

Jeff's Reflection – Jan 23, 2022

Sometimes we are surprised to discover what is already there.

A family in St. John, New Brunswick decided to begin this new year of 2022 by doing some basement renovations. They knew that there was some kind of mural painted on one of the walls in a storage room in the basement, but the mural was largely obscured behind boxes and the other 'stuff' that collects in basement storage rooms.

When Jen Parker, the owner of the house, cleared away that stuff, she discovered a beautiful painting measuring slightly more than one metre by one metre in size.

The painting was a hand-painted depiction of Simms Corner, a well-known neighbourhood in the city's west end. The painting depicts several large red buildings of the Centra-care Psychiatric Hospital as well as the white buildings of the Simms paintbrush factory. Neither building now exists.

Parker doesn't know when the painting was made, or who was the artist. She is attempting to find out. Several people have inquired if they can get prints of the painting.

Most of us probably haven't had discoveries as dramatic as finding a mural behind boxes. But many of us may have had the experience of coming across an old photo, or a story we wrote when we were in elementary school, or a letter received decades ago – discoveries that may remind us of the past, remind us of friendships and relationships, remind us of who we were then.

In the Biblical book of 2 Kings, we are told of a dramatic discovery of something from the past, something that reminded the people of who they were in the past, and of who they were meant to be in their present.

King Josiah of Judah had decided to repair the temple in Jerusalem. During the renovations, a book was found. The story doesn't say specifically that this book was found behind a wall, or even that it was uncovered by the renovation, but while the renovations were underway, a priest, named Hilkiah, said he had found the book of the Law in the temple. Hilkiah passed the book along to the king's administrative person, Shaphan, who read the book to the king.

According to 2 Kings, "having heard the words of the Book of the Law," King Josiah tore his robes. The king gathered all the elders and leaders and initiated a reform movement. What had been found reminded the king that they were God's people, that they lived in relation to God, and that their lives and society were to be shaped by God's Law, God's commandments, God's vision for their society.

Scholars think it likely that the book that was found was a version of what we know as the Biblical book of Deuteronomy – a book that tells of Moses leading through the

wilderness the people freed from Pharaoh's exploitive and oppressive rule in Egypt. The people spent years in the wilderness while they underwent a kind of 'detox' from the dehumanizing spirit of the economy of Pharaoh – an economy that said they should produce, produce, produce while Pharaoh would accumulate, accumulate, accumulate; an economy that said to these people 'you are cogs in the machinery of Pharaoh's wealth and power. That is your identity!'

There seemed to be no way to survive in the wilderness but they discovered manna, stuff that appeared on the ground; stuff they could gather and eat, but stuff they could not accumulate and store – God told to take only what they needed for that day (the exception being one day a week they could take what they needed for two days so that they did not gather on Sabbath).

And in that wilderness, Moses and the people received commandments – God told them that they couldn't just do what they wanted, they couldn't just live as they wanted, they had to live in relation to God and in relation to one another. They were not to give allegiance to other gods – like Pharaoh and Pharaoh's economic system – and they were not to murder, or to take other people's property or livelihood, they were not to steal, they were not to falsely accuse others, and they were to keep Sabbath – they were to intentionally not work 24/7, the way Pharaoh had them work in Egypt.

In this story from 2 Kings, King Josiah hears the book of the Law read, and the words shake him and he tears his clothes, a sign of repentance, of saying "we've got it wrong and we have to change" – and then orders the idols and altars and rituals connecting to all sorts of other gods and other commandments, to be removed, destroyed, cleared out.

The king realized that it wasn't enough to renovate some buildings and the temple. They had to renovate their lives, their faith, their practices, their understanding of who they were as people living in relation to God and in relation to each other.

The re-emergence of this old book meant the emergence of a new imagination for living.

Now let us move from that reading of scripture to today's gospel reading from Luke.

After being baptized, Jesus had gone into the wilderness – into that place that Moses and the people had gone into after leaving Egypt. Jesus went into the wilderness, the place his faith tradition imagined as a place in which to encounter God, where one was shaped to live in relation to God and to others, the place from which you emerged with a new imagination for living.

Leaving the wilderness, Jesus returned to Galilee. In the various villages and communities he talked about God. People who heard Jesus said that he was awakening hope and new imagination in their hearts.

Then he arrived in his hometown of Nazareth. He went to the synagogue, to the gathering of people to worship, to listen to scripture, to discuss their faith.

Jesus was invited to read the scripture for that day, and he was handed a scroll containing words from the prophet Isaiah, and he read these words:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of God’s favour.”

Then Jesus rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the person who had given it to him, and then he sat down. The people looked to Jesus and waited for him to say something, probably expecting him to say something about the words he had just read.

What Jesus said was “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

The book of the prophet Isaiah dated back several hundred years, to the time of the Persian Empire’s conquest of Judah, to the exile of some Jewish citizens taken from Jerusalem to live in Babylon, in a foreign place, a different culture, amongst people worshipping other gods.

The passage read by Jesus came from a section of Isaiah in which the prophet assured the people that the exile was not forever, that Jerusalem will be restored, “they will rebuild the ancient ruins and...renew the ruined cities.”

The prophet spoke in the poetic, imaginative language typical of the prophets, reaffirming that God cared, that God had good news for the poor – those who had lost so much; that those held captive, those separated from all they loved, would be released; that the blind, those who dwelt in darkness, those who could see no light, no hope, would regain sight, would see again the glory of their home; that the oppressed would finally be free and that the year of God’s favour, the year of Jubilee would ensure a time in which debts were forgiven, land returned, and a new beginning offered to the community.

For the writer of Luke’s gospel, these words from an ancient prophet were to be reheard as words about Jesus, and what God was up to in the life of Jesus.

