

“To Walk in Beauty”

By: Adrienne Trevathan

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TEXTS

ISAIAH 61:1-4, 8-11

LUKE 1:46B-55

It stands, 46 feet tall, in the town of Craig, Alaska. It is a totem pole – a traditional Native American symbol created with great time and effort, to tell a story. This particular totem pole tells the story of how one community found healing. In 1991, Stan Marsden suffered the loss of his son, Jimmy, to a cocaine overdose. The Marsdens are members of the Tsimshian tribe, which is surrounded by two other indigenous communities – the Tlingit and the Haida people. The entire community was devastated to learn of Jimmy’s death. At the time of his son’s death, Stan was well-known for his carving of many totem poles in Southeast Alaska. As Stan was struggling with grief, one of his friends suggested that he carve a totem pole to honor his son.

Stan was unwilling to try at first – he was too weighed down with grief, and wasn’t sure if he would be able to do it. A year later, he was walking through the woods, and come across a 500-year old cedar tree. As he reached out to rest his hand on the bark, he knew that he had to carve a totem pole from *this* tree for his son. Almost as soon as he began to make plans for the project, Stan noticed that people were surrounding him with support. People from nearby towns began to show up and take interest in learning about his son – they began to ask what Stan had in mind for the totem pole – what visions he had for it. The interest spread beyond the local tribes and into the non-Native community. Stan began to realize that the task before him was large, and that he needed other people.

Traditionally, the creation of a totem pole is done by a persons or group of people with Native American heritage – but many of the people who offered to help were not affiliated with any tribe. Stan went to the tribal council, the governing body, to ask for permission to include non-Natives in the planning and creation of the pole – and, in a process familiar to any of you good Presbyterians, they formed a committee. The Totem Pole Committee was made up of Natives, non-Natives, elders, students, professionals, and the self-employed. Slowly, with much discernment and prayer in their work, together they helped Stan bring honor to his son Jimmy with what is now known as The Healing Heart Totem Pole.

The animals on the totem pole are all symbolic to their family: the frog represents Jimmy, whose mother was adopted into the Haida frog clan. The raven represents Stan’s father, the grandfather of Jimmy – the raven gives light and hope. The Killer Whale is for the clan of Jimmy’s grandmother, Louisa, who offered intelligence and leadership. Finally, the Healing Heart Totem pole includes a figure called The Uninvited Guest. On the pole, the Uninvited Guest carries with her a basket of roses and a blessing – the rose is a symbol of love and peace.

This character, though not invited, serves as a reminder of blessing and comfort that comes at unexpected times – and in the story of this pole, the uninvited guest is welcomed and brought into the community.

As the body of Christ, we too look to our traditions to offer us support and hope in the difficult times we experience. These traditions, not unlike the traditions of other cultures, have the power to not only bear significance, but to sustain us as a community. We are given seasons of life together as a community, to seek healing, and to seek God throughout. In this time of Advent, we are called to be countercultural in the otherwise exhausting culture that Christmas creates. Our traditions during this time are varied, and ancient. We listen together as we invoke The Holy Spirit to be our invited guest, present with us, as we light the candles of the Advent wreath – each candle represents the ways we have experienced God: Peace. Hope. Love. Joy – and the list could go on and on.

We have additional worship services together, in the smaller setting of the chapel – huddled together with family and friends, hearing about the kind of world God longs to create – the kind of world we encounter when we read the stories of Jesus, the One Who is To Come. Advent is the season for waiting and watching for God’s activity in the world. It is likely not something that comes naturally for us; it requires patience, stillness, and careful attention in a culture that seeks to stifle those very qualities with piped-in holiday music and immediate gratification.

If we are honest with ourselves, we may even venture to name the things that we are expecting to occur as a result of these observances; perhaps we expect that they will bring us closer to God. Perhaps we expect that following Advent rituals will strengthen our faith, or remind us of the importance of family. Especially when we experience loss as a community, most recently saying goodbye to Sue Wiegand, Deb DeNoon and Arlene Waller, we remember. And in the traditions we hold together as the church, we encounter the sacred. We encounter the presence of God, in small ways, unnoticed by those who would hurry by.

