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The End: The Place to Begin

In a recent weekly epistle, I shared the truth that I have a long-held habit of closing my eyes when I want to protect myself from something unpleasant. If I am watching a scary movie or a movie that gets violent, I close my eyes. I am nervous about heights, so when I ride a ski lift up a mountainside, I close my eyes. I think the most memorable time I did this was when I was driving in San Francisco and looking down from the top of the hills to the bottom made me queasy, so I closed my eyes. The frightening part for Randy was that I was driving. Closing my eyes is one way that I protect myself. However, there are times when I close my eyes to give myself the opportunity to see things from a different perspective. Closing my eyes gives me an opportunity see through imagination, creativity and faith.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent and we begin the journey toward the manger. However, our ultimate destination is not Bethlehem. The stable is merely a stop along the way. Our ultimate destination is the Kingdom of God. Jesus came to earth to invite us to live in a new way of living, to see an alternative to the choices humans have made generation to generation. In his teaching, he gives us one glimpse after another of that Kingdom – a place where all of creation is precious, a place where those who have the least among us are cherished and respected, a place where we do not just gather in the name of God, but actually live out our lives together as community, a place where justice for all is not just a slogan, but a reality, a place where children are treated with respect, a place of peace. Our problem is that this Kingdom that Jesus describes is as foreign to us this day as it was when he lived. Jesus' teachings were based on the Jewish faith. We, too, refer back to those teachings as we hear the words from Isaiah 11. The opening verses of the chapter speak to the coming of Christ. The verses I am about to read, speak to the Kingdom of God here on earth. The passage has inspired authors, painters and composers and is often called the "Peaceable Kingdom."

Since none of us are driving at the moment, I invite you to close your eyes, open your heart and imagine, just for a moment, what God is envisioning for us, all of us, the whole of creation.

Isaiah 11: verses 6-11

God envisions a creation that is whole, without violence and deeply connected. We have so much trouble seeing it because we are absolutely dedicated to seeing what the culture tells us to see. No mystery, no wonder, no awe. Yet, as people of faith we are called to see beyond what the culture dictates to what God has designed. And what

God has designed is the sacred within the ordinary, mystery within the mundane, awe in the midst of routine.

“People can most easily recognize mystery when it presents itself in dramatic ways. The person who heals for unknown reasons when all hope is gone, the angelic visitation, the life-altering coincident. We seem to be able to hear best when God shouts: even Moses required a burning bush, and Jesus’ disciples needed him to feed multitudes with a single fish.” [Rachel Remen .] Even when someone has one of those amazing, life-altering encounters with the Divine, others often sit back to discount or diminish that experience. We are blind to the presence of God in our living and when we do encounter the spirit of God we often seek to diminish that truth.

E. F. Schumacher writes in his book, *Guide for the Perplexed*, “We can only see what we have grown an eye to see.” We have grown an eye to see only that which is evident, concrete before us, by God who comes to us through wonder, through mystery, through awe. So much of life is lived without intention, a habit, moving from one activity to another. In such a life, we see little that startles us or awakens us. We are not looking for the mystery or the awe. We are putting one foot in front of another in an attempt to get somewhere that holds little importance to us, no joy, no sense of blessing, and without any mystery. Yet the extraordinary is in the midst of the ordinary. The sacred is in the midst of all our living. We have just not grown the eye to see it. We have not grown the heart to embrace it.

The journey of Advent is about putting the end as the beginning. This journey is moving toward the Kingdom of God. That Kingdom is a place of peace, a place of grace, a place of hope, a place of joy. It is right here before us, but as we remain bombarded by depression, violence. We see the negative because we take the negative as our only reality. Our true reality, our ultimate destination is the Kingdom of God. It is the peaceable kingdom of Isaiah and until we can see that kingdom in our mind’s eye, until we can place that vision in our mind and heart, we will continue to be blind to its power and presence. It is the faithful of the world who will lead the way toward justice, toward peace, toward hope.

