

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-Two, Number Three (February 2021)

"What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how."
(W. Wordsworth, from "The Prelude")

NOTES FROM READERS

>>What you think<<

I sense signs of hope on the horizon in these pandemic times. Leaders who follow public health and science guidance. Vaccines that protect more and more of our fellow travelers. Economic assistance for those most in need. And yet, I also witness just a few blocks from our campus in Minneapolis the stirrings of anger and protest as the trial of Derek Chauvin gets underway. I see continued economic injustice. I see fear of Western medicine, alongside anti-vax sentiments. Will we see justice in our community? We wait impatiently, and with hope.

Occasionally, I (or my colleagues) refer to items from previous issues of Notes. If you have not been a subscriber previously, and wish to review our conversations, past issues of Notes are available on-line at www.jgacounsel.com. I thank my friends at Johnson, Grossnickle & Associates for their many years of abiding support for our reflective practice.

REFLECT ON THIS

>>Come and see<<

John 1: 1-5 and 43-46

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life,^[a] and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

Last week, Pastor Babette introduced us to the iconic Sam Cooke ballad that provides the theme for this semester's chapel services and then she offered a powerful word about the call to watch for and be "the change that gonna come." As I reflected on her challenge, I was struck by how the liturgical season of Epiphany, the time between Christmas and Ash Wednesday, offers us a rich reservoir of language and concepts to embrace this change that is coming.

The 20th century theologian Paul Tillich once said that the opposite of faith is not doubt; it is certainty. I think of this point often during Epiphany, when we celebrate the light that has come into the world, and Christians everywhere are tempted to believe that all is well, certain even that the dark will no longer prevail. God has broken into our lives and now the entire world will see that we have found the way, the truth, the life...

And then I pause and consider the power of the darkness all around us. Especially in these fraught times, we witness the darkness of violence, of bias and injustice, of illness and death, of hunger and pain and indifference. Where is the light that overcomes this darkness? If all is well (as we would like to believe), then what are we to do with the evidence that contradicts our certainty?

In her provocative book, *Learning to Walk in the Darkness*, theologian Barbara Brown Taylor addresses this tension of a world divided into light and dark. She writes: "...I have learned things in the dark that I could have never learned in the light, things that saved my life over and over again, so that there is only one logical conclusion: I need darkness as much as I need light." Her theological point is that we cannot afford to divide the world simply into light and dark, or good and evil, and believe naively that God is only in the light, while all else is left to the shadows of our lives. Instead, we must embrace the reality that we live as those called into the light while residing in a world marked by darkness. How will we learn to walk in the darkness?

Our two readings from the first chapter of John's gospel illustrate this dynamic tension. On the one hand, we have these soaring words from the opening stanza: "In the beginning was the Word – What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of the world. The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it."

And then just a few verses later, we are on the ground with Jesus in the early days of his ministry, calling his disciples to follow him. First, it is Andrew and then Simon Peter. And then we join the story with Philip and Nathanael. And it is Nathanael who helps set the terms of our tension when he asks of Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" to which Philip responds, "Come and see."

Similarly, in Sam Cooke's ballad, we hear his proclamation that "change is gonna come" interspersed with stanzas like this: "Then I go to my brother, And I say, brother, help me please, But he winds up knockin' me, Back down on my knees."

You are the light of the world, but the world is marked by darkness. Change is gonna come, but there is so much that needs to be changed. How shall we go forward? Come and see...

It seems to me that these questions about how to live as children of the light in the midst of the darkness, about how to follow the call to discipleship, are at the heart of our common work as God's faithful people. And together, we are called to explore our individual and common callings to be God's people and do God's work in the world. But it's sometimes hard to know what to do, what to expect, how to be faithful when there are so many obstacles and temptations to decline the invitation of faith, to step off the path of discipleship.

And so I offer these Epiphany notes from the field about what it means to receive and accept the invitation to come and see...

Come and see...the gift of surprise. I love the quintessential Epiphany story of the wise men and its emblematic lessons for what it means to fall in love with God (again), to be drawn by something as compelling as a sacred star, out of our positions of power and privilege, on journeys of risk and adventure, finally to reach our destination and to find this remarkable surprise, this counter-intuitive God, this child in his mother's arms. And then to offer our rare gifts, to worship, to return home by another route, to be changed forever.

