

Faithing Our Fear
Isaiah 2:1-4
November 21, 2007
Lamorinda Interfaith Thanksgiving Worship

This evening we have gathered as those ancient Israelites of years gone by. We have climbed a mountain, similar to Mt. Moriah on which the temple was built in Jerusalem. This mount in Lafayette leads to Temple Isaiah. Like the faithful of long ago, we stream together from our different faith communities to one holy place of worship. I am still learning about our various traditions. Last week at the monthly meeting of our religious leaders, I learned how long the varied communities will pay attention to the preacher. Jews and Catholics will listen for about seven minutes; Protestants may pay attention for 10 minutes; but Bahai's will tune in for an hour!

In our day and age it is important that we make pilgrimages together to holy places in our community. Our gathering serves as a beacon of hope in a world which is deeply divided over religion. In the climate of fear and hostility that has tainted so many worldviews, we worship in order to catch a glimpse of the divine vision for our life on earth.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us of the reason for our gathering: to receive the instruction of the Lord that we might walk in God's ways. Isaiah imagines that as we learn the ways of our God, we will live together in peace. The teaching of our Lord provides an alternative to the ways of the world.

As people of faith, we are called to immerse ourselves in the teachings of our God. The instruction of our faith traditions are like corrective lenses. Many of us come to a point in life when our sight becomes blurry and we are in need of glasses to bring clarification.

Likewise, our worldviews become blurry and tainted by the various influences of our culture and society. "The Buddha explained that in the dark, you see a snake, you scream. But when you have a light, you see it is a rope. Sometimes we see a person as a snake, whereas she is only a rope. When I change my perception of the situation, my anger is transformed."ⁱ

Sister Joyce Rupp recalls the Saturday morning at 6:00 a.m. when her meditation was rudely interrupted by the seventy-year old man across the street riding his lawn mower back and forth across his front lawn. A moment of quiet was abruptly followed by the persistent buzz of a weed cutter. This was followed by the leaf blower's whine as he pushed the cut grass off the sidewalk. All the while at meditation, she thought, "why can't he wait until a more reasonable hour of the day to do this." Only long after her non-loving response did she learn that his wife was dying in a hospice where he went early to spend the day with her.ⁱⁱ

When light is shed, the snake becomes a rope. The teachings of God provide the illumination we need. Corrective lenses come in the form of divine instruction. The Ten Commandments are a foundational teaching for people of faith. Recently the Bishops of the United Methodist Church reminded our denomination to follow three general rules discerned by the founder of Methodism, John Wesley. Those three rules are: *Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God.*

A military chaplain serving in Iraq found his prayer life deepened in unexpected ways. He obtained a strand of prayer beads that appeared similar to Christian rosaries. They were Islamic prayer beads, a strand of thirty-three beads, representing the years of Jesus' life. He was taught to pray using the mantra, "God is Great. God is One. Praise be to God the Master of the Universe."

He noticed that in Iraq it is commonplace to see men carrying their prayer beads with them wherever they go. It is the rule rather than the exception to see Muslim men praying in public not only during prayer time but also throughout the day while fingering their beads. The chaplain got into the habit of carrying his prayer beads with him wherever he went. He wanted to deepen his prayer life in order to be a nonanxious presence in the world. He prayed while walking down the street, waiting for a meeting to begin, or traveling in a convoy. In one convoy the window of the vehicle in which he was riding was struck with a rock thrown in anger by a teenage boy. The chaplain saw the boy as he hurled the rock at him. Wondering how to respond to this assault, he simply lifted up his hand with the prayer beads he had been praying and mouthed the words in Arabic for him to see, "God is Great. God is One. Praise be to God the Master of the Universe." The chaplain said, "I was at peace and serene; my enemy was not."ⁱⁱⁱ

Grounding ourselves in faith enables us to view life and the world with the eyes of God. Holy teachings correct our skewed vision. Divine wisdom shifts our perspective.

Realigned with the divine vision, we are able to claim hope, even when so many feel overcome by despair. We trust that the reign of God seen by Isaiah is breaking in, in spite of all the media manipulation to the contrary. When we are guided by a vision of peace with justice, we can even celebrate.

Celebration and praise are hallmarks of faith. They do not deny the harsh realities nor the despair and pain of life. Kathleen Norris was steeped in the psalms as she participated in the liturgy of a Benedictine monastery for nine months. She says, "In expressing all the complexities and contradictions of human experience, the psalms act as good psychologists. They defeat our tendency to try to be holy without being human first....The psalms make us uncomfortable because they don't allow us to deny either the depth of our pain or the possibility of its transformation into praise."^{iv}

Without denying the challenges of daily life nor the pain of global conflict, praise and celebration are a participation in the larger vision of God which is still coming into fullness of being. We can rejoice because we yield ourselves in trust and gratitude to the One whose we are.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of London tells of an encounter he had with the headteacher of a floundering school in London. She had heard some of his radio broadcasts and felt that he might have an answer to her problem. He met with her and listened to her tale of woe: low morale among teachers, pupils, and parents; declining enrollment; poor test results. Unless something changed dramatically, the school would have to close.

They talked about possible approaches, until he realized that the solution was very practical. He said, “I want you to live one word – *celebrate*.”

The headteacher sighed, “You don’t understand – we have *nothing* to celebrate. Everything in the school is going wrong.” (It sounds like she is only seeing snakes!)

Rabbi Sacks replied, “*Find* something to celebrate. If a single student has done better this week than last week, celebrate. If someone has a birthday, celebrate. If it’s Tuesday, celebrate.” She seemed unconvinced, but promised to give the idea a try.

Eight years later the rabbi received a letter from the headteacher. Test scores had risen. Enrollment increased from 500 to 1,000. Saving the best news to last, she added that she had just been made a Dame of the British Empire – one of the highest honours the Queen can bestow – for her contribution to education. She concluded by noting how one word had changed the school and her life.^v That one word was celebrate.

We gather in thanksgiving to immerse ourselves in the teachings of God. We trust that divine wisdom will correct our blurry perspective on life and on one another. We dare to celebrate and praise, for we believe in a God who continues to create life among us even today.

ⁱ Sr. Chan Khong, quoted by Joyce Rupp, *The Cosmic Dance* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 90.

ⁱⁱ Joyce Rupp, *The Cosmic Dance* *ibid* p. 90.

ⁱⁱⁱ From *In Times Like These*, Malcolm Boyd and J. Jon Bruno editors. Seabury Books, an imprint of Church Publishing, New York, 2005. Quoted in *Alive Now*, The Upper Room, Nashville, Tennessee, November/December 2007, pp. 16-19.

^{iv} Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1987), p. 96.

^v Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), pp. 255-256.

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