

Reflections on World AIDS Day

John Hassell and Glenn Clark



December 1, 2024

First Sunday of Advent

John Hassell

Good morning. Please pray or sing with me:

Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine

Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine,

Heir of salvation, purchase of God

Born of God's goodness, washed in God's love.

This is my story, this is my song

Praising my savior, all the day long

This is my story, this is my song

Praising my savior, all the day long.

Today is World AIDS Day.

In 1988, a group of AIDS activists established World AIDS Day when they went to the World Health Organization to make the day official in order to raise awareness about HIV and to remember the millions who had already died from HIV related illnesses.

Some basic facts:

Today about 38 million people live with HIV and about 40 million have died from it. While there's treatment only about half of the people living with HIV in the U.S. are retained in regular care. In spite of the successful roll out of anti-retroviral therapy, which can make the virus undetectable, 40 percent of the HIV population in the U.S. haven't achieved viral suppression. Once someone achieves viral suppression, they can't pass the virus to someone else through sex, therefore undetectable equals untransmissible. Treatment is prevention. The U.S. is last among rich countries in getting most of its people living with HIV to undetectable levels. Botswana, Malawi and Rwanda have each achieved 90 percent of their HIV population getting to viral suppression.

We have about 38,000 new infections every year in America. We

won't reach "epidemic control" until we get to only 4,000 new infections a year. Long way of saying, AIDS isn't over.

Locally, here's a couple of slides showing the status of the epidemic in our community. You can see from this map, the burden of the epidemic is born most heavily in communities of color. In the District of Columbia today, about 12,000 people are living HIV.

About 25 years ago, I was sitting in the pew at Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco in the Castro neighborhood. Our pastor, Jim Mitulski, who had presided over nearly 500 AIDS funeral in 15 years, welcomed a choir of orphans from Kenya. Most of the kids had lost at least one parent to AIDS. Many of these kids were also living with HIV.

This was a point in the epidemic when death rates in the U.S. were dropping due to the scale up of HIV treatment. Not so in Kenya. Barely 50,000 people living with HIV in the African continent were on lifesaving treatment. Jim said to the congregation: "These children know what we've been through." He exhorted us to champion their interests and to be in solidarity with them.

I went back to my day job as a lobbyist for a technology company. At one point I was taking my CEO through the halls of Congress lobbying for tax breaks. I told her that President George W. Bush wanted to invite her to Africa to help launch what became the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, known as PEPFAR. I knew she was too busy to take that trip but I said, "Somebody should go." She replied, "You go!" So in December 1, 2003 I went to Zambia for World AIDS Day. About four years later, I resigned to work fulltime in the HIV response, first with the UN's HIV program.

We should look today at the 71st Psalm: "In you O Lord, I take refuge, let me not be put to shame ... be to me a rock of refuge ... for you are my rock."

God is the rock I stand on when I do my HIV work even today.

In the reading from Luke's Gospel, after the angel stuns Mary with the annunciation that she will be the mother of our savior, she then responds with her own declaration with the Magnificat, that God is in solidarity with the "anowim" the exiles, the outcast, the downtrodden, the powerless and yes people living with HIV, too, I believe.

Much of my theology is influenced by the exile narrative in the Hebrew Bible. A lot of people living with HIV, because of the continued stigma, still are exiled. Those of us who have worked or volunteered in the HIV response know this, Lucy Slater, Sandra Miller, Cynthia Dahlin, Glenn Clark and Paul Holmes, you know what I'm talking about. My current employer runs about 70 HIV primary care clinics in the U.S. We don't have signs saying welcome to an HIV clinic. We don't have any signage stating that they are HIV clinics. We prefer to locate these clinics so that people living with HIV aren't inadvertently disclosing that they are going to an HIV clinic.

Today's lectionary readings have a common message: God is for us. God is for Hagar. God is for Mary. God became a slave in Jesus. God is for you who are heavy burdened.

"Let me never be put to shame!" shouts the Psalmist. There has been a lot of shame connected to HIV. It wasn't that long ago when Christian pastors were telling us the AIDS was God's punishment for queer people, completely ignoring the facts that plenty of straight people were acquiring HIV, too.

On December 1, 1998, Gugu Dlamini, a volunteer based in Durban with the South African National Association of People Living With HIV, went on national television to raise awareness about HIV and in doing so, she disclosed her HIV status to help reduce stigma. But soon afterwards, she received death threats. She called the police who took no action. Two weeks later a mob stoned her to death. Let us remember Gugu Dlamini

who laid down her life so others with HIV may live fully today.

You all know I have a special relationship with Mary. Today we hear about the Annunciation. I love Mary of the Magnificat. We don't see a docile, passive asexual Mary when she proclaims " ... The Mighty One has done great things for me...Yahweh has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly, Yahweh has filled the hungry with good things..." The Mary of the Magnificat has a passion for justice, for the poor and the powerless. The connection between the Annunciation and the Magnificat, is the good news. God is with us. God is for us. God strengthens us. God sees us.

