

December 3, 2023
“Coming from Gratitude”
Psalm 85:8-13 / 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
Pastor Tim

So I was moved this year to work through an overall theme for our Advent journey at Calvary – “Nurturing Resilience, Practicing Active Hope.”

That theme is based on a book I’ve been lately reading by eco-philosopher and Buddhist scholar, Joanna Macy, and physician and specialist in the psychology of resilience, Chris Johnstone.

It’s called, “Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re in with Unexpected Resilience & Creative Power.”

I figured that would preach in general. And I especially figured that would preach during Advent, this season during which we are invited to activate our hope. To put flesh on our waiting for, and our anticipation of, the coming of God’s kingdom. The reign of Christ.

The arrival of a new world marked by justice and peace, where – as the Psalmist asserts – “God’s glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.”

The book is largely based on Joanna Macy’s groundbreaking work over the past 50 years – what’s come to be known as the “Work That Reconnects.” With an emphasis on reconnecting ourselves to each other and the Earth, the so-called “spiral” of the Work That Reconnects invites us into a journey that moves continually, coming initially from GRATITUDE, moving to a place of HONORING OUR PAIN FOR THE WORLD, then SEEING WITH NEW EYES, and then GOING FORTH. And on and on that spiral continues.

In the book they cite a phrase coined by economist, David Korten, to describe the mess we’re in: the “Great Unraveling.” What they define as “the progressive decline and

collapse of countless interlocking elements in the social, ecological, hydrological, and atmospheric systems on which life depends.”

We all know that mess.

In response to the “Great Unraveling,” they propose two directions.

The first and most common is what they call “Business As Usual.” Whether our conscious embrace of the prevailing norm that economic growth driven by unbridled capitalism – above all else – is essential to prosperity, or our unconscious or semi-conscious default that the problems we face are too big, or that the problems that other people and species face is not our concern. Or that there’s nothing we can do to change it.

That’s Business As Usual, and needless to say, it does nothing to confront the Great Unraveling.

The other response is what they call the “Great Turning.” The turning in and toward which we are invited to participate anew during Advent. The turning, albeit gradual, from “a doomed economy of industrial growth to a life-sustaining society committed to the recovery of our world.”

To a reclaimed awareness of our interdependency with each other and the full expanse of Creation. To a reclaimed sense of belonging to each other and the world. To renewed action, rooted in Active Hope, that is centered on reconnecting. What they suggest is about “waking up to the beauty of life on whose behalf we can act.”

That is the Work That Reconnects. That is the call of Advent.

And the Great Turning is already happening if we pay attention. If we open our eyes and ears and hearts. If we stay awake, alert, ready, as the Advent readings remind us to do each year.

There are countless examples in Philadelphia and across the globe of resistance and resilience to Business As Usual, most of which you will not find in mainstream media.

They are out there. There is momentum, and it's momentum that can and will continue to build with our participation in it.

The kingdom of God is nearer than we think. It's at hand, Jesus reminds us. It's coming, and it begins within each of us. Emmanuel, God with and within each of us. Another world, a different way, IS possible.

That is the message of Advent. That's the journey we're invited, called, to join. Macy and Johnstone call it an "adventure." Rooted in the classic adventure stories where the central characters are not overwhelmed by seemingly overwhelming challenges they face. Where the central characters eventually discover resources in themselves and in each other to confront the challenges.

They find a way where no way seemed possible.

We are the central characters in this unfolding adventure. Another way, a different way, IS possible. And again, Macy and Johnstone, along with countless spiritual activists past and present, insist that what brings us to actually believe that, to orient and reorient our lives to make it possible, begins, again, with gratitude. "Dancing," as the authors put it, "to the tune of gratitude."

For them, gratitude is not about politeness; it is an absolute necessity in nurturing resilience to the oppressive reality of the Great Unraveling, and practicing Active Hope for the Great Turning.

And so we begin our Advent journey today with gratitude.

Our reading from 1 Thessalonians, as Susanna just read for us, puts it this way: "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all things give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you all. Quench not the Spirit."

