
Imagine

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**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George M. Maxwell, Jr.
The Third Sunday in Advent - Year A**

Several years ago, I took a bike trip with a friend. We planned to ride along the panhandle of Florida and the Gulf Coast of Mississippi.

About mid-morning on one of the early days of the trip, we pulled our bikes off of the road for a break. We had been peddling against a strong headwind for several hours, courtesy of a storm moving along the coast.

My bike was stuck in the lowest gear, which made climbing those long bridges tougher than you might expect. I was hot. I was tired. I was covered in sand.

As we huddled behind a row of shrubs, I began to wonder why I ever thought that riding my bike through Florida in the middle of the summer would be good idea and how in the world I was going to survive the next ten days.

My friend offered me an orange. I didn't realize that I was hungry until I began peeling away the thick skin. I didn't realize that I was thirsty until I began breathing the citrusy smell.

When I finally bit into it, you would have thought I had never had an orange before. It was so juicy. It was so sweet. It might have been the best thing that I ever tasted - either before or since.

Perhaps more importantly, it was all that I needed.

When I got back on my bike, I was ready to go. I had a new sense of joy about being outside. I was fascinated by the changing colors in the ocean caused by the storm. I was thankful that my bike hadn't gotten stuck in the highest gear. And, if that was how good food was going to taste, I couldn't wait for lunch!

It was one of those moments of scarcity, when I didn't think that I had enough. An unexpected gift allowed me to imagine my future differently. I realized that I had an abundance of what I really needed.

When John heard what Jesus was doing, he sent word by his disciples. "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Mt. 11:3)

John and Jesus, as we know, are related. They are family. But, more importantly, they are prophets. They are both announcing the coming of the kingdom.

John is the forerunner. He is the one who intended only to herald the coming of one greater than he. He is the one who expected to decrease so that another could increase.

I suspect, though, that John thought Jesus would follow him a bit more closely.

John preached an apocalyptic message. He described a kingdom characterized by the wrath of God. He declared that the wheat would be separated from the chaff, and the chaff would be burned with unquenchable fire.

Just as Elijah lost himself in battle with Ahab and Jezebel, so John loses himself in battle with Herod and Herodias. You will remember that Elijah was the one who stood alone on the mountain and heard Yahweh in the "still small voice." What you may not remember is that what he heard in the voice was a command to slay all those who persecuted him. And, that's exactly what he did.

So, I hear a note of frustration - maybe even anger -- in John's question to Jesus.

It's as if John is challenging Jesus. "Where are you? Why aren't you protesting my arrest, or at least challenging Herod's unlawful marriage? Are you the one, or should we wait for another - someone who actually has the courage to do what must be done?"

Jesus does not respond to the combative emotion of John's challenge. He simply suggests that life in the kingdom might look different from what John expected.

"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news brought to them." (Mt. 11: 4, 5)

Jesus seems to be saying that the coming of the kingdom is not just about the defeat of sin. It's not just about the righteous confrontation of wrong. It's not just about chipping away at the marble like a sculptor until the perfect statue emerges.

The kingdom is about reincorporating what was lost. It's about resurrecting in the new what was left out of the old. It's about gathering up the marble discarded by the sculptor and treating it with the same dignity as the sculpture itself

John was experiencing one of those moments of scarcity, when it didn't look like there would be enough. Jesus gives John a gift. He shows him what life in the kingdom looks like. He shows him what to do and whom to do it with in order to experience God's abundance.

There is a small church in the south side of town that was founded at the end of the nineteenth century. In the 1950s, it moved into an established urban neighborhood, Ormewood Park. The neighborhood began to change color in the 1960s, as the more affluent whites began to move out. By the late 1970s, the parish was in trouble - divided into fighting factions and dominated by confusion and bitterness.

The Bishop began to talk openly about closing it down.

The priest in the parish finally walked out of the church building and into the surrounding neighborhood. He found a large number of group homes, filled with folks living on disability checks. They were poor. They had been grossly neglected. They were, for the most part, profoundly affected by mental illness. In an earlier era, they would have been in mental institutions.

That was all that he needed.

The priest invited his new friends to come to church. They were suffering from isolation, both because of their illnesses and because of the misconceptions and fears that we all have about them. He offered them community, and the love and acceptance that only a community can provide.

As the government continued to reduce its support of the mentally ill, Holy Comforter continued to expand its programs. Soon the newcomers outnumbered the old. The parish became a mission of the Diocese, and volunteers from other churches and the surrounding neighborhoods began to help out.

Today, Holy Comforter operates a Friendship Center that provides meals, support and enrichment activities, such as art and gardening, to almost 100 participants.

It's not that the kingdom has arrived in all of its glory at Holy Comforter. People there don't have everything they want. They are not guaranteed long, healthy lives free from the suffering, disappointment, frustration, and loneliness that the rest of us face.

It's that, at Holy Comforter, they have been able to imagine what the kingdom looks like. They know that what we call disabilities or special needs - differences that we assume signal scarcity - can be gifts of sight. And, they know that learning how to tell the truth, how to receive care and how to take delight in the smallest of

things are essential practices for learning how to accept God's abundance.

In other words, at Holy Comforter, they know that they have all they need to follow Christ.

I suspect that all of us know what it feels like to experience scarcity in our lives. All of us know what it feels like to not have enough. We don't have to look for these moments, really. They have a way of finding us.

Yet, they often come bearing unexpected gifts. There is often something in those moments of human scarcity that allows us to imagine the abundance of God.

It was just an orange. But, there was something about eating it in my moment of fatigue that allowed me to imagine the abundant joy of being in God's creation.

It was just a question, posed by a man in prison. But, there is something about hearing the answer in the context of such disillusionment that allows us to see the abundant joy in committing ourselves to the search for what has been lost.

It was just a church, falling as many have to the changing demographics of a neighborhood. But, there was something about seeing similar needs in the faces of diverse strangers that allowed the church to imagine the abundant joy of real friendship.

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

"Go and tell , what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news brought to them."

Imagine.

Could it be that the scarcity we feel as we look at the sculpture we have made is really the absence of the bits of marble that we have chipped away?

It makes sense - all this talk of abundance as restoring, reincorporating and gathering up.

Just think. What would we say to God, if some of us arrived to stand before the throne of heaven without the rest of us?

Amen.

You might be interested to know:

- o Samuel Wells offers a wonderful discussion of the notions of scarcity and abundance in *God's Companions: Reimagining Christian Ethics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006). I particularly like his notion that we have everything we need to follow Christ (pages 6 and 7), and his argument that life in the kingdom involves worshiping God, being friends with God and eating with God (pages 29 through 43).

- o I have also relied on an earlier work by Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004) for the image of life in the kingdom as reincorporating the lost. The sculpture metaphor is his. He compares church history to the making of a sculpture, focusing on the need to reclaim the marble that is chipped away and discarded in the process (page 144).

- o I was ordained as a Deacon at Holy Comforter in 2005. In telling the story of that

parish, I have relied on a history written by my friend, the Rev. Michael Tanner, who is the current Vicar there.

- The sermon closes with a question inspired by Charles Peguy, the French spiritual writer. Peguy describes the experience of standing before the throne of God after one's death, and asks the question, "What would God say to us if some of us came to him without the others?" I came across Peguy's quote in Wells book, *Improvisation* (page 145).