When Jesus read those words in Nazareth, he was reading them to a people who were not in exile, but they were living in a now occupied land. Judah was under the rule of the Roman Empire. Coins displayed the image of the emperor, designated as ‘son of God’. The Roman military could quell any disturbance. Taxation burdened the village people. They wanted to be free. They wanted their land back. They wanted good news that God had would restore their land and their freedom.

None of that seemed likely to happen or to be fulfilled by the son of Joseph and Mary - the child of one of their own oppressed and poor - reading some old words to a small

worshipping community. None that of that may seem likely to us today in a world in which so many throughout the world are still poor, oppressed and burdened.

But 2,000 years later there are people throughout this world who come back to the stories about Jesus, the stories told by Jesus, the faith Jesus expressed in talking about the kingdom of God – we come back because as unlikely as it may have seemed or still seem, in this Jesus we do somehow encounter God present in this world.

When Jesus read from that scroll in the synagogue in Nazareth, people may have hoped that God would do something dramatic and definitive and get rid of the Roman Empire; drive the legions from their land, melt the emperor's images from their coins, defeat THEM and do what Moses said to Pharaoh, "Set my people free."

It didn't happen...what did happen, was Jesus living and relating to people in a way that began to change people's perceptions of the world. I suggest that Jesus lived in his world as if it was God's world, but that Jesus knew that God was not a god of violence, that God was not going to deal with armies by sending a bigger and better army, that God was not going to bring peace by slaughtering all the people who didn't want God's version of peace. I suggest that Jesus lived from a belief that God is not going to just wave a wand and make everything be different, but that God was going to be with people as they lived into God's way of living, that God is going to be with people as we live into God's way of living.

So, Jesus welcomed people. Jesus welcomed Zacchaeus, the tax-collector, who was the front-runner for the title of 'most unpopular person' in Jericho. Zacchaeus was the person with whom Jesus wanted to dine, the one to whose house Jesus wanted to be invited as a guest.

Jesus welcomed the theological critique of a woman of Samaria when she challenged Jesus' personal mission statement about having been sent solely to the children of Israel.

Jesus was accused of welcoming, socializing with sinners and undesirables. Yet, Jesus kept welcoming and socializing until people began to suspect that there were no undesirables as far as God was concerned.

Jesus told people that their faith, their trust in God's compassion, meant that healing could come to them. Not everyone in the world who was blind could suddenly see, but there were moments when healing happened – moments when people walked, when people saw. There were also moments when people now saw someone whom before they had seen only as a sinner, an undesirable - now saw them as a child of God, as another human being of God's creation, as a bearer of something sacred.

Have faith, Jesus said. Trust. Trust that this is God's world. Trust that everything is somehow bound up with God. Trust that at the heart of creation is a loving heart. Trust that there is a conspiracy hidden in creation, in the universe, a conspiracy on our behalf,

a conspiracy of a holy, sacred love that wants to be let loose in our lives and in this world.

Trust that everything and everyone lives in God.

Hildegard of Bingen, a German Benedictine abbess who lived from the year 1098 to 1179, wrote:

“Everything that is in the heaven and on the earth and under the earth is penetrated with connectedness, penetrated with relatedness...God has arranged everything in the universe in consideration of everything else.”

Climate change should be awakening us to an ancient wisdom that everything is related, that how humans treat the air and the water and the soil affects humans as well as the air, water and soil. Indigenous societies have always known that creation must be respected, must be cared for, that we are part of creation, not just users or consumers of creation.

King Josiah heard the words of the ancient law, the words of the old book of Deuteronomy and realized that society needed a reboot, that they needed to reengage with practices of being good neighbours, of ensuring that that the most vulnerable in society were welcomed and honoured in society.

Jesus read ancient words from the prophet Isaiah and said that those words were not just old words about what God was doing once upon a time. Those words were being fulfilled as Jesus read them. These words were relevant then and now, because God is present now, because God permeates everything with connectedness, because all of us are related through God's love.

I think one reason church communities gather for worship, whether we can do it in-person or online, is to hear the old stories, the old words, the old testaments telling of God's presence, and we rediscover that those old stories and words and testaments are new words and stories and testaments because God THEN is God NOW.

Church communities are multi-faceted and multi-gifted, but one way of thinking of churches is to think of them as recovery centres, as communities in which we recover the wonder and healing and holiness of those stories that now awaken our imaginations and faith to perceive ourselves and our world differently, and to open ourselves to the healing spirit of God in our midst, and in that imaginative recovery to enter into a new conversation, partnership, relationship with God; one that awakens us to new practices and new ways of living out the depths of God's love in our world.

I think that the scriptures we hear tell us of God's love leading people into more just and inclusive and welcoming ways of shaping their communities and societies. I think the scriptures give us faith, imagination and courage to create and shape more just and inclusive and welcoming communities today. We are constantly rediscovering that we are all expressions of God's love, all expressions of God's creation.

The Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, tells of once being on a retreat in Italy. He saw olive trees growing in bunches. There were three or four trees that seemed to have been planted very close together. He asked one of the retreat hosts why the trees were planted so closely together. The person replied that one year there had been a severe frost that had killed the trees. However, the tree roots were still alive in the ground. When the trees resprouted, they emerged from the ground in clusters. What looked like three or four trees was actually one tree with three or four trunks.

We are all rooted in the love of God. While we appear to be separate, we are all one people, one human family, one community of creation rooted in God's creative spirit.

Let us continue to listen to the stories of our faith, prepared to again and again be surprised as we discover that what is there in those stories, is the love of God in which we remain grounded, rooted and blessed.

Let us continue to attend to the stories of faith, to rediscover that we live in the continuing story of God's love. Thanks be to God. AMEN