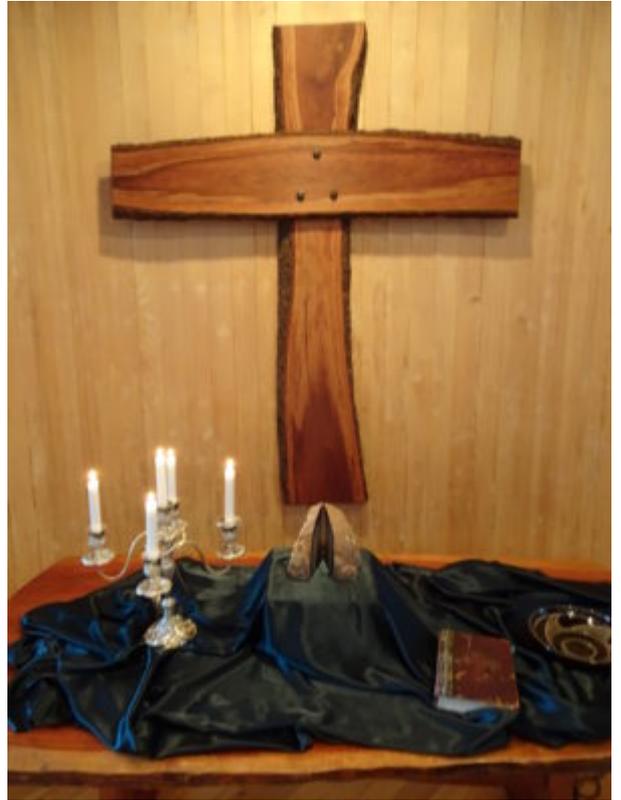


“Treasures of Darkness” by Elizabeth Gelfeld

October 22, 2017



Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Hear again the beginning of our reading today from Isaiah:

45:1 Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him— and the gates shall not be closed:

45:2 I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron,

45:3 I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name.

Now I'd like you each to find a partner – the person sitting

next to you, or maybe in front of you or behind you. When I say go, talk with your partner about what this phrase might mean: “treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places.” After you’ve all had a couple of minutes to discuss the question, I’m going to ask a few of you to share out.

Some examples from the sharing:

“Making the soil that sustains us.”

“My faith.”

“Entering recovery as a tunnel leading to centering prayer.”

“Some people speak easily about deep experience. Others, who are silent, might experience even more deeply.”

“Treasures of ultimate consciousness.”

Darkness itself is a treasure.”

Here’s some background on this passage from Isaiah.

Around the turn of the sixth century BCE, the army of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon began a siege of Jerusalem. And, in a series of deportations, many of its people were force-marched to Babylon. The last of these deportations occurred around the year 587. The kingdom of Judah was conquered, and Jerusalem and Solomon’s Temple destroyed. Many of the Hebrew people were held captive in Babylon. This time is known as the Exile.

Then, some 50 years later, in 539 BCE, the Persians conquered Babylon, and their king, Cyrus the Great, allowed the Hebrew people to return to the land of Judah, and Jerusalem.

The prophet Isaiah is known mainly as the one who foretold the coming of the Messiah. But the book of Isaiah actually contains the writings of many prophets over several different time periods. Scripture scholars agree that the middle section

of Isaiah, chapters 40 through 55, was composed during the later years of the Babylonian Exile by a prophet determined to lift the sagging spirits of the Israelites who by then had been living in the foreign capital for nearly two generations. Most of them had never seen Jerusalem. After more than 50 years in Babylon, the children and grandchildren of the original exiles had come to accept their life, and they probably did not believe that returning to Jerusalem would be worth the long, difficult journey, not to mention the work of rebuilding an entire city. Then this prophet comes along to remind them of their glorious past and their still hopeful future.

“Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, ... for the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me.”

The prophet is telling Israel, in no uncertain terms, that this announcement of Cyrus is the will of God. Get moving – go home and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. He calls Cyrus “anointed” – which is the English equivalent of the Hebrew word *mashiah*, from which we get the word “messiah.” The equivalent word in Greek *christos*, which of course in English is Christ. Hebrew priests and kings were anointed with oil, signifying their confirmation by God. Cyrus is the only non-Israelite to be called “anointed.” According to the prophets, he carried out God’s purpose of returning the Hebrew people to their land. God even leads Cyrus by the hand, and promises him “the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places,” so that he will know that it is the Lord, the God of Israel, who calls him.

The late Marcus J. Borg, a progressive Christian scholar and theologian, identified three great stories – overarching themes – that run through the entire Bible – both Hebrew and Christian scriptures. These stories are:

1. The Exodus – the story of liberation from slavery
2. The Priestly story, which is about redemption from sin and guilt
3. The story of Exile and return from Exile

I remember the “aha” moment I had, many years ago, when I read about those three great stories in Marcus Borg’s book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. The revelation for me was that, while I knew very well the first two stories – Moses and the Exodus, in the Old Testament, and, in the New Testament, Jesus as the atonement for and redeemer from sin. Those two stories were taught continually in my Sunday school. But I knew almost nothing about the Exile – it was not taught in my childhood Sunday school, possibly because it’s a complicated, messy story. And that is unfortunate, because the Exile is the great story that includes me. I’ve never been enslaved or particularly oppressed, so I can’t really connect with the Exodus story. And, while I have no trouble believing that I’m a sinner in need of redemption, the whole idea of God’s plan being to require the torture and brutal killing of God’s son in order to atone for the sins of humanity – I find that idea problematic.

But the story of Exile – the loss of home – and the slow, painful growth experienced by the Hebrew people while in exile, and then the hope and hard work of the ones who returned to their homeland – I can see myself in that story, and I know I’m not alone in that. Who among us has not experienced both pain and hope associated with home? As Ron said recently in his Circle Time prayer for Peace and Justice, and Deborah reminded us in her sermon two weeks ago, there are many ways to become homeless.

We are, after all, Seekers. We are a people on the way. At any given time, some of us are being taken from a home we loved and sent on a long journey into the unknown, while others are finding their way to new homes they never imagined. Sometimes, parts of me are going in one direction while other parts, the

other direction.

Now, for today's Gospel reading: I have no greater insight than what Dave shared today in his Word for the Children, except for Kayla McClurg's reflection on this passage. We are so fortunate – we Seekers and all the sister churches that came from the Church of the Saviour – to have Kayla's reflections on each of the Sunday Gospel readings, which, by the way, are published in three little paperback books by Inward Outward. Here is part of Kayla's reflection, titled "Give God What Is God's":

They tried to trap Jesus into saying something for which they could accuse him.

How simple Jesus' instructions are to all who will listen.

Love God

Come home to your true self in me.

Do what is yours to do.

Give away what God gives to you.

Share the good news, each one to each one.

. . .

Jesus amazes the cynical ones, dismays the critical ones, sets the crooked straight. His ways are easy. Simplify, simplify. Just two easy steps:

- Give to the rulers what belongs to the rulers;
- Give to God what is God's.

Who are your rulers? Who is your God? What do you owe each of them? Which one carries the ultimate authority in your life? To which one are you truly devoted?

Why do I tend to complicate my life, when you have already

shown me how simple the way is?