

The Sunday Missive -- January 23, 2022

The Third Sunday After the Epiphany

Hymn 383 Fairest Lord Jesus

Fairest Lord Jesus, Ruler of all nature,
O Thou of God and man the Son;
Thee will I cherish, thee will I honor,
Thou, my soul's glory, joy and crown.

Fair are the meadows, fairer still the woodlands,
Robed in the blooming garb of spring;
Jesus is fairer, Jesus is purer,
Who makes the woeful heart to sing.

Fair is the sunshine, fairer still the moonlight,
And all the twinkling, starry host:
Jesus shines brighter, Jesus shines purer
Than all the angels heaven can boast.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1Aga22hkvU>

The Collect of the Day

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Nehemiah 8:1-10

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaijah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah,

Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

Psalm 19

The heavens are telling the glory of God* ***And the firmament proclaims God's handiwork.***

Day to day pours forth speech* ***And night to night declares knowledge.***

There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard* ***Yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.***

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul* ***The decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple.***

The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart* ***The commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes.***

More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold* ***Sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.***

But who can detect their own errors?* ***Clear from me my hidden faults O Lord.***

Keep back your servant also from the insolent* ***Do not let them have dominion over me.***

Then I shall be blameless* ***And innocent of great transgression.***

Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you* ***O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gI5EYt7VRP4>

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

Hymn 513 Like the murmur of the dove's song

Like the murmur of the dove's song, like the challenge of her flight
Like the vigor of the wind's rush, like the new flame's eager might:
Come, Holy Spirit, come.

To the members of Christ's Body, to the branches of the Vine,
To the Church in faith assembled, to her midst as gift and sign:
Come, Holy Spirit, come.

With the healing of division, with the ceaseless voice of prayer,
With the power to love and witness, with the peace beyond compare:
Come, Holy Spirit, come.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4q-nj66X-0>

Luke 4:14-21

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Wordplay -- Epiphany 3C

"The dream of a liberator, and the dream of peace, are not merely dreams. The liberator is already present, we can follow him, even today making visible something of the liberty and righteousness of the kingdom that he will complete. It is no longer impossible. The power to bring peace is already among us." So wrote theologian Jürgen Moltmann. Our task, our vocation, and our salvation, explains Jesus in his first public message, is to align ourselves with and channel this power.

Paul explains in today's reading there are lots of ways to do this. In the Nehemiah passage, Ezra reminds the people of the divine instruction for life they have been given by the Creator. After a long time in exile, they have a new start, but they will never be truly free unless they align themselves with the good. The psalmist declares that all nature points to the law. The law is perfect, whole, complete and blameless. The precepts of God set our boundaries for us. These boundaries apply universally, to the whole of humankind, and they apply to each of us, as deeply individual wellsprings of wisdom, if we will tap them. So we must pray to remove our hidden faults, especially the presumptuous ones where we think we're doing good, but at others' expense. If anything we feel, say or do conflicts with the law in any way, we have to pursue change, or humanity will perish.

We seem to be enslaved to our conflicts, however, and Jesus' announcement that his being frees us from them is met with skepticism, to say the least. After all, the Pharisees themselves, the people with whom Jesus and his followers are going to worship in the synagogue, already existed with the purpose of freeing the Jews from corrupt leadership and the chains of oppression. Pharisee comes from the Hebrew *Perushim*, the separate ones, the reformers.

Jesus differs from the Pharisees in two fundamental ways, which are both the core and the manifestation of his teaching: he bids us to acceptance of the Other, that is to say, "All are Welcome, and he rejects the requirement of purity for participation in the good grace of God's community. The law is pure, yes but us, not so much. We must aim for perfection in the sense of completeness and wholeness -- as, like, and with God -- but always well-knowing that we will stumble along the way and still be welcome in the arms of God and one another if we acknowledge our faults and seek forgiveness. All are welcome, and all can be forgiven.

Just as Jesus delivers his message and conducts his ministry in the context of existing structures and modes of thinking, our transformation must occur locally and individually if we are to go global with integrity. It is not merely a matter of thinking harder but of thinking differently. The millennia have led humanity to a survival mindset, that as the Fulani proverb warns leads to: "Me and my clan against the world; me and my family against the clan; me and my brother against the family; me against my brother." Then there is the law of *Omerta* – don't talk with outsiders about anything. Today we inhabit a culture in which it is thought commendable by many so-called public servants to lie to – and about -- anyone who disagrees with them. But surely is not by means of isolation,

mendacity and manipulation that we will ever come to understand the nature of Jesus; it is by striving to hear, understand and imitate him.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, bids us to subject ourselves to this process as to a radically different kind of captivity, beholdenness to one another: “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, but each of us is given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift. We are the body of Christ, both spiritually and physically. We are one whole and also individually members of it, not just a bunch of Christians clumped together. The claim Paul makes in this extended, visceral description is practical, not merely metaphorical. His picture is an analytical and also mystical description, with parallel meaning and deeper purpose, not merely a colorful analogy with parallel appearance.

