

Seeds of Preparation

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Third Presbyterian Church
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Malachi 3:1-4 and Luke 3:1-6

We begin by sharing another poem from the donated volumes of William Young: “The Task” by Denise Levertov.

“As if God were an old man
always upstairs, sitting about
in sleeveless undershirt, asleep,
arms folded, stomach rumbling,
his breath from open mouth
strident, presaging death...

No, God's in the wilderness next door
--that huge tundra room, no walls and a sky roof--
busy at the loom. Among the berry bushes,
rain or shine, that loud clacking and whirring,
irregular but continuous;
God is absorbed in work, and hears
the spacious hum of bees, not the din,
and hears far-off
our screams. Perhaps
listens for prayers in that wild solitude.
And hurries on with the weaving:
till it's done, the great garment woven,
our voices, clear under the familiar blocked-out clamor of the task,
can't stop their
terrible beseeching. God
imagines it sifting through, at last, to music
in the astounded quietness, the loom idle,
the weaver at rest.”

How do we join God in the wilderness?

How do we become absorbed in God's work?

What does preparation look like?

On Monday, my news feed told me that the University of Chicago had closed down its campus because they had received a phone call, the threat of someone with a gun. Some few minutes later I received an email from my seminary, McCormick Theological Seminary, from where I graduated and on whose board I am privileged to serve. McCormick sits on the campus of the University of Chicago; in fact, while in seminary I took a class at the university's divinity school, studied in its library, exercised in its gym. Because the university closed on Monday, McCormick did so as well. Later, the source of the call was discovered, a student at another university in the city. An arrest was made, and the campus, including my seminary, opened for business the next day.

That day served as a kind of tipping point for me. I knew the geography, the buildings, even some of the people who would have been affected had something actually happened. The proximity to my own experience became a kind of tipping point, but I was halfway there already.

The litany is all too familiar, and in some ways so hard to recall because it keeps receiving additions. It didn't start with Paris, but Paris. And a shooting at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs, where the shooter articulated some kind of unfathomable religious rationale. In Chicago, protests happened a week ago in the city streets, and political pressure has been turned up considerably, and rightly so, as video surfaced some 14 months after a police officer shot and killed a young African-American male. This happened while a jury was being seated in Baltimore for the Freddie Gray trial, another young African-American male dying and another round of community unrest about a city's police force. Locally, a shooting in Leroy.

And then of course news from San Bernardino, so many dead and wounded. A friend of mine is a pastor in Claremont, about 20 miles from San Bernardino. We were talking Friday as she was preparing to go to the local mosque for their Friday prayer service, a simple act of solidarity.

Monday was a kind of personal tipping point for me, but it could have been any of these things, and so much more. Racism, organized and institutionalized, and abuses of power by those in authority. An epidemic of gun violence, where people who should never have access to them obtain guns that are manufactured well beyond any need for hunting or even self-defense, and a culture and political system unwilling to do anything. And a cultural and political and sometimes religious response to those different from us, "us" being majority Americans. Irrational fear is driving the debate about Syrian refugees, or any kind of immigration policy, to which we now add fear of any with an Arabic name, let alone a practitioner of Islam.

All the while, a climate conference in Paris was highlighting the dire situation our environment faces, and I very cynically thought that the easiest solution to all of these other matters was simply letting our environmental freefall continue so we won't have a globe at all on which to practice racism, or violence, or discrimination.

So the tipping point could have been anything, for any of us. But we need a tipping point. This week at the close of a meeting, we were invited to pray silently, and one of my prayers was this

– “O God of justice, make me angry.” What I mean was that I was seeking the kind of anger that would lead to something, something positive, something hopeful.

A tipping point can lead us in many directions. A word I heard over and over from many of you this week, and experienced it in my own soul, was “numb.” Another story on the news feed, another tragic incident. Another event to process, another moment when we say that our thoughts and prayers are with victims and survivors, almost by rote. How can we be anything but numb?

Another conversation I had, a serious, thoughtful conversation, was one of acceptance. Not acceptance in terms of this being OK, any of it, but acceptance in the sense of this being so big, so beyond our impact and control, that we kind of shrug our shoulders and say that this is the new normal, about which we can do nothing.

Some of us went to to grade school doing drills to prepare for nuclear attacks. Some of us went to grade school doing drills to prepare for tornadoes. To go to grade school now means doing drills to prepare for active shooters, and while I am glad that smart people and caring people have plans in place to protect our children, how insane it is that those plans need even to exist?

Do we become numb to it, and do we simply shrug and accept? Or do we ask that the God of justice make us angry, angry enough to do something.

One faith response can be to do nothing, to focus on the heavenly and ignore the earthly. One faith response can be even worse than that, to fan the flames of hatred and violence, and we have seen plenty of that.

Our faith response, because we believe in the transformative good news of a tiny, vulnerable baby, cannot be either, but a third way, anger, righteous anger fueled by a vision of peace and hope and justice and reconciliation.

Anger does not seem like the right word, because we are so programmed to be nice and polite. But anger in this case is the right word, as long as it is anger channeled toward justice that engages the world with deep hope.

Anger that reflects and echoes the prophet Malachi, who told us to prepare, for God is coming, who will refine us and purify us with a vision of righteousness. Righteousness, as far as I can tell, will look like a table, maybe this table, where all are welcome, regardless of the color of their skin or the nature of their creed, where war will be no more. But it will take the heat of refinement to get us there, not numbness, not acceptance of the way that things are.

That’s why anger is the right word, as long as it reflects and echoes John the Baptist. You would not ever have invited John to the company Christmas party. You would have deleted his emails before even reading them. But you would have taken his message seriously because it was God’s message, and it would not have allowed us to be simply numb or accepting of the way

things were. Repent. Forgive. Prepare. Plant a seed of preparation that moves us from numbness and acceptance to righteous anger to hope. Prepare by smoothing and straightening, so that we – and all – shall see the goodness of God.

That's what preparation looks like. Praying and preparing. Calling a legislator. Going to a meeting. Marching in a march. Lighting a candle. Not allowing yourself to be numb even when watching the news and engaging the world is so difficult.

Believing in change. Embracing hope. Because that's what God calls us to do, because that's what God did. In Jesus. Who came, and is coming soon. People get ready. Amen.