

**December 24, 2023**  
**“Going Forth”**  
**Isaiah 40:1-11 / Mark 1:1-8**  
**Pastor Tim**

Previously on “Nurturing Resilience, Practicing Active Hope”:

We've focused primarily on Nurturing Resilience. Working our way through what Joanna Macy calls the “Work That Reconnects,” through what she describes as a spiral rooted in a deeper awareness and understanding of a fundamentally interconnected world in which we all depend upon and belong to each and every other living thing, we've explored strategies for resilience.

Strategies to build our individual and collective capacity to resist “Business as Usual” approaches to the Great Unraveling – to the world as it currently is, in all its brokenness.

We've explored the importance of both gratitude and grief – BOTH growing out of our interconnectedness with all living things; building our capacity for resistance and resilience by FOSTERING gratitude and FEELING grief, honoring and actually engaging our pain for the world.

ACKNOWLEDGING our God-given instinct toward care and compassion for the world – what Buddhists call the “bodhichitta,” the “... deep desire to act for the welfare of all beings.” And bypassing the “business as usual” pitfalls of avoidance, indifference, paralysis, cynicism that leave us stuck in the Great Unraveling.

Last Sunday we took the spiral to its third stage, to the gift of seeing ourselves with new eyes. A WIDER SENSE OF SELF, a DIFFERENT, shared, KIND OF POWER, a RICHER EXPERIENCE OF COMMUNITY, and a LARGER VIEW OF TIME – like gratitude and grief, emerging from the vision of our connected rather than separate selves. A vision so often lost in the pace and privatization of the unraveling world as it is.

This morning we shift from Nurturing Resilience to Practicing Active Hope. We shift from building our resistance and resilience to the Great Unraveling, to participating in – or what Macy and her co-author, Chris Johnstone, call “going forth in the adventure of

the Great Turning." Going forth toward a different way. Toward recreation of another world. Realization of the kingdom of heaven.

The Advent journey of expectant watching and waiting is ultimately a journey of preparation.

So says the prophet Isaiah, "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the HOLY ONE, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.'"

And so says the author of Mark's gospel, echoing that prophetic tradition: "As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Holy One, make God's paths straight.'"

For the gospel writers, the messenger was John the Baptizer – he of camel-hair clothing and a strict locusts-and-honey diet. PROCLAIMING, as he did, a message of repentance – which, remember, is simply about turning around. TURNING back toward God, toward each other, toward ourselves. Turning back toward love for God, each other, ourselves.

And the Baptizer pointed to One more powerful than he – Jesus, the Christ, the One who would soon be born into a world hostile to his Way. The One who would teach and preach, live and die for, a different Way. Another world. A kingdom of heaven, marked above all else by love manifested as justice and peace.

The Great Turning, you might say.

Prepare the Way for the Great Turning. Developing our resiliency through deeper recognition and experience of gratitude and grief, through the gift of expanded vision of ourselves, our power, our sense of community, our time, is part of our ongoing process of preparation. But it is not enough to prepare the Way.

The Great Unraveling will not be slowed, and the Great Turning will not ultimately be realized, if we don't participate in it. Each in our own ways.

Advent Hope is Active Hope. Again, the title of the book we've been referencing through this sermon series is, "Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in with Unexpected Resilience & Creative Power."

With greater resiliency through the gifts of gratitude, grief and renewed vision, we are better able to practice active hope. To both prepare for and participate in the Way. We are better equipped to tap into the divine imagination, to liberate our imaginations – as the authors suggests – from the way things are to the way they can be. Will be.

They cite a design principle meant to boost creativity, and that is asking the question, "WHAT comes before HOW."

"First identify what you'd like to have happen;" they write, "working out *how* comes later. If we exclude options just because we can't immediately see how they can happen, we block out many of the more exciting possibilities that might inspire us."

Without a vision, the people perish. That's Proverbs. Let your imagination, the divine imagination for a different way, another world, the kingdom of heaven, be your guide. Inform your vision.

Make space for it, the authors insist. Give it your INTENTION and ATTENTION. Spell it out, write it down, say it out loud so you don't lose track of it. Share it with others so you can be accountable to it.

Don't just passively wait for inspiration, they say; actively invite it in!

As the authors put it, "If the Great Turning involves turning up to play our part, opening our eyes and our attention is how we begin. This may seem like a small thing, but when the default setting of mainstream society is to avoid looking at painful realities, it takes courage and determination to sustain the gaze."

One practice they recommend is “imaginary hindsight.” Stop telling ourselves a different way, another world, is not possible, and imagine the world we hope for in order to strengthen our belief that it IS possible.

As Rumi once wrote, “Close both eyes to see with the other eye.” The eye of divine imagination and inspiration. As Rabbi Michael Lerner has long advocated, be an idealist and live accordingly; the world has far too many realists already. Realism is a slippery slope to business as usual.

So with imaginary hindsight, imagine that the problem you are approaching, we are approaching together – whether it be climate change or gun violence or the lack of affordable housing or universal health care, or whatever it is, however big or small; imagine that it's already been solved and look back from the imagined future.

The authors point to research to back up the claim that people who engage this practice are “more creative and detailed in describing potential solutions.”

