

Advent 7/28/19

“God with skin on”

I have to confess to you, for the past several days I have been having what I call a “lovers quarrel” with the Scriptures I have been asked to preach on this morning, It should not be that way! I had been assigned Psalm 138, a beautiful Psalm of praise. The words really kind of sing! “I will thank you, O God, with all my heart; I will sing praise to you before the angels. I will worship in your holy temple and give thanks to your name!”

My first problem comes because I live in the world of story and that I don’t know anything about his story! And can’t ask him about now. I don’t know what these beautiful words meant to the Psalmist. This was a poetic hymn written by an unknown person, perhaps three thousand years ago. I read the words and tried to decipher them, but nothing leaped off the pages of my Bible, nothing ignited that “fire in the belly,” that every preacher prays for.

I read the words and I envied the Psalmist, who in a time of trouble, called out to God and he was convinced that God had answered his prayer. I suspect, He would have sung with Al and those good folks from Holy Wisdom Monastery, who a few weeks ago walked around the Capitol square singing, “The Lord hears the cries of the poor, blessed be the name of the Lord.”

I wanted to be able to ask the Psalmist, “What is your story? What did you experience that filled your heart with that overwhelming desire to lift your voice in gratitude and praise? I think of myself as grateful person, and a person of faith. I love Jesus, but frankly, I don’t always know how to make that connection between my experiences of being cared for and comforted and the role of God in my life.

Part of the reason for that “ambiguity of faith,” is the fact that my experiences of encouragement and hope have come for the most part through compassionate “human” voices and the gentle healing touch of “ human hands.” As you see, I own a T-shirt with words that attempt to cross that divide between the one we name as “God,” and our human kin folk. I stole that t-shirt from Bethlehem Lutheran in Brodhead. No, that just a line I threw in there. Actually, I paid \$15 for it. The Psalmist would probably join our friend Al in calling this, “the hands and the voice of Christ.” This is what you and I are called to be. It is what I sometimes refer to as, “God with skin on.”

As some of you may remember, when I was in the eighth grade living up in central Wisconsin, the big parsonage we were living in, was struck by lightning in the middle of the night, and burned to the ground in a few terrifying minutes. The four of us stood huddled together in the rain watching the total destruction of what I always thought of as the safest place on earth!

My father promised my brother Paul and I that we would be all right, he said God would provide whatever we truly needed! But, I must tell you, what made that promise believable, was my trust in my father! And that trust was affirmed by the fact that our driveway was already being filled by the cars and wagons of flesh and blood farmers and farmers wives who had come to scoop us up into their comforting arms. The Psalmist might say, “that was God fulfilling his promises to my parents and to their two sons.’ But for two small boys, it was important that, if that was God, our God came with “skin on” and dressed in bib overalls!

Fifty years later, in the span of two and a half years, I lost my brother Paul, my closest friend and only sibling, my father, whose death made me an orphan, and Beverly, my wife of twenty-five years. There was as you might guess, a huge aching void created and it seemed at the time, like that empty place would never be filled this side of heaven!

In the months and years that followed, I was set on the gradual path of healing by the countless friends and parishioners, who reminded me over and over again, what a precious gift those three persons, Paul, my Father and Beverly, had been in their lives. And those loving human voices generated in me a deep gratitude for my own memories of the incredible gift they had been for me. A gift experienced in that human connection in which we had shared. And that is a gift that will always “have been,” and for that reason is never fully lost from our lives.

The psalmist might tell me, “God was speaking to my heart through those voices.” I don’t disagree, but I would put another way, “I think those loving, caring human voices, are as close to God as I will ever get in this life.”

I suspect, another reason I struggle to find myself in that confident place of the Psalmist, is because these days, I find myself rather deeply mired in an experience of lament! Not lament, for the personal circumstances of my life, which are going remarkably well, especially for a person of my age, but lament over the state of our communities, divided nation and our troubled

world. The Psalmist spoke of the time when all the rulers of the earth will bow down and offer their praise to God. I see no evidence that will happen anytime soon!

I lament, the mindless cruelty being visited, in our name, on the desperate men, women and children seeking refuge in this land, I think of how our country has been blessed by the waves of refugees and immigrants who came to these shores, to build a better life for their children. I remember the picture of Jesus family fleeing in a time of grave danger to find sanctuary in Egypt.

I lament over the thoughtless damage being inflicted on our Mother Earth, driven by an insatiable hunger for profit and power, to benefit the few at the expense of the many. While we gather in comparative comfort, many today many in Europe will experience this morning, the hottest temperatures ever recorded.