The prophet Isaiah portrays the presence of God in ways that most of us would dream to encounter. Today’s reading is from Third Isaiah – the last section of the book that conveys hope and freedom for the Israelites after seemingly endless wandering and battling. Isaiah offers a powerful, *magnificent* vision of justice for humanity *so* united with God that the two become one – that there seems to be no separation between the sacred and the secular any longer:

*he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit (61:1-3).*

What is described here is no less than salvation – not in the other-worldly sense many Christians attribute to the word salvation. Rather, Isaiah offers a mission statement of sorts for

those who are chosen by God to be an instrument of blessing: Zion will know, and will be able to name, that from which it has been saved: Captivity. Oppression. Broken-heartedness – and not for *their* comfort only. The liberation that the Israelites experience will only be a glimpse – a shadow – of the mercy they will receive in the covenant of faithfulness God makes with them. This covenant, however, cannot be self-serving or inward-focused. Scott Bader-Saye, professor of Christian Ethics at Seminary of the Southwest, describes the mission of the Israelites and our mission today, in working toward community: it is “not a fellowship of the like-minded. Mission happens when we turn our attention toward the recipients of the good news: the oppressed, the broken-hearted, the captives, prisoners, the mournful, the faint of spirit.”

Isaiah’s community was in the beginning place, for they were returning to their land, seeking restoration. Those who have been exiled are now returning to a land that will require new creation and a long process of growth. This passage is a larger part of what lies ahead for the community: not only a restored city, but a city radiant like a fresh garden, described in verse 11:

*For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations (11).*

Praise will spring up in a tangible way. God will act in a tangible way, so that glimpses of a new reality will be seen – and the comfort that God so yearns to give will be a part of this new creation. Old Testament scholar William P. Brown describes the scene for us: “Zion’s restoration is the miraculous work of the divine gardener. It is the comfort of new creation. It is the garden of God’s glory as well as the nursery of a nation. As Zion is clothed in new garments, so the earth is clothed with new life.”

We are not used to thinking of any new creation as that which brings us comfort. To the contrary, it seems that the smallest change in our personal or communal lives can cause a great amount of process, preparation, and – sometimes – pain. American author Flannery O’Connor, who often wrote about the human condition, seems to capture the struggle well: “All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.”

It is not surprising, then, that the song of Mary, the Magnificat, is included in today’s readings – for in the beginning of Luke, we hear reflections of both change and good news proclaimed by Isaiah, now as the joy of Mary’s song:

^{46b} *My soul magnifies the Lord,*
⁴⁷ *and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*
⁴⁸ *for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ *for the Mighty One has done great things for me,*
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ *His mercy is for those who fear him*
from generation to generation.

⁴ *He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”(Luke 1:46b-55).*

Mary’s song begins as an individual recognition of what God has done – that God has looked at her with favor - but her praise doesn’t stay there. Mary’s praise returns to the community – recalling the history of Zion, the Israelites – singing songs of God’s promises and actions on their behalf – singing of the richness of depth in their tradition, that now God would choose even her to bear such a one as the Christ child. We hear this great mystery year after year, and it is easy to get caught up in wondering what Mary’s emotions must have been. But here, in the story of God becoming flesh in the infant Jesus, Luke uses the word “Savior” – not once, but twice in this story. Nowhere else in the synoptic gospels of Matthew and Mark does the word “Savior” appear. It makes me wonder what we, as the readers – and disciples of Christ – are to make of this strange beginning.

In the birth of Jesus, salvation is *already* happening – before the calling of the disciples, before the Beattitudes, before the cross - something life-altering is happening. A road has been prepared for the Christ child – and perhaps it is that road, that journey, that causes Mary to sing with all of her being – for herself, her role in God’s marvelous plan, and for her people. In Native American culture, we have a phrase for the journey of life called “the red road,” which the choir sang about so beautifully. It is said that the red road is the road created by God that leads to life. For those who choose to walk on the red road, they walk in beauty, because they are following God.

Both in Isaiah, and in the gospel of Luke, we see people walking the red road. The Israelites have received a word of hope, that God will not only help their community survive – God will sustain them and be their comfort. Mary sings of what is to come – the hope of the Christ child, who will be salvation – who will call us into community so that we, too, can walk the red road with him.

As God brought healing and restoration to Israel – as God prepared the way for Mary to bring forth good news for us all – God longs to break into our world and spring forth, again and again, in the most unexpected places – for when the community gathers, healing takes place. We have to carve it out. Along the way, we grant permission to each other to enter into our experience, and to fully hear and know the stories of others. Slowly, through that process, pieces of ourselves will be chipped away like cedar - pieces that have been imprisoned and held captive by false realities for far too long – they will fall away around us, and what is left will be a new creation.

We can see it even now, as we continue to look toward Bethlehem, as we continue to look east. It is only the beginning. People, look east. Walk the red road that leads to life, and walk in beauty. Amen.