

Sermon (homily) Dec. 4th, 2016 Impossibly Possible Cara B. Hochhalter

Isaiah 11:1-10 and Matthew 3:1-12

Do you know what a “nurse log” is? I remember seeing these fallen trees from which new trees begin to grow...to be nursed into this world! This is how it works. A tree in the forest dies... woodpeckers peck holes in it, birds live in it, insects munch on it, fungus grows on it, microbes delight in it...you get the idea. Eventually, the tree weakens until it falls over...crash! This makes a space in the leaves overhead so that new sunlight is able to get down to the forest floor. And the log is now a raised platform so that when seeds happen to fall on it, they are not buried by the undergrowth.

Moss grows on the decayed tree along with leaves that compost and it becomes a perfect incubator for new trees. When seeds fall, they get nourishment from this fertile bed and trees begin to grow, then wrap their roots around the log to reach the earth below. Sometimes these new unusual trees seem to be standing on stilts as the original logs decompose. If you ever see a straight line of trees, it may be that they all grew as a colonnade from one nurse log. We saw nurse logs in the rainforests of the Northwest ... but you can find them in our woods, too!

Out of the stump, a new shoot grows.

Let us be in prayer: God of new growth, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

Just before this Isaiah passage, Isaiah proclaimed that the enemies of Israel will fall like trees, with boughs lopped off and only stumps remaining. It was probably the Assyrians he was talking about in the 8th century BCE and it was out of this destruction that we hear a message of incredible hope and new life.

“A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of the roots.”

Isaiah describes a new thing happening...that people will not judge by what we see and hear...but will be righteous with those who are poor and will “decide with equity for the meek of the earth!” With righteousness and faithfulness shall we rid the world of wickedness, and listen to this, not with violence, but Isaiah says, “with the breath of our lips!”

What? The wicked will be overcome not with weapons, but through the "breath of our lips!?" Breath is inspiration... Spiritus... from the Holy Spirit within us, we will speak with words, for justice and peace against all evil... allowing God's Word to speak through us!

Who says the Bible is not relevant to the events of our world today! Mick reminds us that the Living God meets us in these texts... and informs us for today!

Isaiah lays out this beautiful peace image that artists have painted... "the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together... and a little child shall lead them.... a little child shall lead them."

Like the calf, lamb, kid and ox, the child stands for the vulnerable... who are safe in the world at last." Paul Duke writes, "Why is it the child who leads the whole bleating, mooing, yipping, snuffling, roaring, giggling company? The new creation wants a human presence... new, bright, undefended, and free... to love and care for it all."

If children were to lead us, would we allow harm to those who are hurting already...

And so we are in this time, really, we are in this time in our world and in our nation... and in this church season, too, where we seem to be pausing, waiting to see what is going to happen... But now is the time to affirm, ever more firmly in our hearts, and through our words and prayers... that the impossible is possible. That a vision for shalom, for peaceful co-existence with people of other races, religions and national origins... is possible.... Through faithfulness and righteousness.... that we are called to live out.

Our country has been strapped with a notion of "two sides" and yet we are all in this nation together and how much better if like the lion and the lamb living together... we can imagine ways of coming together over common yearnings for what is right for all our people.

Walter Brueggemann says that Advent is the very time to look forward for this shalom, a creation time when all God's creation eases up on hostility and destruction and finds another way of relating and he calls this vision "the impossible possibility!"

Let us work to find the avenues to this kind of shalom.... now, here, together, looking into the future for one another and our nation and world. Let us be examples of this kind of love, this kind of faith, this kind of trust in a living God who meets us here and inspires us each day in the ways we respond to one another.

The impossible is possible...who would believe that out of a decomposing log, a new forest could grow? I close with some words from a poem by a friend of mine who lives in Minnesota, Karen Hering...she writes this poem for our time right now in our nation and in this thing we call Advent:

Here, ...

Here,
on the threshold
you balance
on a comma
between the no longer
and the not yet.

Now,
may you pause,
breathing in,
breathing out,
on the cusp
in between.

Now,
letting go
of attachments
and assumptions,
may you release
what you've clutched
in your fear,
making room
for the stranger...

Now,
may you listen,
one ear turned inward
tuned to your heart
and the body's knowing.
One ear turned outward
to the suffering—
and the joy—
that will teach us.

Now,
look around you
at the others
waiting with you
on the curl of this comma.
You will need them.
They will need you.

Together
we will round this bend,
cross over
into the not yet,
where,
having let go,
we might finally learn—
anything
is possible
Now,
Here,

Amen....