

Sermon: Advent 6

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Year C

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Canticle 9

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

Jesus said, "Whoever seeks should not cease seeking until he finds. And when he finds he will be troubled. And when he is troubled, he will be amazed and he will be a king ruling over everything." This reading is not from today's Gospel from Luke, but from a collection of Sayings of Jesus called the Gospel of Thomas, which was used in the orthodox Christianity of Syria, which was very different from the orthodox Christianity simultaneously growing west of Jerusalem. When Constantine commanded the Church to standardize and choose a biblical canon, western orthodoxy won out and the Gospel of Thomas was suppressed, and basically lost for 1700 years until manuscripts were discovered in Egypt in the 1940's.

This has been a favorite saying of mine since I discovered the Gospel of Thomas a number of years ago, and it seems to bridge the wide chasm between what John the Baptist is preaching and what Paul is saying in today's readings. John's God is ready to cut down any tree not bearing good fruit and Paul is telling us to rejoice in the Lord always. How can we reconcile the two? The way I see it is contained in the passage from Thomas. Whether or not it is an authentic saying of Jesus, it does seem to me to be a very wise saying. It says seekers should keep seeking until they find. However, it appears that when we find, it won't be what we expect, but rather something outside the box. This will trouble us because we don't understand how it can be so, but eventually our consciousness will expand, and we will be amazed. Thomas says then we will be kings and rule over everything, which seems to be saying that our new level of consciousness will enable us to rejoice in the Lord always because we can see through God's eyes, and see that everything is in God's hands.

I was raised in a fundamentalist household, and we believed that the entire Bible was infallible and divinely inspired, that all the stories were historically true, and what was important was that they actually happened. Looking back now, I can see that there are a lot of problems with that belief. The ancient Jewish editors of scripture used to put different viewpoints next to each other in the Torah and the historical books, and even write different versions of the same stories, so there is no single vision, but a variety of visions. There are two creation stories, two nativity stories, etc., as well as stories that had God doing very violent things, and commanding genocide and being angry and punishing a lot of the time. The Gospel writers changed their source material to fit the needs of their community, so there are multiple viewpoints in the New Testament as well.

Modern fundamentalists assumed there was only one viewpoint, ignored the contradictions, and picked the things they liked, making scripture fit into their theologies, which is not the way infallibility works. They didn't allow room for the human element in the Bible, that some writers were more inspired than others, that there is room for many levels of interpretation and inspiration, the most important being God is good, and mercy and justice prevail, and all the violence and punishment maybe be mostly our projection onto God of our brokenness. Their narrow belief gives God a bad reputation that unfortunately seems to endorse violence as way to solve problems. How can we trust God when God might go from love and forgiveness to violence and judgment at any time.

The alternative to this is realizing that God is not dualistic, only seeing black and white and good and evil, but rather God embraces everything, and rejects nothing, because God created it all and saw that it was good and creation is still in process. Imperfection and chance are part of the creative process God has set in motion in our universe. God allows the tares to grow with the wheat until the harvest, and does not ask us to violently uproot them, because we can learn about mercy and justice and our common

humanity from interaction with those we consider our enemy, and they can experience God's love and mercy through our response to them.

Those who are stuck in the fundamentalist stage are not seekers, because they already have all the answers, and there is no need to look further. So they will not become troubled. However, those who are truly seeking will come to the point where they are not so sure that things are as they seem. Being stuck in the rut of certainty can get very boring because there can not be any growth. Starting to question certainty can make you troubled, to realize that much of what you have believed all these years could be wrong. Once certainty is given up, it is possible to live in the present and to be creative. The crowds who flocked to John the Baptist, had had their complacency shattered by John's insistence on producing good fruit. The way they were living was self centered and self serving. John told them to give their extra cloak to somebody who needed one and their extra food to the hungry. The tax collectors asked what they should do, and were told not to take more money than they were prescribed. The soldiers also asked, and were told not to extort money by threats and false accusations, and be satisfied with their wages.

