

– Rev. Brian Gaeta-Symonds

I love listening to the Moth Radio Hour. I love storytelling in general, especially affective storytelling, when it is felt viscerally because it may have struck a chord within me that resonates to my lived experience or that of a person for whom I care. Recently, I listened to an older episode from October 2021 entitled, “Afraid to Look”. Three storytellers told stories about when they were afraid to look more closely at their lived realities.

One storyteller, in particular, left a lasting impression on me. He began his story by revealing that when he was really young, his uncle was shot and killed by a police officer. He hadn’t ever asked his mother to tell him about this incident. He continued his story by sharing about growing up in a part of the country in which young adult African American men were examined as potentially threatening by many in society and especially in his community. Driving home one night as a young adult, he was pulled over. After asking for his license and registration, he was asked to get out of the car and sit at the curb. Still not having been told why he was pulled over or why he was asked to exit the vehicle, he began to get scared and upset. He didn’t do anything challenging in the moment, simply listened to the officer and was eventually allowed to leave. His fear was based in a few experiences of what he has witnessed happens when young African American men in his community challenge the police. He never filed a report (as strongly suggested by many of his close friends), nor did he do anything else to seek retribution, but he did make his way home and that night he decided to ask his mother about his uncle’s death.

This isn’t an experience familiar to all people in this country, and yet is a reality for many. I say that his story resonated with me, because I remember having conversations with my boys about what happens if a police officer comes to the door, or if they are out and get pulled over, or stopped while walking along the sidewalk at night with a hoodie over their heads and airpods in their ears. My boys are Mexican American – they have certain natural characteristics that set them apart from their peers and others. For the time we lived in Claremont, I began to learn the names and meet many of the officers in the community – both as a local pastor, but now also as a father of young Latino men.

As we continue the idea of a Living Theology or living theologically, I found Rev. Dr. Steffen Losel’s article in the Presbyterian Outlook entitled *Jurgen Moltmann: Theologian of hope and transformation* to offer some wonderfully insightful thoughts and theological questions for both this Reign of Christ Sunday, and the last Sunday before the new liturgical year beginning with Advent next Sunday. Quoting Moltmann, Losel writes, “Moltmann declares in his book *Theology of Hope*, “Christianity is eschatology (the end of this time), is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present.” Declaring that the hope we have in Christ is what we are all about, it invites us to live in such a way that prepares this world by preparing for the eschaton, the end of this time. He then continues with, “For Moltmann, God’s ever newly creating love sends believers back into the world to participate in its transformation. Because God is at work in the world, the faithful live out of hope for the future and become restless in the face of the suffering and injustices of the present.” This is so beautiful, almost poetic, because it names why I believe we do what we do and are involved in mission work and worship. God sends us into this world to transform it, and mostly because we have become restless in the face of suffering and injustice.

Our Lukan passage (Luke 1:68-79) offers the prelude of the Advent story – that of Zechariah immediately following the birth of his son, John – whom later we come to know

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as John the Baptist – the one who preaches of the Messiah. Zechariah became mute when he doubted the angel’s words that he and Elizabeth would give birth to a son. He remained mute until his son was born. Luke chapter 1 might better be known as the maternity ward of the Gospel – assisting in the birthing of God’s promises through John and Jesus. Zechariah, at the moment when his words needed to be heard most, his mouth was opened and he offered this song dedicated to his son, John. This act of fulfilling promise through John and then Jesus is an act of righting the relationship between God and God’s people.

It was Jeremiah (Jeremiah 23:1-6), however, that spoke much more poignantly to me and this morning’s theme of a living theology, including the article from the Presbyterian Outlook which I am pairing with this morning’s sermon. Jeremiah 23 is about holding shepherds accountable to how they teach and take care of their flocks. Now, it is important to point out that Jeremiah isn’t speaking of just the Israelite flocks and tribes, nope. He is talking about any shepherd of any kind of flock – think of it this way: everyone at that time knew a shepherd and what that shepherd did - a shepherd leads, and is responsible for the wellbeing of the flock. He is warning many that God is not pleased with how the shepherds are treating their flocks. This warning turns into a promise that God will send new shepherds to better take care of the flocks. There is a righteous branch being raised up. Luke likes to think that Jeremiah was speaking of Jesus. That *may* be right, and it could also be that things were terrible and Jeremiah was trying to offer hope in the God who provides. The Babylonian Empire was gaining strength and creating power. The Israelites were being threatened.

Since November 2nd when we recognized the saints of the church and better understood that we all make up the great cloud of witnesses, and now the previous two Sundays when we discussed living theologically, we are now being challenged with accountability. What kind of Shepherds of God’s flock have we been, and what kind of shepherds do we want to be? Recently, we have become witnesses to some devastating examples of shepherding others. We’ve seen a dismissing and erasing of whole demographics of peoples, the restricting of life saving medicines, the withholding of funds use to stave off food insecurity, and a disregard for those most vulnerable in our society. We have been seeing the un-friending, the un-healing, withholding food and water, the unsustainable, the forgotten. Here are some questions offered by a commentator whom I read for this sermon, not as a way to criticize the things we are doing, but rather simply as a way to call us to reflect on what we are doing: “what role should the church have in speaking out against bad leaders and bad policies? To what degree is it the duty of the people of God to be like Jeremiah and call out and deter the rise and influence of narcissistic and power-hungry autocrats who cause great suffering and harm?” And then will we hold the mirror up to ourselves and ask – how have we failed at shepherding? Have we hindered God’s unfolding vision? How can we become better shepherds and protectors of our flocks?

As we reflect on those questions and more this week, we also get to ‘look forward and move forward, revolutionizing and transforming the present...’ just as Moltmann stated about being a follower of Christ. This is our call...to revolutionize and transform the present because of the hope we have in Christ. I have been trying to convey this message these last several weeks. Because we know the truth of the gospel we may struggle in this life as we strive to follow Christ, we look to the great cloud of witnesses for inspiration and guidance, we lean into the absurdity of our faith because that wondering is what draws us deeper

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into our faith, and we don't let our past define us – we learn from it and we move forward – all because of the hope we have in Christ.

How amazing that on this Sunday, the year end of our liturgical year, we get to hold onto this truth of the promise we have for hope in Christ, as we move forward into Advent....And what is Advent all about? – “The church is not only a community of worship but also one that joins Jesus Christ in working for justice and peace in this world. It can do so because it is itself the body of Christ, empowered and continuously transformed by the Holy Spirit, such that it becomes a visible sign and symbol of God's inbreaking reign.” The birth of Jesus is God's inbreaking reign into the world to bring Christ's justice and peace, so that we can be empowered and transformed by the Holy Spirit. Our being transformed by this knowledge, invites the revolutionizing and transforming of this present world.

So, let the countdown begin...10...9...8...7...

Amen.

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