I think about the logic of this love story especially this week, when we consider Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life and work we honored on Monday, and the journey that he undertook and the surprises he encountered along the way - often, unwelcome surprises - and how his vocation unfolded on unexpected and life-changing ways. Instead of the scholar's life or the prestigious pulpit, Dr. King was drawn by a dream to make a journey, to encounter the surprises of a life of discipleship, and to give everything to follow the call. Come and see...

Come and see...the call to be neighbor. In these pandemic times, it has sometimes been hard to know how to be neighbors when we are forced to stay away from each other. But I have been inspired by so many of our staff and faculty and students who have redoubled their efforts to walk alongside our neighbors and to follow the path of discipleship to a God who calls us to feed the hungry, free the oppressed, heal the sick, and fight for justice – the way, the truth, the life.

If you haven't noticed, check out the Shop Local campaign, spearheaded by our Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship, that is supporting local businesses. Or look again – and maybe volunteer – at the Campus Kitchen, which is meeting the needs of our neighbors who are food insecure, on and off campus. See how the Minnesota Urban Debate League has moved its programs online so that middle and high school students across the metro area can continue to participate in debate programs that equip them for success in college and beyond. Witness the work of our Health Commons in downtown Minneapolis and here in Cedar-Riverside, offering food and water and comfort and kindness to those so in need

Our students and co-workers and fellow faithful may most fully discern their calls as they are inspired and nurtured to make a difference in the lives of our neighbors, to be of service of the world, to be God's hands and the face of Christ to our fellow travelers. Surely Peter and Philip and Nathanael didn't know exactly what was going on when Jesus called and named them, but they followed and served. You shall be my disciples, Jesus said, and through you shall my people find their way in the world...come and see.

Come and see...the promise of abundance - I would venture that the most significant challenge we all face in being faithful and following our calls is the fact that we live in a world marked by a perspective of scarcity. And to my mind, the scarcity we experience is too often a result of wanting answers here and now, of fearing the dark, the unknown and surprising, of not being able to deal with the messiness of the called life.

Consider again our gospel for this morning. If we want firm answers, this is not the place to look. But if we are willing to accept the invitation to abundance, the invitation to be loved and claimed, the invitation to follow our Lord, then here is our call.

I learned a great deal about abundance from my friend and faculty colleague, Jay Walljasper, who tragically passed away just before Christmas. Jay was a renaissance person – a journalist, an activist, a believer in what we all share in common. In our teaching together, we explored with our students the wonders of cities, places that mattered. Time and again, Jay would share his passion for the ordinary ways in which cities are places of abundance. Jay liked to quote Mexican novelist, Carlos Fuentes, who says “The citizen takes his city for granted far too often. He (and she) forgets to marvel.”

Jay Walljasper never forgot to marvel, and in his marveling he taught all of us to believe in the promise of abundance! Rest in abundant power, Jay!

Change is gonna come – indeed, it is happening in our midst. Come and see, come and see..

Thanks be to God. Amen.

>>Transfigured: A Change is Gonna Come<<

Mark 9:2-9

The Transfiguration

²Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one^[a] on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings,^[b] one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved,^[c] listen to him!” ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

The Coming of Elijah

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Perhaps the most daunting thing I have experienced during these past 11 months – these pandemic times – is a lack of control. Every time I believed I knew what to do, the landscape changed, new information emerged, something I was certain would work turned out to be an illusion. The virus eluded me; businesses and organizations I care about were buffeted; the city I love was wracked by violence and fear. How about you? Control was not to be had – where are we to turn to make sense of what is happening in our daily lives?

In this time just before we enter the 40 days of Lent, we read this mystical story from Mark’s gospel about the transfiguration of Jesus. Transfiguration – a fancy word that means to be lifted up, made more beautiful, more luminous, to be transformed. We come upon this scene where Peter, James and John – three of Jesus’s most faithful disciples – witness Jesus, along with Elijah and Moses – giants of the faith – in conversation as Jesus is transfigured, placed in the pantheon of God’s beloved.

And they are frightened – terrified, Mark tells us – and what do they want to do but to take control, to build monuments to what they have seen, to make sense of this extraordinary moment. But there

would be no control, no dwellings to build, no sense to be made, as a voice from on high proclaims, “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!”

I am struck by how this story frames the days to come. Transfigured, Jesus turns his eyes to Jerusalem, and in the journey that follows – the journey we begin again tomorrow on Ash Wednesday – instead of the celebration of one transfigured, we watch as Jesus humbles himself again and again, in service to others, in accepting his fate, in death on a cross – until that brilliant Easter morning when God reconciles all of creation to God’s self.

