

Year B - 3 Advent *“You are the fulfillment of God”*

A number of years ago, I was serving as a supply priest for Christ Church in Tacoma, Washington, while their rector was on sabbatical. My commitment to them involved not only Sunday morning services, but some pastoral care and guidance as needed by the congregation. One Sunday, the deacon took me aside and asked me to go with her to see a woman who had at one time been an active member of the congregation, but had had little contact with the parish in years. Her family had called and asked for a visit. She was dying.

So I followed Evelyn on back roads out of Tacoma into the hills in the direction of Mt. Rainier. I had no idea where we were going, or how far we would end up from my own home. We drove for several miles, through fields and into a very rural area of the state.

Eventually she turned off the highway onto a dirt road that led us through a grove of trees and to what looked like a shack. It was an old farmhouse, not unlike the many that dot the landscape of Maine, that looked like it had been neglected for a number of years. We parked our cars and walked up the walk in the rain. No one answered our knock, so Evelyn just opened the door. The family was in the kitchen, expecting us, and clearly did not know what to do with two women in collars. They showed me to their mother’s room and then retreated back to the kitchen with Evelyn, who began to pray with them and talk about final plans.

It was a small room with a single bed and chest. The woman who lay in it was piled high with quilts and blankets to keep warm. The room temperature must have been at least 80. I could hardly breathe. Mary was propped up slightly in her bed and she turned to me when I walked in. She motioned to me to come closer, so I pulled up a chair, and began to prepare communion for her on the bedside table. And she began to talk.

As Mary talked her crystal blue eyes began to glow. She told me about her life - the hard times and the good times. And how grateful she was for all of it. She spoke of children and grandchildren, divorce and death of a child, her own personal failures. And through it all, she claimed a place in the life of God both in the church and in the world. She was ready to find out about this next great adventure that God had in store. She was ready to die.

By the time Mary finished her story, the tears were streaming down my face. *“What is wrong, my dear?”* she asked. I shook my head, reaching for a tissue and wiping my tears. *“Not wrong”,* I said. *“Incredibly, wonderfully right. You have given me a gift this day. I have seen that our lives are indeed interwoven with God’s and that each of us has place and an important role. You have shown me what the joy of fulfillment looks like. Thank you.”*

What I got in touch with that day, in that unlikely place, was my own deep need to know that who I am and what I have offered to family, friends, the church and the world is valued, needed, a part of the living whole of God. It is a need that underlies much of our effort in living. We all want to know that we are part of a meaningful whole. We all want the joy that salvation brings. And I think that is what it looks like.

Salvation means to become whole. Our need for it springs from the inner and outward sense of ourselves that says we are incomplete, not quite as perfect as we might be. In the Bible our incompleteness is expressed in the book of Genesis with the story of Adam and Eve. That story tells us that we carry responsibility for our inability to choose God. The Good News in that for us is that we can do something about our salvation. But what we discover, as we live our life, is that we can't do it alone. Indeed we need a community of faith and we must allow God to accomplish salvation in us. And so we come to a paradox: In order to "do" salvation, to be made whole, we need to not "do" but "be" a different kind of human being.

On this third Sunday in Advent, we continue the great Christian story with John the Baptist at the center stage. Only this time instead of calling us to repentance, he is pouring the abundant baptismal water of joy on all of us.

John speaks with the clarity of one who is getting ready to die, or at least to let go. "A man can be only what God has made him to be. You yourselves can testify that I said, *I am not the Messiah; I have been sent as his forerunner.*" John understands his part in the greater whole. And he is satisfied with it. He is a part of the fulfillment of God.

And the prophet Isaiah gives us another picture of this fulfillment. It is the evidence that God has begun reconciling this broken world. Good news is preached. The brokenhearted are repaired. The captives are set free. Garlands, oil, and praise are lavished on God's people who are restored to wholeness.; In the community of oneness with God, the past will no longer define who we are. As "oaks of righteousness" we are planted in our communities amidst a sense of joy and exultation.

Isaiah's vision is in an incredible one. And it is shared with us just at this moment in Advent when we might thinking that we can't figure this faith and life stuff out. As all of us go from day to day, struggling to meet the demands that life has placed upon us (demands that we have signed up for!), we struggle to figure out how to meet God's demands as well. Isaiah, John the Baptist, and the parishioner Mary on her death bed - say: "It's ok, you don't have to do it. Life in God is not about meeting God's demands. God is already bringing all things to fulfillment in, among and through you." Paraphrasing what John says: You can only be what God has

made you to be. You are a gift from God to the world. Your joy and fulfillment is found in exercising your giftedness.

A few days after my visit to Mary, the City of Seattle was greeted with the smiling face and open arms of Nelson Mandela. One child who got to meet him said: *"He held my hand and it felt like joy!"*

It felt like joy. Joy that we know was forged in the soil of years of imprisonment, despair, persecution and rejection. Joy that comes from years of holding on to hope and vision when there is no rational reason to do so. Joy that knows that each person, regardless of race or economic status is a gift from God, belongs to God, and will one day return to God.

The same message is meant for us today. And we really need to hear it. As individuals and as a parish, we can only be what God has made us to be. Or put another way: We can be what God has created us to be and that is our way to the fulfillment of salvation. And each of us needs to claim it. To rejoice in our place in the reconciliation, the salvation of all of creation. We don't have to do it. We just need to discover our gift and be that gift to each other and the world.

Amen.

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