

Grace Episcopal Church
Third Sunday in Advent 2022
Rev Brian C Justice

Isaiah 35.1-10
Psalm 146.4-9
James 5.7-10
Matthew 11.2-11

The World Turned Upside Down

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O God of Love,
Take our minds and open them,
Take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen

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According to contemporary accounts, after Lord Cornwallis surrendered to George Washington in 1781, the British troops marched out of Yorktown while a band played “The World Turned Upside Down.” From the perspective of Great Britain, which was the dominant imperial power on the globe in the 18th century, the victory of the colonies over the mother country certainly must have represented a shocking inversion of the order of things, as if indeed the world had been turned upside down.

We can only wonder, then, what the disciples, the Jewish authorities, and the crowds of people must have thought when they heard Jesus of Nazareth speak in such unspeakable proverbs, parables, and prescriptions as are recorded in the Gospel of Matthew:

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out. (5.29)
I have come to bring not peace but a sword. (10.34)
The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. (13.31)
Follow me and let the dead bury their own dead. (8.22)
Do not worry about tomorrow. (6.34)

Do not judge. (7.1)
Do not resist an evildoer. (5.39)
Love your enemies. (5.44)
Blessed are the poor. (5.3)
Blessed are those who mourn. (5.4)
Blessed are the meek. (5.5)
The Kingdom of Heaven has come ... (4.17)

What? Who talks like this?

With utterances like these, shocking, alarming, Jesus must have seemed to turn the world upside down. He violated their values; he assaulted their assumptions; he sabotaged their sensibilities; he overturned the order of things.

Jesus seemed to shatter the very reality which people knew and built their lives on.

But when one thing goes, another thing comes.

And as conventional reality falls away, a new reality, a bold reality, a glorious reality is opened up. Jesus shows us The Way into the new, the bold, the glorious ... shows us The Way into what is really real. And that's because the Way of Jesus is the Way of Love and the Way of Love is the Way of Life.

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Today's Gospel text comes after the very first events in the public ministry of Jesus: the Baptism in the Jordan River by John, the 40 days in the Wilderness, the Sermon on the Mount, the calling and commissioning of the 12 disciples. By this point, John has been arrested, but accounts of the words and deeds of Jesus reach him in prison. John sends his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one ... or are we to wait for another?" (11.3)

At first, we may be puzzled by John's question. After all, didn't he already baptize Jesus? Didn't he already say to Jesus, "I need to be baptized by you?" Didn't he already see the heavens open? Didn't he already see the Spirit everywhere?

Was John having seconds thoughts? Or, was Jesus different than what he had come to expect? John had said that “the one who is coming after me” has a “winnowing fork in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor.” John, it would seem, expected that the Messiah, the Christ would take that winnowing fork and cast down into the unquenchable fire all the forces of evil in the world: the Romans, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the oppressors, the discriminators, the violent, the dishonest, the cheaters, the haters, and all the rest of them.

And, yet, with Jesus, none of that happened. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the meek. Love your enemies. Don’t worry about tomorrow.

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John asks Jesus the question that we are asking in our time and our place: Jesus, are you the one or not? Just like John, we look around at our world and ... and ... and ... and we have to ask the question because sometimes, Lord, it’s really hard to know.

Our politics, our economics, our counties, our cities, our nation, our world ... oh God, are you gonna just take the fork and fix the damned thing or not?

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John got an answer. But not the answer he expected. Just like us.

Jesus responded to John’s question: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised ...”

It would be easy to hear this text as a record of strictly physical, biological, literal occurrences and dismiss it accordingly as supernatural nonsense. Since when do the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the lepers heal, and the dead rise to new life?

But the miracle is hidden in plain sight.

And Jesus shows us The Way to see the miracle in everything.

It is The Way of Love. It is The Way of Love.

And this is the tough love, the unselfish love, the sacrificial love ...
the love that gives itself away to the beloved,
the we-gotta-get-it-together love,
the daily-acts-of-kindness-in-your-neighborhood love,
the forgive-someone-who-has-hurt-you love,
the I-don't-really-feel-like-it-right-now love,
the this-person-really-annoys-me-but-I-am-going-to-be-kind-anyway love,
the I-am-hurting-right-now-but-I-can-do-it-with-the-grace-of-God love ...
that doing-the-hard-hard-work love
that Emily talked about last week.

And you know this ... you know this in your own experience. In your own life.
Think about it.

When you have given this kind of love, the person who could not see any light anywhere sees a new light shining through.

When you have given this kind of love, the person who could not walk forward in any direction finds a new path and begins to walk.

When you have given this kind of love, the one who could not hear any music, any meaning in the struggles of life hears the beautiful notes of a new song.

When you have given this kind of love, the one who was sick and broken and diseased becomes whole again.

When you have given this kind of love, the one who was dead to life rises to new life ... and lives again.

Like John, we wonder about the world. Can't God, can't the one God sends just make it right, make everything right?

This is the mystery.

It doesn't work that way. It'll take time. But if we look closely, we can believe what Dr. MLK, Jr. said, "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." And, we can also say, it bends toward love.

In this wonderful, wonderful season of Advent, let us prepare ourselves to do the work that is ours to do: to walk in The Way of Love and to witness to the miracle hidden in plain sight.

And then we can cry out in song with Jesus, with John, with Isaiah, and with all the saints in praise of the world turned upside down by love where

... waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water ...

A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way ...

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing ...
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee ...

Thanks be to God.

Amen.