And along the way, we see the disciples continuing to seek control – cutting off the ear of a centurion in the garden, betraying Jesus to the authorities, denying Jesus to fellow citizens, failing to see that God’s plan for Jesus and for all of creation is the only way to make sense of what is happening; the only way, the only truth, the only life.

The theologian Howard Thurman, who was a faculty member and the dean of the chapel at Boston University, tells this compelling story in his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited* – purportedly a book that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. carried with him throughout his journeys. He recounts how his mother awakened him one night when he was young to step outside and watch Halley’s Comet blaze across the sky. As he watched in wonder, he asked his mother, “what will happen if that comet falls from the sky?” And after a few moments of silence, his mother replied, “Nothing will happen to us, Howard; God will take care of us.”

Thurman comments on this moment: “O simplehearted mother of mine, in one glorious moment you put your heart on the ultimate affirmation of the human spirit! Many things have I seen since that night. Times with number I have learned that life is hard, as hard as crucible steel; but as the years have unfolded, the majestic power of my mother’s glowing words has come back again and again, beating out its rhythmic chant in my own spirit. Here are the faith and the awareness that overcome fear and transform it into the power to strive, to achieve, and not to yield.” In other words, here is the faith – as has become cliché – to let go and to let God.

To strive, to achieve, and not to yield – there is the call that Thurman found in his mother’s profound faith that so inspired others like Dr. King to give up human longing for control and to trust that God is in the midst of our history and our lives, showing us – if we only have eyes to see and ears to hear – what it is that God intends for God’s creation and what people of faith are called to be and do in response.

I have been reflecting on this remarkable story and its lessons for our lives as I think back on the final days of my mother’s life. She was a remarkable woman who had been fighting cancer for many years and now was in a hospice waiting for the disease to run its course. Her large family – six kids, with spouses, and lots of grandchildren – were with her constantly, holding on for dear life, seeking control, wanting to have more time with her. Finally, a good nurse said to us, it is time for you to leave, to let go, and so we did, reluctantly, and mom passed into God’s arms shortly thereafter.

This experience strikes me as instructive for all of us as we learn to “keep vigil” with and for each other in our journeys of faith. I wonder what we might all learn from those times when we band together with family, friends, co-workers, fellow citizens to pay attention, to wait for, to mark out the time in preparation for some impending moment that God has in store for us.

Here, then, is how we learn to strive, to achieve, and not to yield – not as a means of control, but because we believe that God is in our midst and has a plan for us. Here is faith as promise, the ways in which we suspend our own notions of time and progress and success to wait patiently and prayerfully for God’s will to be done, and to listen and watch for what we are called to do. This is faith reaching to a deeper place in our lives, asking us to remember all the ways in which our lives are shaped by the people we care about; to console each other, to be faithful partners in the work of grieving loss and celebrating lives well lived; to learn how healing is more often about broken hearts and spirits than about broken bodies; to be patient, to wait for things beyond our control to show us the way to a new place; to wonder at the awesome power of life and death, and of our grand and mysterious God; and to hope for the things to come.

And when my mom passed into our God’s embrace, we experienced what the hymnwriter John Ylvisaker has called “just one last surprise,” God’s promise of abundant and eternal life. God’s plan for God’s transfigured people.

And so in these pandemic times, while we seek to take control, to make sense of it all, to find some sense of the normal, maybe this transfiguration story can frame our Lenten journeys once again – maybe this story can remind us that “change is gonna come” on that brilliant Easter morning when God revealed God’s awesome plan for all of creation.

In his recent book, *Virus as a Summons to Faith*, Biblical scholar and poet Walter Brueggemann shares this compelling prayer for these times – may it be our guide as people of faith, Easter people learning to let go and to let God...

At the Edge of a New Normal

*Our “normal ways” are reassuring to us:
It is our normal way to slot people for wealth or poverty;
It is our normal way to classify people as “us” and “other”;
It is our normal way to prefer males to the other gender;
It is our normal way to distinguish heteros and the “other.”*

*Our usual normal make us safe,
make us happy,
leave us certain.*

*Only now our normal ways are exposed as constructs of privilege
that cover over the reality of neighborly situation.*

*In the midst of the virus, we notice that the others are very much with us,
and we are all vulnerable together.*

*We sense the disruption, the loss, the dis-ease among us,
and we want our old normal to be “great again.”*

Except we cannot!

