**A Voice of Renewal**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford, MA

It doesn’t happen often, but when it does, I really like it. I’m talking about when I read a verse in the Bible and because of where I am in my life or even just the particular day I’ve been having, I find myself saying, “Wow, that’s exactly how I feel, too.” I love this feeling when it happens I guess, sheepishly, because feeling ‘spiritually one’ with someone in the Bible might make me feel more holy…though it entirely depends on exactly who in the Bible we’re talking about! But more so because it reminds me that whoever wrote that verse hundreds of years ago, wasn’t just writing what they *thought* about God, or what I should think about God, they were writing of how they *experienced* God, in their real, messy, incarnate life. I too have a real, messy, incarnate life. So do you. It’s nice to remember that the Bible is full of these people. And in fact, many parts of the Bible don’t really tell us directly what to think about God, rather they show us the range of how people experience God.

I had one of those moments last week as I looked through the readings for this Sunday. And, of all places, I found it in the letter of St. Paul to the good people of Philippi, that we heard read this morning. Now a lot of Paul’s letters start out the same way. They have an extended and somewhat gratuitous sounding salutation from Paul to the community. The words are different each time, but the gist of it is the same: a warm and ingratiating hug. Now, when I read these letters in seminary, I thought to myself, Paul’s a smart guy. He knows that if he starts his letters off with these effusive statements about how much he’s missed everyone and prayed for them, they’ll want to keep reading. Good trick. But my friends, when I read Paul’s words this week, something different happened in my heart. “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you….[and] it is right for me to think this way about all of you because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me.” That’s exactly how I feel, too!

I have missed you all so much these past four months. I did pray for you with joy, and I know that you held me in your hearts. And it meant so much to me – to have you to pray for, and to know you prayed for me – not just because of the unique and wonderful people that each one of you is, but also because you are the ones with whom I share in the life of God’s grace. And that’s what sustains us through the challenges and through the joys of this life. I know now what Paul meant when he wrote that greeting, because it’s been my experience, too.

And not only that, but just as Paul’s feeling compelled him to write to the churches he was away from, “That exactly how I felt, too!” It was this feeling of connection to you in prayer that inspired me to write the little booklet of Advent reflections that I hope some of you have downloaded and might find time to peruse this season. Each week is a bit different so if week one was not your cup of tea, maybe you’ll find weeks 2, 3, or 4 to be more stimulating. But they all have to do with the theme of Renewal.

Renewal is a funny word. Etymologically it literally means re-birthing…something that is physiologically impossible but an image that suggests radical new beginnings. In the world of library books (or the era of Blockbuster video!), renewal means kind of the opposite: extending or continuing what already exists. But spiritually, I think the word means something closer to re-centering and re-energizing. Real experiences of renewal enliven our spirits and kindle a source of energy deep within us. And it’s a renewable source of energy -- an energy that we don’t deplete right away; one that is sustainable into the future. One that is more robust to the changes and chances of this life. But what is that source of renewable energy, that gift from God, that fuel for the spirit, that keeps us going through the trials and challenges of this life, through the dark nights of our souls, through the despair and the distrust and the doubt that all of us know?

I imagine it’s not the same for everyone. But I’ll tell you what it is for me. For me, the renewal I experienced during sabbatical came from having more space and time for every experience of the day. It wasn’t so much about what I did (though I did some really fun things that I can’t wait to tell you all about in the coming weeks). It was about how I did them. It was about having enough space around each event of the day that I could really do it with full intention and attention. I really never found myself worrying about what was coming next or doing “after action” on what had already happened. And the space that was opened up by that freedom, lead to greater clarity and the ability to be more attuned to what was really going on in me and in the people around me and perhaps even with God.

From that renewal, that spaciousness, that more present way of being with my family, of walking in the world, of reading, even of sleeping, I found myself more in touch with my spiritual voice. By this I don’t mean my “preacher’s voice”. I actually hate that term because “preacher voices” tend to instruct others about God, rather than share experiences of God. That’s probably because the former is often easier than the latter. Instructions about God can be clear, neat, tidy, and authoritative. But they are often untrue. Experiences of God are nuanced, mystical, hard to explain, and often disbelieved. But in their imperfections, they are authentic. Sharing our experiences of God are how we grow faith in one another, how we build bonds with each other, how we live out what it means to be church.

My sabbatical time was filled with new experiences – of landscapes, of other people, of myself, of different parts of our country -- many of them in wilderness areas that were unfamiliar to me. The voice I began to recover in that wilderness was not a preacher’s voice. The voice I found is the voice that integrates my soul-knowing with my brain-knowing with my heart-knowing. It was the voice of my heart when it is near to the heart of Jesus…which it isn’t always, but I try. The voice that both longs for a more just and equitable world, and that respects the dignity of *every* person as we fumble our way towards it. The voice that is willing to say I don’t know when I don’t know, and that is willing to say I do know when I do. The voice that is able to speak a Way of Love in a world of hate. The voice that is gentle with the vulnerable people, which is everyone, though they don’t always know it. The voice that is bold with those who have strength, which is also everyone, though they don’t always know it.

The voice I found again is the voice that speaks of the God I actually experience, not just the one I was taught about in Sunday school or in seminary. The voice that honors the truth and complexity of living in the world today, and the moral clarity of Jesus’ ethic of love. The voice that is willing to be inspired by the playful power of the Holy Spirit. And it is, I hope, a voice that can invite you to find your voice and then be quiet to listen to what you have to say…

Like John the Baptist, what energized me during sabbatical was finding out what my voice cries out when I’m in the wilderness – or at least, in a campervan driving across the wildernesses of our country with my family in tow! And as I began to discover that, I wanted to share it with all of you. Not because your voice speaks the same words, but because I want you to know what’s been re-born, renewed, made alive in me during my time apart from you. That’s why I wrote these reflections for us to share in this season of Advent.

So as we move through Advent together, I wonder how this season might be renewing your voice, too? For some this will be a very blue Advent indeed, especially if you are grieving or recovering or suffering in some kind of fresh way. For some this will be a joyful Advent that portends long-awaited family visits, transitions in your vocations, or anticipated new births. For others this Advent might be playing out far in the background of carpools or hospital visits or COVID tests or hockey practices or just getting to the right place with the right things at somewhat close to the right time. My prayer is that whatever your wilderness looks like this Advent, you will let your voice cry out within it. Somehow, someway, let your voice cry out. It might be raw, or unfamiliar. It might be too loud or too soft at first. It might not even sound like you right away. But don’t be afraid of that voice. The reason it sounds unusual is probably because God is trying to speak – to you, and through you into the world, which needs your voice, which needs God’s voice, which needs the Word of Love. Amen.