I grieve over the hateful speech that seeks to divide us, to make us afraid of whole groups of people, to keep us from working together for the common good. I grieve over the total disregard for truthfulness at the highest levels of our government, and the pervasive disdain for the norms of decency and respect that are needed if public life is to flourish.

We can grieve and lament, but, as people of faith, we are not allowed to surrender to despair. We are called to look for and seek to nourish the beams of light shining in our dark world. As an example, two weeks ago, Sonja and I were up at Washington Island, for the Forum sponsored by the Wisconsin Council of Churches. Our speaker was a pastor by the name of Johnathan Wilson Hartgrove. He describes himself as a “recovering Southern Baptist pastor!”

In 2003 He and his wife Leah were in Iraq as members of a Peace Maker Team, during the American bombing campaign, On a lonely desert road, one of their group was seriously injured when the vehicle he was riding in hit a large chunk of shrapnel and overturned. He was taken by local Iraqis to a hospital in the small city of Rubha.

At the hospital, the doctor said to them, “Three days ago, your country bombed our hospital, many of our own people were hurt.” He waited for a moment and then said quietly, “But, of course we will help you!” They took

their friend in the hospital and he was given all the care he needed to survive. It was a modern day version of the story of the “Good Samaritan.”

When Johnathan told this story, he added, “Because of the “Good Iraqi”, this “Good Muslim,” and because of the words of Jesus in that parable, “Go thou and do likewise,” we heard this as an invitation from God for us to practice the compassion we had received. It was an act of pure compassion from someone who had every right to see us not just as strangers, but also as enemies!’

Johnathan continues, “We came to Durham, North Carolina to establish a home for the homeless. We gave the Home the name “Rubha House” in gratitude for the compassion of the far off village in Iraq. On the door of Rubha House, we placed a plaque with the words of Jesus, “I was a stranger and you took me in.”

For a decade now, the homeless have come knocking on the door of Rubha House, often in the middle of the night, like the man in our Gospel. When I hear that knock, I get up and I go downstairs and I open the door, and I peer out at that person who has robbed me of good nights rest, and ask myself, “Jesus, Is that you again!”

Some come directly from prison, other are fleeing abusive relationships, many others are battling with addictions and mental illness. They bring their broken world with them and their stories will break your heart wide open! But, they also bring you Jesus! We answer that knock, open the door and, lo and behold, we are the ones who are saved!

In the weary bodies and broken spirits of strangers we are brought by them to the cross and there is where we find Jesus waiting for us! Jesus is the one who, from the cross joins us in our suffering, and from the cross pours out his love for all of us. This work of compassionate hospitality can be heartbreaking, many are so wounded they find it almost impossible to place their trust in the hospitality being offered to them, but for every disappointment there are other experiences that show us the miracle of God’s compassion at work, and we find ourselves lifted up in gratitude and joy.

Here in this place, we also seek to plant and nurture the loving seeds of hope. They may seem ordinary compared to the drama and challenge of Rubha House. But, each act of compassion can make a huge difference. Mother

Theresa is fond of saying, “We are not necessarily called to do great things, but to do small things with great love!”

Some make quilts and prayer shawls with great love, Others work in the heat of summer to raise vegetables and flowers blessed with great love. We hear the cries of the poor in Haiti and money and people are sent to answer those cries. Monday morning the phone rings we tell Porchlight there are some precious funds available to help some more people. Some struggling farm family is given a modest grant, which for them makes all the difference in the world. We gather to read and discuss books that help us to be better informed about the needs of our world and sometimes we find the courage to throw ourselves into the battle for justice and healing in our community and nation. Small things, but when done in great love can make a difference, and almost always, lead to other things that we feel compelled to do.

And then there is this strange “Sunday business.” Each week, we gather in this unlikely community of teachers, preachers. Laborers, therapists, public servants and all kinds of other people. We sing to praise God and to lift our own spirits. We announce our hope to live our lives in faithful covenant with the one we call the “Crucified One.” We trace our hands over ancient stories and we listen to them told in new ways.

We confess the faith that has been passed on to us, and although we may quarrel with some of the insights, we treasure those words as a gift that can cast light on our lives and the world we see as home. And we gather up offerings of gratitude for the sake of the church and for the needs of the world.

Then with our Pastor, we do something really bizarre. We bless bread and wine so that it may become for us the body and blood of the one we name as “Savior.” We receive bread for mercy and healing and wholeness and wine for compassion and forgiveness and new life! And, in a final absurdity, we receive these gifts and we say, “Amen,” which means, “This is true!” This is our life together, Pastor and People together, and it is the life of the world! That’s good news, good news we are dying to hear. Amen!