

Preaching award: Menno-Simons-Predigtpreis 2017

Betty Pries, Canada

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The Heart of God has been Revealed (Apocalyptic Time)

Over these past several weeks, I have felt a profound need to weep. Perhaps you have had the same experience. It has been a few weeks now since the US election, but the devastation of that event and the tenor of the campaign leading up to that day are still with me. In part this event is with me because of the acts of racism, sexism and homophobia the US election has unleashed; in part it is because we do not know how the US will position itself in the world over the next four years. Both of these issues alone are cause for grief and concern. But the election is also with me because of something even more troublesome: What is happening in the US is happening across the world. There has been a hard turn toward exclusion, fear and hatred in so many countries around the world.

As Canadians we may feel protected from this global movement – after all our current government has declared that it is marching to a different drum. Nonetheless we dare not be smug. What is happening elsewhere is also happening here. We too have leaders who espouse rhetoric against the outsider and we too have acts of racism, sexism and homophobia in our midst.

It appears that a growing mood across the world has awakened the age-old divide between self and other. In the industry in which I work, we call this the us/them dynamic – it is the tendency to see the self (or us) as good and to see the other (or them) as bad and as the cause of our ills. While this creates great sadness at the interpersonal level, at a national or international level this dynamic can be profoundly dangerous.

Throughout history, our species has struggled with a tendency to exclude the other. On the upside, this tendency appears to have emerged from the positive human need to seek belonging. We have a profound human need to belong to someone or some group. Unfortunately, the desire to belong has come at a cost. To belong to one group is not to belong to another and that appears to be where the trouble begins. Our need to belong becomes correlated with a need to exclude. And while the solution to this problem may sound quite simple – we should just stop excluding people – the reality of exclusion is far, far more complex.

The us/them dynamic into which our current time is plunging is frightening in part because it emerges from patterns deeply embedded in our way of being. Recent research has shown that our tendency to exclude

the other is held so deeply in our bones, we hardly see the exclusion of which we ourselves are guilty. Racism, for example, is so endemic in our social structures it takes up residence in our souls in ways we hardly recognise. Racism includes the inner voice that tells us to be afraid of someone who is different; it can include a judgemental spirit with regard to how another group orders its life, it includes acts of charity that patronize the other, and it includes resistance to allowing members of another group to move into positions of leadership. We see racism in the western-centric lens through which the rest of the world is regarded. We see it with regard to hiring practices, public policies, acts of violence in the street, and in conversations around family dinner tables. Of course it isn't just racism that is the scourge of the us/them dynamic. It includes sexism, homophobia, fear of other religions, fear of other political perspectives, disregard for other cultures...

The us/them dynamic is so frightening because once we place someone in the category of other, we begin on a trajectory that allows the chasm between self and other to grow. Over time, the self (or one's group or one's nation) becomes the norm of what it means to be human. And, by way of corollary, the other now becomes the norm of what it means to be less than human. We do not need to look far into our human history to observe the devastating consequences associated with seeing the other as less than human.

I read an article a few days ago written by an American pastor named Jonathan Martin who has been in anguish these past weeks over the state of his country. He called the time we are living in apocalyptic time. When I read the term "apocalypse" associated with the present day, I was initially surprised. I had not put this together. After all, the apocalypse is often associated with some notion of the end times. This, however, was not what the pastor had in mind. Martin reminded his readers that the term apocalypse actually means something much more near to us. In Scripture, apocalypse means a revealing or an unveiling. Apocalypse time is a time that reveals or unveils that which is in our hearts – both individually and collectively. During apocalyptic times there is no place to hide because even our hiding becomes an unveiling of our inner spirit. Jonathan Martin writes: "In Scripture, apocalyptic time is peculiar because it is time marked both by unprecedented, unparalleled grief and seemingly irrational, logic-defying hope." In other words, the great unveiling of the apocalypse is devastating because it reveals to us that which we did not want to see. It exposes that which has been hidden and, in our current context, confronts us with the profound levels of exclusion in our world.

