

Jeff's reflection:

The New Creed of The United Church of Canada says, "We are not alone. We live in God's world."

I think those words are a concise and insightful summary of the consistent and defining message of the Bible - of the stories, the commandments, the prayers, psalms, and letters that comprise the Bible.

'We are not alone. We live in God's world.'

We are not alone – creeds are meant to be read, remembered, recited often to ensure we regularly have exposure to a faith perspective that is not always evident or seemingly present in our lives, in our world:

a faith perspective that streams through the Judaic and Christian scriptures and stories, a faith perspective that proclaims that the agent, the presence, the power, the One we call God, is faithful, is devoted to this creation that God has created; that reminds us that if we try to describe God in one word, we keep coming back to the word 'love'.

'Love' – we keep coming back to that word – God is love and those who live in love live in God.

We keep coming back to 'love'; but when it comes to God, even that word 'love' seems inadequate – God loves- but it's not the love of romantic fiction, it's maybe more like the love of parents for their children, if we can start to conceive of all creation – of everything - as being God's children.

God is love, God is faithful, God is both tenderly and fiercely devoted to loving, being in relationship with, belonging in and to and with creation!

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This faith perspective means that when we read scriptures, when we read these stories and psalms and letters written about encounters with God, about what God is up to in the world, we are reading about God who is still up to something in the world. We are not reading about a character who lived a long time ago and now is just a character in history books. We are reading about God who is in history today.

I think that both of today's scripture readings – one from the prophet Isaiah who lived in the 8th century BCE and one from the Gospel of Luke in the first century CE - are about this living, active, present God.

I like the way the Isaiah passage begins:

"But NOW, thus says the Lord" - Now, right now, at this time in history , NOW God has something to say..

Isaiah reminds the people of Judah- it is God, who created you, who formed you, God who birthed you: God who says to you NOW: Do not be afraid, I have redeemed (saved) you....I have called you by name!!”

And then the prophet creatively, brilliantly, connects God of THEN with God of NOW.

God says “when you pass through the waters’ - remember THEN- then when God led the people out of Pharoah’s Egypt, then when the people passed through the waters safely and the waters parted and their enemies could no longer pursue them. THEN God was with them – THEN- and now – when you pass through the waters, I will be with you, they shall not overwhelm you.
AS THEN...SO NOW.

Isaiah says, ‘Remember what God has done, not just as a way of remembering what God did, but as an assurance of what God does, still does, will do, NOW”.

You are not alone. You live in God’s world.

But NOW...now God is with you, with us.

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The prophet told the people that they could trust God to be with them...they could expect God to be present and active.

That is the faith stance of the people who came to listen to John the Baptizer in the passage we have today from the Gospel of Luke.

It begins, “As the people were filled with expectation....”

The people were expecting...expectant...waiting for God to do something, for God to fix the world, for God to birth something new, for God to free them from the rule of the Roman Empire and give them back the land...

So they came to John – out in the wilderness, calling for repentance, for people and systems to change, calling for a reimagining of the way the world should be...

They came to John, dressed in his camel skin, probably somewhat reminiscent in dress, in style, in being a kind of abrasive holy person – of Elijah, one of the great prophets of THEN... could John be for the people the prophet of NOW?

Could John be the Messiah? – a word that means the anointed one – the one chosen by God to initiate a new era, a new beginning. God had anointed kings, and prophets.

Was John the newest, the new Messiah, anointed one, appointed one of God?

John answers their expectation, their question, by telling them that God of the Then, the then of past anointed ones – kings and prophets – the God of Now – the God of John baptizing and stirring people's imaginations and expectations – is the God of Yet to be – that there is another who is coming says John, another who is more powerful, who will baptize not with water but with the Holy Spirit...and with fire.

So God was active, was doing, was birthing, was creating...

So THEN...and NOW?

As we begin the year 2022, begin a new year, we do so recalling and proclaiming and trusting that we are not alone, we live in God's world...