*Except that you summon us to new futures made sober by the pandemic;
You require us now to imagine, to risk, and be vulnerable
as we watch the new normal emerge among us:
the blind see, lepers are cleansed, the poor have good news;
students have debts canceled, the poor have health care,
workers have a living wage, the atmosphere breathes fresh air.*

*We want to return to the old normals that yield (for some) safety and happiness,
but you dispatch us otherwise.*

*Your new normal for us requires some adjustments by us.
And adjust we will. We will live and trust and share differently.*

“All things new” is a huge stretch for us.

*But we know it is your good gift to us; with wistfulness, we receive it,
we embrace it, and
we give thanks to you. Amen.*

PRACTICE THIS

>>Practicing Anti-Racism<<

In my own journey to confess my white privilege and live into anti-racism in my personal and professional contexts, I have come to know the complex emotions and cognitive dissonances that often make the work daunting. I, therefore, am grateful for thoughtful guides that offer insights and examples of how this important work can be done. Recently, *The Christian Century* compiled a series of articles from its pages that address racism into “Acting Against Racism: With Action Steps for Groups and Individuals.” You can download the guide, which includes study questions, at www.christiancentury.org.

I found a couple of thought-provoking passages especially helpful...

Here is Monmouth College Chaplain Teri MacDowell Ott recounting an encounter at an event that featured Princeton Professor Eddie Glaude, Jr., and that was meant to prompt discussion about racial issues:

“Sitting across from me was an African-American student with short dreadlocks and a red T-shirt. I knew this young man, Denton, only by my professor husband’s admiration of his work as a philosophy major. After listening for quite a while, he finally spoke up. “Well,” Denton said with a little shake of his head, “I pretty much think that White people created these problems, and so White people need to fix them. That burden should not be on us.”

His words were understated yet damning, and they silenced the room. As the chaplain, I struggled to come up with an appropriate response. I wanted Denton to know that I was on his side. I also wondered if I really was. I didn’t want to express my guilt over being a part of the problem, as such

confessional statements seem to be primarily about me and my need for redemption. And redemption requires an honest desire for change—change for which I was unprepared. I wanted to know what exactly needed to change, what I needed to give up.”

And here is Pastor Peter Marty (yes, of the Martin Marty clan), who is publisher of *The Christian Century*:

“Here’s what the Christian faith helps me know and reminds me to tell my most defensive-minded friends: look, you have some tools in the toolbox of your faith life that are exciting to put to work in our world of racial inequity. Start by letting go of the defensiveness. That’s a must. It’s a constrictive survival response that only separates you from God. I know we equate letting go of something, including cherished assumptions, with deprivation. But claw marks don’t set you free. According to Jesus, relinquishment is a ticket to abundant life. Reexamining personal behaviors and perspectives isn’t just a Lenten project. We no longer have the luxury of living racially unaware lives. Where you feel uncomfortable, disempower it. Let go of your brittleness. The Lord helps us know that we don’t have to secure ourselves against insecurity. So relax into the power of faith. Do some soul searching. Take what scares the hell out of you about yourself and pick it up, much like that cross Jesus mentions. Then, move your ego aside, much like that denying of self that Jesus commands. And live! Live with the mind of Christ, humbly open to changing all that needs to be changed about you and your world.”

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Continuing my fascination with all things Chicago, I have Carl Smith’s *Chicago’s Great Fire: The Destruction and Resurrection of an Iconic American City* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2020).

I added another periodical to my monthly subscriptions with *National Geographic History* – beautifully designed and written.

Perhaps you’ve seen the PBS series on the Black Church. I have *The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song*, the companion text by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Penguin Press, 2021).

>>Change<<

The iconic Sam Cooke ballad, “A Change Is Gonna Come” is the theme for our chapel services this semester (as you noted in my homilies above!) Here are the lyrics...

"A Change Is Gonna Come"

I was born by the river in a little tent
Oh, and just like the river I've been running ever since

It's been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change gon' come, oh yes, it will

It's been too hard living, but I'm afraid to die

'Cause I don't know what's up there beyond the sky

It's been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change gon' come, oh yes, it will

I go to the movie and I go downtown
Somebody keep telling me don't hang around

It's been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change gon' come, oh yes, it will

Then I go to my brother
And I say, "Brother, help me please"
But he winds up knockin' me
Back down on my knees

There've been times that I thought I couldn't last for long
But now I think I'm able to carry on

It's been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change gon' come, oh yes, it will

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Trusting institutions - again
- Stories we tell to ourselves and each other
- Big ideas!
- How the gifts of our faith helped us navigate the pandemic!

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