Mary shows us the way to Jesus. She also made me a feminist. The science that developed lifesaving treatment, in part, was due to studies that monitored how pregnant women living with HIV, who were on antiretroviral treatment didn't transmit to their unborn babies. Because of those mostly poor, powerless women, who would walk miles to get to a clinic, we now have about 21 million people living with HIV on treatment in the world today.

When I took a group of congressional staff in 2008 to Botswana, we visited a treatment site run by Catholic nuns. I met a wonderful Irish sister who showed me how she educated people in her community on how to put on a condom! We all know that the Catholic teaching is opposes the use of condoms.

The early response to HIV in this country was met with a lot of fearmongering, it also showed an enormous amount of courage and compassion. Many gay men, including me, came out of the closet because we had to. As Jesuit Father John McNeil wrote in Taking a Chance on God, "...I think of the hundreds of gay couples whose love for each other might have remained hidden but whose selfless love and devotion into death was made manifest in hospitals and hospices all over the country."

The tough AIDS years gave me no choice but to look into what was a simple superficial faith and go deep. I didn't choose HIV, HIV chose me. Like many of you, the faith of my childhood gave me enough awareness that I couldn't be a bystander. And that faith, became my rocket fuel. Here's how. In our sadness and anger, we sang praise as lament. The last verses from the book of the prophet Habakkuk says it for me:

"Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; God makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.

"Yet!" says the prophet. In spite of it all, the 'yet!' is my proclamation to you. We rejoice in the midst of circumstances because it gives us the strength to survive and thrive.

Here's the good news. The God who sustained me and the many today living with or affected by HIV – will sustain you. The grief and loss, the disappointments, the failures, the betrayals, the indifference – none of that – can separate us from the presence, the grace, the love of the Holy One.

I realize my friends – that you may leave here and not have to deal with HIV. That's understandable but my testimony, my experience, my journey has shown me that God can sustain and strengthen you because God has sustained me.

May it be so.

Glenn Clark

I appreciate John's foresight to ask to bring the word on this day, December 1st, which, as he noted, is World AIDS Day. I

just wanted to add a few words of my own experience of how working in the HIV field and living in a community so impacted by HIV has both strengthened and tested my view of God and spirituality. It's hard to describe how jarring it was to come out as a young gay man in Chicago in the late 1980s into a community that was reeling from fear, discrimination and death due to AIDS. My first experience with HIV was when I was trained as a volunteer in an AIDS hospice in Chicago in 1988. No amount of training could have prepared me for the reality of seeing people—both men and women—whose immune systems were decimated, their bodies unable to fight off infections or heal bedsores, dying in their 20s, 30s or 40s. I have often thought of Jackie, a black woman in her 30s who contracted HIV from her husband, who she didn't know was also having sex with men. Jackie loved soul food from a specific restaurant on the north side of Chicago. I can remember her telling me that she didn't want to be forgotten once she was dead. I have a picture of her, emaciated, but smiling in her hospital bed, wearing reindeer antlers and a red nose. She died years before there were medications to effectively fight the HIV virus. My first boyfriend, Jacques, who introduced me to gay culture and foods that we didn't eat back home in Indiana, who saw me in ways that no one had seen me before, also died shortly before the anti-retroviral medications were available. We stayed friends after we were no longer a couple, and the last time I saw him he was in the hospital, fighting a losing battle with PCP pneumonia and with AIDS-related dementia. He was 39 years old. Where was God in this shit-show of death and betrayal and discrimination? I did not often feel that the God of my childhood was present. But I saw what I learned later to call Christ many times. I saw Christ in the Alexian Brothers (and their associated nuns) who provided the primary care at Bonaventure House, an AIDS hospice where I did my social work internship. I saw Christ in the eyes of compassion with which my boss Pat Hunt at Whitman-Walker Clinic saw the homeless men living on the streets with HIV. And I saw Christ in the resilience and joy

of a client who wasn't going to let her heroin addiction or HIV get her down, who wanted me to take her picture in my office when what I really desperately needed to do was get some paperwork done for her. I've learned through my own spiritual journey and recovery from the fundamentalist Christianity of my upbringing that I've had too narrow a view of God. I've come to believe that God is in connection, and that, yes, God is love. When I view my experience through this lens, I see that God was infused throughout this crazy, awful, remarkable time. The love and concern that galvanized the gay community and those that cared about it, to create havens of caring, to organize volunteers to provide services that fed, housed, cared for and provided dignity to people who others had turned away—that was from God. The anger that fueled Act Up and other organizations that demanded that our government acknowledge HIV/AIDS and act to provide services, and to fund research—that was from God. And the connections forged through pain and grief—that was from God. I will admit that I feel much more like a bureaucrat than a social worker these days. And I'm very grateful for a new generation of people who are committed to ending the HIV epidemic and ensuring dignity and care for those living with HIV. As John noted, there are still 30,000 new HIV infections each year in the U.S. at this time; so the work is not over. HIV work is, at its core, social justice work. But it's hard to look back on the last 35 years without feeling a mixture of amazement, anguish and gratitude that I was a participant in this remarkable chapter in our history. And I believe that the consciousness that is God remembers and holds in love each of the those, like Jackie, and like Jacques, that have died as a result of this relentless virus. May their memory be a blessing. May their memory be a revolution. Amen