So who are the captive, the blind, the oppressed to be set free of their afflictions? Luke’s Greek word for ‘poor’ is *ptochos*, derived from the bent, cringing posture that beggars take in seeking alms. Thus, as with so much of what we are bidden to undertake, we encounter a complexity. Whoever is bent or cringing will be our people, our neediest cases, whether they be bent by poverty, failure, ignorance or misfortune, and whoever is blind, whether to daylight or to truth. C. S. Lewis wrote. “Our souls are curiously shaped because each is the key to unlock one of the doors in the house with many mansions.” Oppression, likewise, takes many forms, external and internal. In God’s eyes, those who have power over others and lack compassion for them are, if anything more deprived than those who have no power at all.

Just as the word passion means both joy and pain. Our experience of the passion of Christ must embrace the whole spectrum of life. Likewise, suffering is not only undergoing hardship, but also allowing everyone to flourish. We must do that with each other, cultivate an ecology of suffering and rejoicing. The Greek words we translate as resurrection are two, with distinct meanings: *Anistemi*, to get up and *Ageiro*, to get together. The two merged in resurrection theology: being raised up to become together the body of Christ. When we talk about Jesus’ resurrection, our assertion that death did not have the last word in Jesus’ story is proved by the existence of communities like this one: raised up to be Christ’s new body. And when we say we believe in the resurrection of the dead, part of that claim is that, no

matter how much a person has given in to destructive tendencies, new life is always possible.

“Here’s the prophecy,” says Jesus, “And get this: I’m it. I’m here to wage a cosmic campaign to help humanity know that God is here with you. The law establishes some human boundaries for human behavior -- invisible fences -- and within those, you will thrive most on your diversity: of art, of opinion, of companionship. You just have to remember that the rules say not to hurt anybody else, physically, economically, spiritually, especially to advance yourself. You are all in this together.

Gradually, Jesus insists, the most observant among us will realize what he is saying is true, and that God’s word is the elixir of life, the saving grace of humankind. It is a process that can only work from the bottom, up; from the inside, out. And we will come to pay better attention to those among us who point out that diversity means being our individual selves -- individuality, but not the egocentric variety. Rather, individuality as individuation; full and joyous use of our single gifts is the nourishment, celebration and completion of humankind. We are responsible for ourselves, and at the same time, responsible for humankind. We can handle it, but will we?

Here’s James Russell Lowell:

True Love is but a humble, low-born thing,
And hath its food served up in earthen ware;
It is a thing to walk with, hand in hand,
Through the everyday-ness of this workday world,
Baring its tender feet to every roughness,
Yet letting not one heart-beat go astray

O Great Love, thank you for living and loving in us and through us. May all that we do flow from our deep connection with you and all beings. Help us become a community that vulnerably shares each other’s burdens and the weight of glory. Listen to our hearts’ longings for the healing of our world. Knowing you are hearing us better than we are speaking, we offer these prayers in all the holy names of God, ***Amen.***

Hymn 409 The spacious firmament on high

The spacious firmament on high, with all the blue ethereal sky,
And spangled heavens, a shining frame, their great Original proclaim.
The unwearied sun from day to day does his Creator's power display;
And publishes to every land the work of an almighty hand.

Soon as the evening shades prevail, the moon takes up the wondrous tale,
And nightly to the listening earth repeats the story of her birth:
Whilst all the stars that round her burn, and all the planets in their turn,
Confirm the tidings, as they roll and spread the truth from pole to pole.

What though in solemn silence all move round the dark terrestrial ball?
What though no real voice nor sound amid their radiant orbs be found?
In reason's ear they all rejoice, and utter forth a glorious voice;
For ever singing as they shine, "The hand that made us is divine."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8cARtRBFco&t=7s>

I Want to Go

I want to go soon and live away by the pond, where I shall hear only
the wind whispering among the reeds. It will be success if I shall have
left myself behind. But my friends ask what I will do when I get there.
Will it not be employment enough to watch the progress of the
seasons?

Henry David Thoreau
Journal entry 1841