

“Marathon of Hope”

Hebrews 11:1

November 28, 2010

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As we've said, today we begin Advent, that season where we prepare again to celebrate Christ's birth. Our celebrations have taken on strange, secular traditions....everything from Santa Claus to Scrooge. Some religious traditions have been so incorporated into the secular that they don't even seem strange, like Christmas carols playing in the shopping malls. And even pageants complete with adorable children in costumes re-telling the story of Christ's birth fall short of completing the story. Now, I admit, I am probably one of the biggest Christmas fans you'll ever meet ~ but as we faithfully prepare for Christmas we must remember that the baby Jesus came not to stay in a cradle but to go to a cross. Jesus was born to die, and he died to be raised, that he might give us the living hope through the resurrection. This truth often gets pushed aside; think about it, what's more celebrated...Christmas or Easter? In many ways Christmas has been “stolen” to be a secular celebration of “feel good events” when in actuality it set in motion, the most powerful, divine sequence of events ever to be known by humankind! And why are we more drawn to celebrating Jesus' birth; because, let's face it, we are uncomfortable even afraid of death, literal, physical death and all the “little deaths” that are a part of life. It takes courage to let something die, but unless something is dead, new life cannot spring forth; there is no resurrection!

We are threatened by resurrection, as author Julia Esquivel identifies in her 1980's collection of poems by the same name, Threatened by Resurrection. Esquivel was a brave Guatemalan school teacher whose commitment to justice in her country put her at odds with the government there and at risk for losing her life. One of her poems, “They Have Threatened Us With Resurrection” recounts the terrible struggle of the people, but also serves as inspiration for others in a variety of situations, including ours. Let me share a few lines:

There is something here within us  
Which doesn't let us sleep  
Which doesn't let us rest,  
Which doesn't stop pounding deep inside,  
It is the silent, warm weeping...

What keeps us from sleeping  
Is they have threatened us with Resurrection!<sup>1</sup>

Threatened with resurrection feels overwhelming, unsettling and even frightening. We may want it, we may want to want it, but...as one author says; “we yearn for change, but cling to the familiar.”<sup>2</sup> And sometimes we don’t even yearn for change. “There is an apocryphal story about the apostle Peter,” described by another author this way, “Immediately after the resurrection of Jesus, Peter—filled with the power of this great event—sees a blind beggar crouched in the dust beside the gate of the city. Overcome with compassion, Peter rushes to the man, places his hands over the blind eyes and says, “in the name of the resurrected Christ, may your sight be restored!” The beggar leaps to his feet, eyes wide open and clearly healed. But with his face full of rage he screams at Peter, “You fool! You have destroyed my way of making a living!” and in one swift and violent motion the beggar gouges out his eyes with his own thumbs and collapses on the street!”<sup>3</sup>

That blind beggar was threatened by resurrection, threatened by change...even healthy change! Isn’t that the way it is with us as well? Like that beggar we can cling to old ways of being and living but is that healthy? Is that what’s best? I don’t think so...we can’t cling to the past and move forward into the future. We can remember, and we celebrate, and we can give thanks to God for the past, but we can’t cling to it. This congregation is in a time of change and I know it feels threatening. I know for some it feels like it would be easier to get back to what was familiar, and yes, I know there would be some sort of comfort in that...but would it be healthy? Would it give you the possibilities and promises of resurrection?

There is another story of a healing of a blind man, this one in the Gospel of Mark. Blind Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.” Jesus asks him, “What do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus replies, “My teacher, let me see again.” These two stories teach us incredible lessons! In the first one, a zealous, faithful Peter acts upon another and healing occurs but that blind beggar wasn’t ready for it...he did not choose it! In the story of Bartimaeus, Bartimaeus chose to be healed! When the Israelites were about to enter the promise land, God said to them, and through them, to all of us... “choose life...so that you may live loving the Lord your God, obeying God and holding to God...” do you hear that...holding ~ clinging to God; then the verse continues, “...for that means life to you...” In the time ahead, zealous people may say to you, as individuals and as a community of faith, “okay, be healed” and yes, healing will come; but, I encourage you to be like Bartimaeus, prayerfully consider how you would answer Jesus’ question to you, “Covenant, what do you want me to do for you?” Prayerfully consider what would be life giving? What would give you new birth?

The author of I Peter says, “By God’s great mercy, God has given us a new birth into a living hope through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Living hope through the resurrection, living hope through death and life again! The author of Hebrews says, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” The future can’t be seen...just like that baby in the manger’s future had a cross and an empty tomb...our lives have our own crosses to bear and our small resurrections reflecting the true Resurrected One!

We are threatened by resurrection, but listen to more of Esquivel’s wise words in the next stanza of her poem:

[Because] this is a marathon of Hope,  
 There are always others to relieve us  
 In bearing the courage necessary  
 To arrive at the goal  
 Which lies beyond death...<sup>4</sup>

Beyond death is resurrected life and we choose life by running a marathon of hope! Not that I’ve ever run one but I think we can agree that marathons are hard and a marathon of hope is no different. Marathons take training and time; planning, practice and patience. Paul puts it this way. “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts....” This is a challenging time for this congregation. Some feel threatened by the changes. I know some of you are hurting. I encourage you to take comfort in Paul’s wise words and I remind you all that you will get through this time of change as a stronger community of faith and a greater witness of God’s love. For God’s love has been poured into your hearts through the baby whose birth and purpose we are preparing to celebrate as today we begin our Advent journey with this message of Hope.

1. Esquivel, Julia, *Threatened With Resurrection* (Elgin, IL; The Brethren Press, 1982)
2. Anthony de Mello
3. Palmer, Parker, *The Active Life A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring* (Harper and Row, Publishers, San Francisco 1990)
4. Esquivel, Julia