God is concerned with all peoples, so those who seek God must go beyond storing up treasures on earth and care for others, and this turns out to be the way to produce the good fruit John is talking about. John was proclaiming the coming of God's Reign, which includes rather than excludes, and it is probably disconcerting to find out that the others who we thought were not good enough, or were our enemies, are included by God. This is troubling to those who thought they were specially favored by God, to find out we are all equal. By working through all our distorted images of God, we will get past our fears of God's anger, punishment, and judgment of us, and start to be astonished by God.

If we look closely at the life of Jesus, we get the clearest picture of what God is like. Jesus was born in very humble ordinary circumstances, lived an obedient life and instead of following a life working to provide for a family, was called to live a life of

servicing the outcasts, the sick, and lost. He underwent initiation into his ministry by baptism, was tested in the desert and returned to Galilee to minister to the common people. He broke the rules when they were oppressive, and healed the sick whenever occasions arose, rather than keeping strict Sabbath laws. He chose a band of students and taught them to continue his ministry, knowing his emphasis on compassion, healing, and nonviolent subversive acts would alarm the authorities and have him executed. When the authorities made their move, he did not resist with violence, but submitted to the violence of his accusers, and forgave his executioners before he died. Jesus was resurrected as the Christ and demonstrated that violence and brute force have no power over God. His union with God was unbreakable, and he appeared to his followers, but with a transformed body that was not limited by space and time. He breathed the Holy Spirit upon his followers and ascended to a different dimension. Now fundamentalists don't seem to realize the implications of the giving of the Holy Spirit to us. Since Jesus imparted the same Spirit that raised him from the dead to us, and two thousand years is but an instant to God, we also have this life within us. Since God can only be encountered in the present moment, looking for God in the past or future comes up empty. God remains hidden to them in plain sight.

Jesus demonstrated God's care for the outsider, the ones who fall between the cracks of society, and those who get lost. Some may be troubled by the seeming lack of the Spirit's presence in the world, but that is because they are looking with preconceived ideas of what God should be doing. God is working everywhere, in places we wouldn't look, and with people who aren't religious. I had this happen to me and I didn't even realize I was seeking God. God saw my troubled life and took the inarticulate longing in my heart as a cry for help, and I did have an encounter with the divine that was more alive than I thought possible. God is never what we expect, and we can't help but be amazed at the grace and mercy that is so freely given us.

So to go from troubled to amazed, we must unlearn everything we have been told about God by people who only have book knowledge to go by, to having first hand knowledge

gained by experience. When we consent to God's will, giving up our personal ambitions, without murmuring or resistance, then we will be on the right track to be amazed by God. The way this happens in real life is through a gradual realization that we are being guided, and involves a lot of trial and error and missteps. Following God's leading involves living with flexibility and creativity, often not really knowing what is going on, and having to live with tension and uncertainty.

The remedy for this is given us by Paul in Philippians when he says, "Rejoice in the Lord always again I say rejoice." Doing this, we are teaming with God, knowing that how things turn out depends on how we respond to the situation. If we trust God and remain mindful in situations we don't want to be in, instead of getting angry at God or murmuring, there is a power there that can work wonders and healing instead of hurt and disconnect.

I have been a seeker for over forty years and found things don't often go forward or in a straight line, but take many detours and sometimes regress. I have been stuck and sidetracked for long periods of time, even years, and it has taken me many years to be able to challenge some false assumptions and ideas I grew up believing, and to be reconciled with difficult situations I had to live with. I often made things worse and stayed stuck in self pity and rage because I couldn't see why God had let things happen, delaying the healing process and the lessons to be learned. But even these mistakes are part of the process, having a purpose we may not see.

Some upon hearing Paul's words to, "Rejoice in the Lord always", may be skeptical of that being possible to do considering the violent, confused world we live in. I have felt that way at times myself, trying to force it when I couldn't honestly say that.

Paradoxically, we are both waiting for God to come and simultaneously God has already come, and dwells with us right now. This assurance allows us to rejoice because we have taken that journey from troubled to amazed, and God's peace which surpasses all understanding guards our hearts in Christ Jesus.