of self-sufficiency, we're reminded how much we need each other, how much we depend not only on people but also on the larger web of life."

Within such awareness, we are inspired to burst the bubbles of “Business as Usual.” Individual acts of expressing common concern beyond our individual bubbles, shared acts of showing up and responding to the Great Unraveling, actually further build our sense of community and belonging.

Fourth, and finally, a larger view of time. This discovery of seeing with new eyes is about seeing ourselves within the whole arc of human and cosmic history – past and future.

Again, within an interconnected, interdependent worldview, we are compelled to look and see far beyond the brevity of our own life spans. To honor our connectedness that extends back in time to the ancestors, the saints, who have gone before us.

And to honor our connectedness that extends forward in time to future generations we will never know. No less than seven generations, in the spirit of indigenous wisdom.

When we operate within the urgency of the narrow view, the short-term, we lose sight of the broad view, the long-term – what the authors call “deep time.” When we operate within the speed which the authors remind us is “embedded in our society, most of us end up feeling perpetually rushed and short of time.”

That speed, they write, is not a “feature of human nature” but “the product of a peculiar way of perceiving time that has, unfortunately, become mainstream in the industrial world.” It is a capitalistic worldview that prioritizes short-term gain regardless of long-term consequence – profits over the well-being of people and the planet.

They continue, “When we are overwhelmed by numerous short-term goals and targets, we lack enough time and space to consider what lies on the horizon. Rushing narrows our field of vision to the immediate moment. The past becomes irrelevant and the future, abstract.”

The invitation to see with new eyes means seeing ourselves as part an interconnected whole – through both space and time. And with it comes the invitation to slow down within a wider, deeper view of time.

We do that more naturally through our families, seeing ourselves as part of a family system that spans centuries and one we hope will continue indefinitely beyond our lives. But the authors ask the question, “If seeing ourselves as part of a family is an important aspect of our identity, then for how long would we like our family to continue? If the next generation matters to us, and the children born to it do as well, then what about their children and their children’s children? Is there a point in time where we draw a line that says, ‘Beyond this they no longer count’?”

They acknowledge that it's a ridiculous question, and yet – and YET – we continue on with business-as-usual short-sighted thinking as if there is indeed such a line. All the more so within the whole of Creation.

There IS another way. Another world IS possible.

Seeing with new eyes – a wider sense of self, a different kind of power, a richer experience of community, and a larger view of time.

This is what happened for Mary. Visited by the angel, Gabriel. He called her God’s favored, and she responded, “Who, me?”

She was confused and afraid. Gabriel laid out the invitation, and Mary questioned it, “How can this be?”

Spirit-filled, Mary, you will have power you didn’t know you had. You will help bring heaven to earth. You will birth another way, another world. With God’s help, you will help make the impossible possible.

Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of God; let it be with me according to your word.” Here am I, of all people.

And you know that she goes on beyond our reading this morning to express her joy – after visiting her relative Elizabeth, whose child leaped in her womb with joy at Mary’s greeting. Mary’s “Magnificat” – meaning my soul magnifies my God!

She had seen herself as lowly, but now sees herself as God's own. Sees herself as a powerful part of God's interconnected community, God's interconnected kingdom already here and still coming. Sees herself within the long view of God's time and God's desire for a world marked by love and abundance, care and compassion, justice and peace.

"God has brought down the powerful from their thrones," Mary sings, "and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

In other words, "The spirit of the HOLY ONE is upon me, because the HOLY ONE has anointed me ... has sent me" – ME! – "to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ... to comfort all who mourn" so that "they shall build up the ancient ruins" and "raise up the former devastations" and "repair the ruined cities."

Mary sees herself with new eyes – a wider sense of self, a different kind of power, a richer experience of community, and a larger view of time.

Friends, that is no less our invitation this Advent. The call of Isaiah, the call of Mary, the call of Jesus, is ours too.

To see with new eyes so that we might see and find our way out of this mess we're in. And see and find our way, together, interconnected and interdependent as we are, to the Great Turning.

Another world is indeed possible, for nothing is impossible with God.

May it be so.