And so it is fascinating to me that those who created the Lectionary always begin Advent with apocalyptic texts. It is why we read Matthew 24 today on First Advent. For those of you not familiar with the Lectionary, this may come as a surprise. But as any preacher of the Lectionary knows, First Advent is always awkward. Here we are, beginning our march toward the happiness of Christmas and the Lectionary's recommended preaching passages all come from the least happy places in our Biblical narrative. In our sanitized white Christmases with cute babies in clean mangers, we hardly associate Christmas with the apocalypse. And

yet, this is precisely the type of time it was for the shepherds, the magi, Mary, Joseph and pretty much anyone else who was paying attention in first Century Judea.

It is also this type of time that the creators of the Lectionary try to evoke each First Advent – not because apocalypse time is any fun but because the need to unveil and reveal the injuries and sorrows of our world is always relevant.

Our temptation is to rush past First Advent toward the Christmas story – to get past the apocalypse and into hope, fast. Even our opening litany in today's service talks about the night being almost over. When we look around us, though, we might conclude that in fact the opposite is true. The night is very much not over. Whether we can quantify this or not, theologically we must stay with the sadness of the apocalypse – at least for a while – because the apocalypse also unveils us – it has something profound to teach us about ourselves and our own complicity with the same us/them dynamic we now mourn. I am reminded of the words of the great songwriter, Leonard Cohen, who died the night before the American election. He released his last CD only three weeks before he died. Perhaps you have already heard his title track. In that song, he says, "You want it darker...we kill the flame." This is the reality of apocalyptic time—we tend to kill the flame even as we clamour for the light that will undo our darkness.

The apocalypse reveals our own hands as they darken the flame.

And so our Scripture reading for today from Matthew while ominous in tone is not so out of place for the time in which we are living. I would like to read a portion of this passage from the translation known as The Message.

36 "But the exact day and hour? No one knows that, not even heaven's angels, not even the Son. Only the Father knows.

39-44 "The Son of Man's Arrival will be like that: Two men will be working in the field—one will be taken, one left behind; two women will be grinding at the mill—one will be taken, one left behind. So stay awake, alert. You have no idea what day your Master will show up. But you do know this: You know that if the homeowner had known what time of night the burglar would arrive, he would have been there with his dogs to prevent the break-in. Be vigilant just like that. You have no idea when the Son of Man is going to show up.

Be vigilant just like that. You have no idea when the Son of Man is going to show up...

I don't enjoy this passage. I suspect that many of you don't either. Unfortunately, this passage has been used as a weapon through much of Christian history. Consistent with our theme this morning, in the hands of people inclined toward us and them thinking, this passage is fuel for an unholy fire. It easily places the other in the category of the left behind, just as the self is self-righteously declared to be redeemed.

But here I would like to challenge our assumptions: If the apocalypse involves a great revealing and if that revealing exposes our hearts and our minds... then we must ask the following two questions:

- Do you have enough exclusionary tendencies in your souls that you are worthy of being left behind?
- Have you done enough great things that you are worthy of being taken up?

I hope you said yes to both of these questions. Because each of us is fully human and in the fullness of our humanity each of us is both sometimes glorious and sometimes mistaken. (Of course, depending on your self-perception, being told you are fully human may sound like bad news or good news!)

I would like to propose an interpretation of Matthew's passage. Specifically, I would suggest that we are, each of us, BOTH the ones taken up AND the ones left behind. *The two men working in the field are the same man just as the two women grinding at the mill are the same woman.* This is not about some being good and some being bad and each person getting their just desserts. This is about a season that causes a great unveiling of all that is within each of us. And as we know, both the glorious and the broken exist within the same person. As we continue in Matthew we read that with this unveiling comes the promise of an encounter with God's presence. Strangely though, this feels ominous – the text compares God's coming with a thief in the night. Why? God's coming is ominous because the unveiling comes at a great cost: The heart does not enjoy being unveiled. An honest heart knows it is both glorious and broken but this knowledge does not protect this same heart from grief. In fact, it appears that the more honest the heart the greater the grief.

And yet... according to Jonathan Martin, this encounter with God's presence – now made more stark in the darkness of the apocalyptic time – is also a time of crazy, seemingly irrational hope. It was in troubled first Century Judea, after all, that a big, audacious, logic-defying hope emerged – hope that the birth of a child could begin to shine a light into the world's darkness.