Rejoice always. Always. Always. Imagine that. Tapping into the joy of divine blessing and imagination. Joy even in the midst of suffering. Breathing in joy like we breathe in air. Always.

Pray without ceasing. This does not mean, of course, to be unceasingly in a POSTURE of prayer, but in an attitude of prayer. Seeing our lives as one ongoing prayer. Understanding prayer as the spiritual practice of PAYING attention and STAYING connected – to God, to ourselves, to each other, to the world around us, to that which is life-giving. Don't stop doing that.

“Prayer,” as Gandhi described it, “is not asking. It is a longing of the soul.”

A longing to stay connected, to belong. And so a longing, as we practice every Sunday, that involves both naming and celebrating our joys, AND sharing, and trusting each other with, our concerns – for our own lives and for the world around us. Knowing that God hears them even as we do.

Thanks be to God. God, hear our prayer.

Quench not the Spirit. Life has a way of quenching the Spirit, the divine Spirit within us. Amen? But gratitude, GRATITUDE, has a way of unleashing it. Removing the obstacles that kill not only the Spirit, but the faith and hope and love that come with it.

Make way for the Spirit.

In all things, ALL things, give thanks. As Meister Eckhart put it, “If the only prayer you ever say in your whole life is ‘thank you,’ that would suffice.” That is the spiritual discipline of cultivating gratitude when all is good AND in the midst of, in the face of, our grief, pain, anger, despair, depression, fear.

Psychologist Robert Emmons defines gratitude this way: “A felt sense of wonder, thankfulness and appreciation for life.”

It is easy and understandable to feel overwhelmed and disconnected by our life's circumstances and challenges. I feel that way a lot, and mine is a life of relatively great privilege.

I do not live with fear that I am or will go hungry. Or that my child is or will.

I do not live with fear that I do not or will not have a safe and warm place to lay my head.

I do not live with fear that I have been or will be excluded or targeted or harassed or harmed because of the color of my skin or the nature of my sexual orientation or gender identity or the status of my national citizenship.

I do not live with fear that my life, or the lives of those I love, will be suddenly stolen away by guns or missiles.

But I would nonetheless suggest that the tendency to feel overwhelmed and disconnected in the face of our life's circumstances and challenges is universal. It's part of what it is to be human.

Gratitude is the key. From the book, "If you're facing a tragedy in your life or in the world, searching for reasons to be grateful might initially feel uncomfortably close to denial. But you don't have to feel thankful for everything that's happened. It is more a case of recognizing there's always a larger picture, a bigger view, and that it contains both positive and negative aspects."

Gratitude is the key to staying connected. Seeing ourselves in a much broader context, a universal context, a cosmic context, part of an interconnected world that extends far beyond planet Earth.

If you're struggling to give thanks, go back to the beginning with the basic truth, the WONDER, affirmed in the blessings we ALL receive from the natural world. The WONDER in every single breath we take that our lives fully depend on the trees and plants that surround us.

And not only that, on the truth that much of the oxygen we breathe today comes from plants that died long ago.

Paying it forward. Past connecting to present, present connecting to future. "Seeing ourselves," as the authors suggest, "as part of a larger flow of giving and receiving through time."

Gratitude promotes a sense of connection, of belonging. It promotes a sense of well-being. It builds trust and generosity. It is an antidote to a consumerist society, reminding us that who we are is already enough. That there are SO many gifts we're already experiencing.

Cultivating gratitude, again say the authors, is about "train(ing) our minds in a basic capacity for awe and reverence ... countering the undermining impact of panic or paralysis. Experiencing gratitude is a learnable skill that improves with practice. It isn't dependent on things going well or on receiving favors from others. It's about better spotting what's already there."

Better spotting, paying closer attention to what's already there. Staying awake, alert, prepared, ready. These are all Advent calls, opening ourselves to what is yet possible EVEN when it doesn't always feel or look like it.

Another way. A different way. The promised, coming, kingdom of God.

Rejoice always.

Pray without ceasing.

In all things give thanks.

Quench not the Spirit.

Thanks be to God.

May it be so.