

December 7, 2014 / Second Sunday of Advent / David L. Edwards

### **What Sort of Persons Are We to Be?**

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...?*

We don't know for certain who wrote the Second Letter of Peter. Was it the apostle himself, writing in the years prior to his execution in Rome? The letter has the tone of someone near the end of life, imparting what is felt to be most important, most essential, for others to remember and know. Or was it penned after Peter's death by someone in the community in Rome who was close to him? It was an accepted practice to write under the name of someone else to lend authority to what was written, and to honor the one in whose name the writing was done. We do know that the letter was written and sent to the various Christian communities scattered around the Roman provinces.

Our reading for today comes at the close of the letter, and it speaks of ultimate hope. The writer has reminded the communities that in Jesus God has given them *everything needed for life and godliness* (1:3), including the power and strength to resist being overcome by the corruption of the world around them (1:4). The letter has warned of challenges to the faithfulness of the communities, and voices encouragement and hope so that they remain centered on what is true and most important. I find this small book very timely for us, as we work with how to keep focused on the spirit and teachings of Jesus in a society and culture so full of violence, hate, fear, materialism, and greed.

My attention was drawn especially 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* (3:11)? This leads 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 attached, which affect us simply because we are bombarded by them day in and day out. We are now in what has become the season of gross materialism. Wealth, money, and consumerism seem to shape *the sort of persons* we are. We are also a violent culture, awash in guns and racial fear and hate. There is a dominant spirit of individualism and self-centeredness that disregards our responsibility to love and care for one another and the creation.

There are so many people we do not hear about, who are working everywhere for justice, peace, and compassion. And yet, we must acknowledge that we live in a very sick society that makes us sick unless we are spiritually grounded and vigilant.

An important part of our inward journey work is to become aware of the things to which we are attached, the things that are affecting and shaping our spirits. Looking more deeply into them, we discover to what extent our attachments are the cause of our unhappiness or anger or anxiety. We also can look at the dominant values of our society and world. We can see into them and through them, weigh their true importance and meaning. This is a good spiritual exercise, taking stock of the illusions, distractions, and attachments that bind up and misdirect our lives and spirits. These are the things Jesus calls us to let go of, or die to, as we follow him in the way of our true life.

*All of these things will be dissolved*, says the writer, who is speaking to late first century Christian communities that are dealing with the challenges of living by the spirit and teachings of Jesus in a culture hostile to that way of life. They were longing for God's promised reign, when things would finally be made right. The expected return of Christ had not happened. The writer wanted people to see that what matters is that they live now the reign of God's love, while holding the long-range hope for ultimate and complete fulfillment, 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? In a culture, a human world lost in obsessions, delusions, and illusions, we are called to live according to what matters most, what is lasting and life-giving.

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. In Buddhism and other Eastern-born spiritual traditions, it is called impermanence. It is part of our Jewish/Christian tradition. The reading from Isaiah 40 says: *The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass*. 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 view of the writer of Second Peter, we begin 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 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.

Given all of this, what kind of persons will we be? Will we continue to hold onto things that do not matter, that give us only a fleeting joy or sense of security? Will we continue to hold onto our prejudices, our judgments about others, our tendencies to treat as enemies those who do not agree with us or do the things we think they should not do? Will we continue to assert our egos in the face of what feels like annihilation, grabbing as much power, wealth, attention as we can? Will we continue to try and hold onto people, attached to them by our expectations or needs, with a love based on what we want or think we need from others? Or can we find the new way of life, of love that is not based on grasping and holding onto, but letting go and not possessing?

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 of God they already are, 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 our true humanity. 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.

The writer speaks of 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 religious piety that is world-denying, that leads us to despise our humanity or distance us from the needs, or the delights, of the world. However, true holiness and godliness means living with awareness of God and God's love in every dimension of our lives—the world of nature, other people, ourselves. It means 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. Our Children Worship & Wonder program affirms that young children already have that inner connectedness and awareness. We need to provide them a safe space and the stories that help them explore and deepen that relationship. And as we are with children in this way, they lead us back to our true life, to the kingdom of God.

Then the writer says, *waiting for and hastening the day of God*. Last week I spoke about the

scriptural understanding of “waiting,” that it is active, not passive. Here it is again. These things—waiting and hastening—are joined in a very intriguing way. 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 let our activity, words, emotions, 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.

What sorts 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. We are those learning to wait, the kind of watchful, attentive, receptive waiting that makes room for God and God's spirit, wisdom, direction, and power. When we are doing this, we are hastening the reign of God, beginning with our own lives.

The writer leaves the question open for us. What sorts of persons, what sort of community, will we 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.

I have developed a particular 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 are not, in my view, doing what they should be doing, I know that it is time to go back to my own practice, my own life, to work with the question, *What sort of person am I to be?* There are certainly things God is calling us 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. I think that is part of what the writer of Second Peter was getting at.