

December 4, 2011 / Second Sunday of Advent / David L. Edwards

### **What Sort of Persons? What Sort of Community?**

Isaiah 40:1-9                    *...surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the word of our God will stand forever.*

2 Peter 3:8-15a                    *Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way,  
what sort of persons ought you to be...?*

Reading the portion from 2 Peter this week, I found my attention drawn to these words: *Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God...?* This led me to think about things that don't really matter, that have no real substance or lasting meaning, the harmful, or superficial aspects of our culture to which we become so attached. We are, for example, now in what has become the season of gross materialism. How sick we have become is made clear by the trampling, fighting, and pepper spraying Black Friday shoppers. We live in a sick society that tends to make us sick unless we are vigilant about our own lives.

Try this as an aspect of your inward journey work. Take some time regularly to reflect on the things to which you are attached, the things that seem to give your life meaning. Look more deeply into them, and discover to what extent your attachments might be the cause of your unhappiness or anger or anxiety. In the same way, look at the dominant values of our society and world. Just observe them, see into them, weigh their true importance and meaning. This is a good spiritual exercise, taking stock of the illusions, distractions, and attachments that bind up our lives and spirits. They keep us from living freely, lovingly, compassionately, and giving ourselves to our most deeply felt call.

All of these things will be dissolved, says the writer, who is speaking to late first century Christian communities. The communities are dealing with the challenges of living by the spirit and teachings of Jesus in cultures hostile to that way of life. And these communities are longing for God's promised reign, when things will be made right. The expected return of Christ has not happened. The writer wants people to see that what matters is how they live in the present, while still holding the long-range hope for God's

coming reign, what the writer calls the “new heavens and a new earth”. As bad as things may seem, and indeed are, the issue for Jesus' followers is always the same: What sorts of persons, what sort of community, will we be?

The writer glimpses a deep truth that runs through all great spiritual traditions. The world, the universe is always dissolving, always dying, always in transition from birth to death to re-birth. Change is the very nature of life. A central spiritual lesson is learning to let go, to live openly and in trust. Jesus taught that if we try to hold onto our lives, we lose them. If we lose them, or let them go, we gain them. In the writer's view, we discover the sort of persons we are to be by starting with the understanding that all things fade away. We are part of a much larger picture than the present forms of things.

Years ago I read an interview with the writer Isabelle Allende. She had just gone through the death of her adult daughter and was asked how it had affected her. Allende responded that the experience had taught her that life is about learning to lose everything. It is about letting go. It is about seeing our attachments, and letting them go, as painful as it may be. That is a hard word for us to hear. Yet it is the reality of our lives.

A friend once showed me the tattoo he had just gotten. It was a small black dot on his wrist, to remind him of his death. There have been orders of monks, Christian and otherwise, that would place a human skull outside their caves so that they would be reminded every day that we fade away like the grass, as Psalm 85 says. This is not about being morbid or obsessed with death. It is about drawing nearer to what it means to be truly alive.

Given all of this, what kind of persons will we be? Will we continue to hold onto things that don't matter, that give us only a false sense of security? Will we continue to hold onto our prejudices, our judgments about others, our tendencies treat as enemies any who don't agree with us or do the things we think they should do? Will we, in grandiose style, simply assert our egos in the face of what feels like annihilation, grabbing as much power, wealth, attention as we can? Or will we learn a different way to live?

Since all of this is to be dissolved, what sorts of persons are we to be? Christian scriptures, including Jesus' teachings, are primarily about what sorts of persons we are to be, as individuals and in community. Jesus' teachings are centered on repentance, calling people to change the way they see things, the way they think, the way they live, to become the people God created them to be, living out of God's realm, God's dream for the earth and humanity. The Indian Jesuit therapist and spiritual writer Anthony De

Mello, drawing from his Hindu/Buddhist culture, says that repentance means waking up, becoming fully aware ... waking up from the illusions and distractions ...waking up to the persons God created us to be. The world changes, society changes, structures change as the people in them become changed. It is NOT about making everyone Christian in the sense of religion. It is about becoming truly human the way God made us to be. That is what Jesus was about, not religion.

The writer describes two ways of walking this path toward our true personhood. First, there is “leading lives of holiness and godliness”. Those words sound “old school”, like having a “holier-than-thou” attitude. We have had enough of personal piety that is world-denying, that leads us to despise our humanity or distance us from the needs of the world. However, holiness and godliness can mean living with awareness of God and God's love in every dimension of our lives—the world of nature, other people, ourselves. It can mean returning to (repentance?) and cultivating something we were all born with—an inner receptivity and responsiveness to that Presence and Power that is at the heart of all life, which we call God. The Children Worship & Wonder program is about acknowledging that young children already have that inner connectedness or awareness. What we need to do is provide them a safe space and the stories that support them in deepening and exploring that relationship.

Then the writer says, “waiting for and hastening the day of God”. How can waiting hasten anything? These things—waiting and hastening—are joined in a very intriguing way. It is one of those spiritual anchovies that wakes up your taste buds. (E.B. White used this image to describe certain sentences in Thoreau's *WALDEN*, a book that White loved dearly.)

It is so important for us to fully understand and practice waiting as part of the spiritual life, the life of faith. The psalms are shot through with it, and the gospels and letters are also sprinkled with the necessity and importance of waiting. Waiting is not “doing nothing”. It is becoming watchful, attentive, insightful, really seeing what is going on in oneself and around us. It is being as awake to God's presence and movements as we can be. It means becoming open—open minds, open hearts. It involves learning to be quiet, to let all our words and thoughts quiet down so that we become AWARE of God in us and around us, and so that we get insight and deeper understanding. This kind of waiting enables us to hear, to discern, what we are called to be and do.

This is an amazing sentence the writer has put together. It is a question, and yet also a declaration. What sort of persons and community are we to be? We are those

endeavoring to live with awareness of the sacred dimension of life, including our own lives. As dishonoring and destructive as others may be in the ways they live, we commit ourselves to the way of honoring others, the earth, and ourselves, all as God's good creation. And we are those learning to wait, and in this kind of watchful, attentive, receptive waiting, we are making room for God and God's spirit, wisdom, direction, and power. We are hastening the reign of God, beginning with our own lives. That is the declarative part of the sentence.

Yet the writer leaves the question open for us. Striving to follow Jesus, living in holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening God's full reign, what sorts of persons, what sort of community, will be be? In *Children Worship & Wonder*, at the end of one of God's stories, the story teller asks what are called "wondering questions". These are not meant to be talked about or answered by the children. They are to leave each child wondering, seeking, contemplating within her or his own heart and mind. The writer of *Second Peter* is asking a wondering question. We are left to reflect on and seek our own answers each and every day.

All of this is what this community has tried to be about from the beginning—taking responsibility for our own lives and faith, always asking ourselves, "What sort of persons will we be?" It comes back to each of us and us together as a community. Given the hope that God, the very Power and Source of life, is bringing about a "new heavens and a new earth where righteousness is at home", we are called to live our lives now in that way. It is the way of compassion, peacefulness with each other and the earth, just and right relationships, and love that is non-clinging, not grasping or controlling. In spite of how discouraging things may be, how badly or irresponsibly others may act, we are called and free to choose the sort of persons, the sort of community we will be.

I have developed a certain practice of my own in recent years. When I find myself getting upset with others, distraught about the condition of our society or world, frustrated because others aren't, in my view, working with their commitments, I take that as a sign that it is time to go back to my own practice, my own life, to face once again the question, "What sort of person am I to be?" There are certainly things we are called to do to change life around us for the better. Ultimately, however, the one thing we can change for certain is ourselves and the way we live. And that is where we are always to be working.