“To be spiritual is to be taken over by a mysterious, divine compulsion to manifest some aspect of life’s deepest force. We become most who we are when we allow the spirit to dismember us, unsettling our plans and understandings, remaking us from our very foundations. Nothing is more challenging, nothing less sentimental, than the invitation of spirit to become who we are and not who we think we ought to be,” according to Catholic theologian, Thomas Moore.

Wonder comes to us as blessing. It may mean closing our eyes to what the culture would have us see, so that we can accept the blessing and see through the eyes of faith. In the words of Rabbi Lawrence Kushner:

“May your eyes shine with the light of holy words
and your face reflect the brightness of the heavens.”

These words come as a blessing anointing us with the presence of God as we live out our days.

Thomas Moore goes on to say, “With a religious point of view whatever we imagine in some future ideal state is already available if only we have eyes to see it and the courage to bring it into being. All we have to do is live this life with openness, imagination, and a sense of wonder and paradox.”

No problem! All we have to do is retrain ourselves to the living of each day and allow that which we think is rare to become that which is commonplace. It can be done. We give up too easily when the ways of the spirit seem unattainable. Yet, those ways are evident each and every day. On our journey to the manger, let’s set aside our skepticism. Let’s resist allowing the media to determine our point of view. Let’s engage with people instead of leveling judgments against them. This year, I pray we do not let our education and sophistication get in the way of our spiritual wisdom.

Finding wonder begins as we share in Holy Communion together. Communion honors the presence of God in our midst. In the liturgy, we are bound anew to grace and to each other. In the taking of the bread and the cup, we dip into holiness and find in vulnerability to the spirit, hope for this life and confidence in the life beyond this life. We begin this journey to Bethlehem with our eye on the Kingdom, seeing it, hoping it, dreaming it, living it.

Years ago, when we were first married, we lived on a small portion of what had been a large farm. It had a beautiful creek, a grove of walnut trees, a barn or two and a very old house. A neighbor loaned us a horse and I thought I was living in paradise. My little piece of heaven was shattered however, when I received a phone call and learned that one I loved dearly was struggling with cancer. This person was not only dear to me, but a true disciple of Christ. I could not believe that this would happen to her. I was so angry. I hung up the phone and went out to the very back of our acreage and gave God a piece of my mind. I was extremely angry. This was wrong. It was unfair. I yelled at my God. And then in the twinkling of an eye I felt completely surrounded by the glory of God. It may have been the snow on the ground or the full moon or the stars in the sky, but I felt enveloped by God’s love and in that moment I knew that the one I loved was also surrounded by the love of God and no matter what we would face, God would be with us. It was a jaw dropping moment of awe and wonder and if it had been possible, I would have stayed in that glory for the rest of my days.

When was the last time that you were overwhelmed by wonder? Were you on a mountaintop or a beach? Were you listening to a symphony or at a rock concert? Was

it while you were reading a book, taking a walk or gazing at the stars? There is no better time of the year to engage our imagination, no better time to open ourselves to wonder. Take in the music this season, listen for angels, look for stars, and see God's Kingdom in the midst of the shopping, the traffic and the merrymaking. Find ways to look beyond the crowds and see the children who are filled with excitement and the parents who are stressed and tired. Find in the merrymaking opportunities to speak of hope, share encouragement and give voice to justice. Spend less, wonder more.

Our first step to the manger is in the sharing of Communion. God came and walked among us. Who can explain it? Not I. I take it on faith. God so loves this world he gave his only son to live with us and show us the way to live. May we open ourselves to wonder this season. May we see God in the faces of those who wait with us in long lines, may we encounter God as we sit in traffic, may we look to the lights of the trees and remember that love is stronger than hate, that hope is eternal and that one day we will live in that place called the peaceable kingdom, a place that is before us if we have the courage to live it here and now.

Open your eyes this Advent! May you be blessed with wonder, mystery and awe as you journey to Bethlehem this year.