And so, they write, “When we think of ourselves as interconnected parts of a larger web of life, just as we feel the Earth crying within us, perhaps we can experience the Earth dreaming within us to.”

So pay attention to your dreams. Dare to believe your dreams are possible. Dare to believe a different way, another world, the kingdom of heaven, is possible.

Prepare the way for it, even when you face resistance. Even when you face what the mythologist Joseph Campbell called “threshold guardians” – whatever, internally or externally, is guarding or blocking the way through the threshold to possibility.

As the authors suggest, “When following the path of an inspiring vision, we are likely to encounter the voice dismissing what we hope for as unnecessary or impractical. The greater the gap between present reality and what we would like to have happen, the louder this voice will be.”

They cite the saying that important changes often go through three phases: first, they are seen as a joke. Then a threat. And finally, they're accepted as normal.

They consider history's offering of any number of seemingly impossible dreams.

Lucy Stone organized the first Women's Rights Connection in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1850. She didn't live long enough to see women get the vote in 1920.

Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for more than 25 years before Apartheid finally came to an end in South Africa, and he was elected its first Black president, in 1994.

The list goes on, of course.

"When a change wants to happen," the authors write, "it looks for people to act through." When a change wants to happen, it looks for people to act through.

The central question throughout their book is, "What happens through you? Which story do you hope will grow stronger and happen more through you?"

What are you doing, what will you do, to prepare the way for change and participate in that change? What are you doing, what will you do, to build support around you to be an advocate for change, an ACTIVIST for change?

With such questions, the authors are quick to point out the need for broader definitions of activism – not limited only to those carrying megaphones and protest banners.

"The practice of Active Hope," they suggest, "involves being an activist for what we hope for in the world. We're using the term *activist* here to mean anyone," ANYONE, "who is active for a purpose bigger than personal gain."

And in addition to a broader definition of activism, they invite us to "Recognize enthusiasm as a valuable renewable resource." To pay attention to the burnout that will inevitably come from our activism if we let it.

So pay attention to your own self-care and what you need to maintain your energy and enthusiasm to help prepare the Way, for the ongoing work of Active Hope and participation in the Great Turning. The Advent of a different way and another world, where "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain."

Macy and Johnstone lift up the oyster as the “emblem of resilience.” The pearl that is ultimately produced from the iridescent substance an oyster secretes to defend itself against, say, an irritating grain of sand.

“What helps us face the mess we’re in and take part in the Great Turning,” they conclude, “is the knowledge that each of us has something of great value to offer, a priceless role to play. In rising to the challenge of playing our best role, we discover something precious that both enriches our lives and adds to the healing of our world. An oyster, in response to trauma, grows a pearl. We grow, and offer, our response of Active Hope.”

In that spirit, in the spirit of Advent watching and waiting and preparation, and now turning toward participation in the active hope of Christmas, let ME now conclude with a poem called “The Great Turning,” from Christine Fry:

*You’ve asked me to tell you of The Great Turning, of how we saved the world from disaster. The answer is both simple and complex:*

*We turned.*

*For hundreds of years we had turned  
away as life on earth grew more precarious.  
We turned away from the homeless men on the streets,  
the stench from the river, the children orphaned in Iraq,  
the mothers dying of AIDS in Africa.*

*We turned away because that is what we had been taught.  
To turn away, from the pain, from the hurt in another’s eyes,  
from the drunken father or the friend betrayed.  
Always we were told, in actions louder than words, to turn away, turn away.  
And so we became a lonely people caught up in a world moving too quickly,  
too mindlessly toward its own demise.*

*Until it seemed as if there was no safe place to turn.  
No place, inside or out, that did not remind us of fear or terror,  
despair and loss, anger and grief.*

*Yet one of those days someone did turn.*

Turned to face the pain.  
Turned to face the stranger.  
Turned to look at the smoldering world  
and hatred seething in too many eyes.  
Turned to face himself, herself.

And then another turned.  
And another. And another.  
And as they wept, they took  
each other's hands.

Until whole groups of people were turning.  
Young and old, gay and straight. People  
of all colors, all nations, all religions.  
Turning not only to the pain and hurt  
but to the beauty, gratitude and love.  
Turning to one another with  
forgiveness and a longing  
for peace in their hearts.

At first the turning made people dizzy, even silly.  
There were people standing to the side gawking, criticizing,  
trying to knock the turners down.  
But the people kept getting up, kept helping one  
another to their feet. Their laughter and kindness brought others  
into the turning circle until even the naysayers began to smile and sway.

As the people turned, they began to spin, reweaving the  
web of life, mending the shocking tears, knitting it back  
together with the colors of the earth, sewing on tiny  
mirrors so the beauty of each person, each creature, each  
plant, each life form might be seen and respected.

And as the people turned, as they spun  
like the earth through the universe, the web wrapped  
around them like a soft baby blanket, making it clear all  
were loved, nothing separate.

And this love reached into every crack and crevice, the  
people began to wake and wonder, to breathe and give  
thanks, to work and celebrate together.

And so the world was saved, but only as long as you, too,  
sweet one, remember to turn.

May it be so.