And so, we begin a new year as participants in a faith perspective that proclaims that this new year is a new year of God with us, God in our midst, God active, God as love...

Which is, I think, gospel – good news with which to go into a new year...and which, I think, is also bad news, or, if not bad news, challenging news, because if God isn't done with being God, with bringing newness to birth, with creating, with loving...

then God is not done with us -not done with being with us - but also not done with creating us to be people who are with God.

And that brings me back to both of today's readings, and to what I hear as disturbing expectations in both passages.

Isaiah says that God will be with the people of Judah, just as God has been with the people in the past, in Exodus, in liberation, in beginning anew. God says, "I have called you by name, you are mine" – a promise of God's abiding faithfulness to this relationship. God knows these people and God will not abandon them.

Yet, these words of promise are followed by words that are anything but promising for the people who are not the people of Judah. Isaiah says that God says, "I will give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you."

Which seems to me to give us God saying, 'People are a little like sports cards, and I will trade away some in order to have you. So I will give Egypt as a ransom – if someone has to get dropped from the top tier of my love, then it can be Egypt and Ethiopia and Seba . You are more important to me than they are.'

I can understand how the people of Judah would be heartened by this. We all like to be told that we are the favourite and that we are the player that has a no-trade clause...

But it also lends itself to nations settling into a posture of exceptionalism – of privilege in the eyes and heart of God – of special compensation. Living in Canada, we perhaps

are most aware of this posture today as we listen to political elections and speeches in our neighbour the United States, where, it seems to me, no matter what political party a candidate might belong to, if a person wants to get elected president they have to emphasize the exceptionalism of the USA, the 'not-only-expectation' but duty and destiny of that country to be the world 'leader' the world 'power' the one that God favours, the chosen land.

From Isaiah, we move to our gospel passage, as John tells people about the one more powerful who will be coming – to baptize with the Holy Spirit- that sounds promising- but also to separate and divide people, to gather the wheat into the granary, and to burn the chaff – the stuff you strip away from the seed, the stuff that you don't need, that has no market worth. The Anointed One of God will see that the worthless don't get into the granary.

If our story stopped with John, we might be expecting God to send someone whom we can only hope picks us for the granary.

John says there is someone coming who is more powerful than I am; but in Jesus we get a definition of 'power' that contrasts to the power of the then ruling Roman Empire. The power Jesus embodied was not a power to divide and conquer, but a power to love and bless and heal.

Jesus spent most of his time with those who would have been considered amongst the least powerful of his day – those who fished to survive day to day; those who could not fish or work or contribute any labor, who could not earn a wage – those whose bodies wouldn't allow them to – those who were blind, those who were lame, those who couldn't move, those who daily lived with inner torment and who seemed to be possessed by a power, a despair, an anxiety that seemed to control them.

Jesus spoke about the kingdom of heaven as a community in which everyone ends up getting invited to the banquet. If we speak of the granary of heaven rather than the kingdom of heaven, we find that there is no chaff that is not invited into the granary.

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The good news is that this is God's world, and God is with us...the disturbing news is that amongst the human creatures of God's world there continues to be attitudes and practices and systems and perspectives that divide people into wheat and chaff, into those who are welcomed and those who are discarded, into those who are exceptional and those who are expendable, into those who are loved and those who don't matter in the end.

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And so we live with a faith perspective that says we should expect, during this coming year, that God will continue to treat us like a baker treats dough, kneading us, stretching us, shaping us, to be more loving, more welcoming, more good-neighbourly, more compassionate.

And so we live with a faith perspective that says that whatever this new year brings – whatever changing health orders, whatever climate changes, whatever sharing of food, whatever joys and whatever sorrows ... God is with us. God goes with us through the waters and pandemics and storms that would overwhelm us, God goes with us as we work out ways to welcome more and more into God's granary, God's kingdom, as guests at God's table.

We go into 2022 trusting that:

We are not alone. We live in God's world.

Thanks be to God. AMEN