We need to talk about that hope and we will, but first we must be careful.

Both prophets and false prophets dance in the shadows of the darkness. Both promise big, audacious, seemingly irrational, logic-defying hope.

- One of these hopes though will only lead to more darkness.
- The other hope seeks undyingly to keep the light of real hope alive in a darkening world.

There appears to be one measure that determines whether our hope is false or true. Is our hope based on exclusion, hatred and fear of the other? Or is our hope built on humility, grace and love for the other?

Similarly – and perhaps even more shockingly – the text also forces us to ask, is our hope based on hatred and fear of that which is broken within ourselves? Or is our hope built on a humble, gracious love for all that is within ourselves?

There is a tangible connection after all between our welcome of ourselves and our welcome of our global community. This is why Matthew's text is so important in the context of hope. We cannot welcome the other if we have not welcomed the parts within ourselves that we would rather reject, ignore or leave behind. We cannot embrace the other if we have not embraced the fullness of who we are, our brokenness included.

Initially, the unveiling of our hearts will cause us great suffering.

But... herein lies a promise.

In the words of James Finley: The pearl of great price is found in the field of our suffering. As we learn to love the parts of ourselves that need our love the most, we also discover the capacity to welcome the other exactly *as they are* in their otherness, no strings attached. The other is welcomed not as one who has to be like us to be whole but as one who in their *own* wholeness is already whole even if that wholeness differs from our own and even if that wholeness – like ours – includes both goodness and brokenness.

Let me say that again: The pearl of great price is found in the field of our suffering. As we learn to love the parts of ourselves that need our love the most, we also discover the capacity to welcome the other exactly *as they are* in their otherness, no strings attached. The other is welcomed not as one who has to be like us to be whole but as one who in their *own* wholeness is already whole even if that wholeness differs from our own and even if that wholeness – like ours – includes both goodness and brokenness.

From here the story just keeps getting better and better. After all, the heart of God is also revealed in apocalyptic times. Contrary to popular belief, God does not appear to smash down those whom we believe do not belong to us, even in apocalyptic times. Nor does God destroy the parts of ourselves we reject. Admittedly, the writer of Matthew does not help us to see this. If you read the whole of chapter 24, you will see that Matthew himself seems to struggle with us/them thinking and wishes for a God who will condemn the other or that which is broken in ourselves.

And yet, when we look at the long arc of the Biblical story and the even longer arc of history, quite the opposite appears to be true. God's heart is revealed as undying in love, steadfast in mercy, sustaining through everything and crazy in its commitment to knit together that which has been divided. The great logic-defying hope that is God's heart is always about love for Each. And. Every. Single. Person. Exactly. As. They. Are. And in the embrace of this love, no part of the self is left behind just as no person is left behind. Destroying that which we perceive as unrighteous is not the point. Dividing the world or the self into the righteous and the unrighteous is also not the point. Healing the inclination to divide the world and the self in this way – that is the point. Because what we know is that it is the inclination to division never redeems. On the contrary, it is the inclination to division that entrenches brokenness and drives exclusion.

But now, something quite miraculous and unexpected happens. When we are healed of our inclination to divide the world and the self in this way, when we embrace ourselves exactly as we are and the world exactly as it is, then the brokenness within us does in fact begin to change.

We are, indeed, transformed.

Similarly, when we embrace ourselves and the other exactly as we and they are, then the brokenness between self and other also begins to change.

Strangely, mysteriously, sometimes slowly, sometimes dramatically.

Transformation however is always Part II in this great play called life. The first move in this play – the first act – is always God's love. Each one of us stands under the waterfall of God's great love... in the fullness of our own humanity. And with the rest of global community. Indeed – with the rest of creation.

A tiny babe. A healed leper. A freed prisoner. A wounded soul put back together. A Samaritan woman honoured. A man on the cross.

This is big, audacious, seemingly-irrational and logic-defying hope. This is the light that shines in the darkness that the darkness will not overcome. This is the heart of God revealed in the great and painful and hopeful unveilings of history. It is the great unveiling of First Advent.

Let it be so.

AMEN.