

Comfort When the News is Bad Message for 8th December 2019

From Psalm 72, “He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice. The mountains will bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruits of righteousness. He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor. For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help. He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death.”

Our first hymn is Green #40, “Dark of Winter”

Our readings today come from some of the earliest Quakers, including George Fox, who wrote in 1663 at a time of great persecution: “Sing and rejoice, ye Children of the Day and of the Light; for the Lord is at work in this thick night of Darkness that may be felt: and Truth doth flourish as the rose, and the lilies do grow among the thorns, and the plants atop of the hills, and upon them the lambs doth skip and play. And never heed the tempests nor the storms, floods nor rains, for the Seed Christ is over all and doth reign. And so, be of good faith and valiant for the Truth.”

Robert Barclay wrote in 1678, “We do distinguish betwixt the certain knowledge of God and the uncertain, betwixt the spiritual knowledge and the literal, the saving heart-knowledge and the soaring airy head-knowledge. The last, we confess, may be by divers ways obtained; but the first, by no other way than the inward immediate manifestation and revelation of God’s Spirit, shining in and upon the heart, enlightening and opening the understanding.”

A final reading reflects our opening hymn and comes from William Penn in the 1694 preface to *The Journal of George Fox*: “Remember, it is a still voice that speaks to us in this day, and that it is not to be heard in the noises and hurries of the mind. Jesus

loved and chose solitudes, often going to mountains, to gardens, and seashores to avoid crowds and hurries to show his disciples it was good to be solitary and sit loose to the world.”

Our second hymn is red #147 “Come Down, O Love Divine”

Joys and Concerns---then music interlude

Dear Friends—In the swirling snow, the ice, the storm of demands and activities and expectations, the gloom of disappointment and the fear of bad actors and worse consequences, the threats both social and personal--come down, o Love divine! Let us find the cozy haven, the warm light of the advent candles, the comfort and quiet of a safe winter’s evening, the brightness of a snowy day. In the presence of troubling news and disturbing voices, at the times we cannot sleep, release us from our fretting minds and our efforts to puzzle through the narrow way. Lead us to the expanse of Spirit and the heart-knowledge of love. Let us welcome the prophet of love and the birth of hope each day, in each moment, through direct insight, engagement, connection. Make us valiant for the truth when times are hard. Amen.

Our third hymn is green #53 “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus”

Children may now head downstairs for time with each other.

Message: Dear Friends, I received an email message this past week from the Michigan Poor People’s Campaign that opened, “Dear Beautiful Faith Leader—We invite you to join places of worship on the weekend of December 6th to 8th 2019 celebrating Universal Human Rights Day on December 10th. As a faith leader we thank you for recognizing the sacredness of water for all.” My regular movement between the great lake state and the finger lakes, where in both cases water is abundant, and the beauty of a well-watered landscape is fundamental to local culture, makes this call

for recognizing the sacredness of water for all, more poignant. Just this past week, the collapse of an embankment at an old industrial site along the Detroit River raised new fears regarding drinking water along the connecting flow between the amazing and vast shining waters of Lake Huron and Lake Erie. Industrial farming and algae blooms threaten our beautiful finger lakes, and in the environmental conference in Spain, the issue of depleted oxygen in our oceans, our common oceans for all on this planet, was also raised this week. And yet, our worship is not based on issues, our coming together is not about a campaign or fact finding, nor in that kind or style of thinking, as Robert Barclay, George Fox, and William Penn all note in our readings this morning. Somewhere and in some way, these blessed real waters and the sacred Living water are one, are not mutual metaphors, and all must be kept pure and protected and flow as a universal right to all living things.

“Dear Beautiful Faith Leaders”. That letter does invite us to pray, but not out of desperation, not out of giving up, nor as a last resort, but as part of a different dimension of life and experience, about a foundation where faith is not naïve, nor is it powerless. Actually, it is essential to our truly knowing one another, to truly sharing this time and this earth. Just as Psalm 72 puts the afflicted and the needy at the focal point of the sacred, water is there too, along with the universal declaration of human rights. We are already deep into winter, into the darkness, and perhaps, like George Fox, in more than one way into a thick night of Darkness that may be felt. Craig keeps challenging me about why we are not right now down on the border with those children, or finding those that have been brought up here to our area, and that is an even harder call to fail to fulfill when I work now adjacent to a reservation and a town that was home to what was called an Indian Industrial School. It is where the U.S. government in the twentieth century was very intentionally kidnapping children from their parents in order to disrupt and destroy their cultural and spiritual heritage. That school closed in 1937, and the community is still dealing with the

aftermath of that trauma. But it is also where this past month I have been working with the senior vice president of Sesame Street in Communities from New York City in connection with that history as well as with the work we are doing with the local tribe and Michigan's rural north on the consequences of opioid addiction, especially as it relates to the lives and growth and understanding of children. Is that the cool dipper of water that I can offer? The lily among the thorns? The light of Advent? The long-expected Jesus?

What do we do when the news is bad? The prophet many read at this time of year who wrote that "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young." Continued that "He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak...they will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." Our activism and resistance and understanding of the world's challenges must ever be strengthened, but we must balance that energy with William Penn's reminder that there is also time for contemplation and solitude, for reflection to sit loose with the world and not be consumed by it. That there are those things that are part of our time--and Advent and the coming Light is part of the fulness of time, the endless returning cycles.

Documents and calls like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are the modern truths, the modern scriptures, if you will, that seek to link the people, the individuals living today, with the eternal, with the ongoing revelation of life's meaning. I think that in some ways, that is also what is happening in Madrid now with the climate crisis talks. This is how our society produces prophecy today, through a form of collective wisdom, through the rise of powerful voices like that of a sixteen-year-old girl, through an ongoing Poor People's Campaign that seeks to speak for and to us. There are sacred calls to answer in our day and time, both

individual and collective. God is still speaking. And so is trouble and heartache and challenge, so is despair and greed and evil, and we must provision for the distance, for the long haul, for the never completed struggle, with a faith, that the needy and afflicted will be delivered. What is amazing is that for the Religious Society of Friends, in some ways that faith is also the proof. We don't externalize the experience of God, we don't wait on or rely on others to tell us what may be required of us, but together we seek to know it and feel it fundamentally and irresistibly together.

This past month, another prophetic revelation came with the work of renewing after six years the Friends Committee on National Legislation policy document called "The World We Seek". It holds, as does the universal declaration and the messages of past Quakers and the passages of scripture, not only the thought and analysis and recommendations in language of what we are called to do, but the Spirit within, and between, and among those words. In each of our lives, whatever trouble or difficulty or distraction comes, we continue to strive and know Life. We pray for the water that will quench our thirst and the thirst of all, and we look to the cycles and the seasons, the rhythms and repetitions of the seasons and the world. The hope that is Advent, the return of Light in the dark of winter, the haven from despair that is this, and every, community of faith in each other, faith that there is and can be a larger goodness, comfort when the news is bad. Prepare ye the way of the Lord.

Closing hymn is green #241 "Lady of the Seasons' Laughter"

I always enjoy passing the church building in Ithaca that is wrapped in the words of Matthew 11: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."