

Epiphany 4A
29 January 2017
Christ Church Cathedral, Victoria, BC, 10:30

It's been a deeply unsettling week for those who live south of the border, and it seems appropriate to recall the gibe that more often emerges with sour financial news: "when the US sneezes, the world gets a cold." At the moment it's more like an anxiety attack. The signs seem to indicate that standard American policy is full speed in reverse. Immigrants and refugees are frightened, American Muslims are deeply worried, working people wonder what's going to happen to their health care, and I imagine Canadians have more than a few questions.

Micah is speaking into a situation of anxiety not unlike what the world is experiencing right now. In the not too distant past, Assyria had invaded the northern kingdom of Israel, and Judah overflowed with refugees. King Hezekiah of Judah negotiated a truce, and devoted years to cleaning up the nation's religious act, toppling idols and urging greater faithfulness to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Apparently some of Micah's community is complaining that God's expectations are too high – whining, as their ancestors did during the Exodus journey through the wilderness. Others are simply mystified – what did we do wrong? There is plenty of unrest and deep anxiety.

What is the antidote? The prophet says that God certainly isn't demanding the sacrificed blood of animals or gallons of oil, and certainly not firstborn children. Rather, God wants justice and mercy – and humility. Not gallons of oil, but rivers of justice and fountains of mercy, says another prophet.¹ Be not anxious – love God and your neighbor and the world looks a lot less threatening.

All the anxiety around us and within us usually comes down to just a few kinds of fear – fear of losing our lives, our stuff, or the love we desperately crave. Demands have never been able to answer those fears, not 2800 years ago and not now. What's needed is vulnerability – openness to lively and creative relationships, not angry insistence or fearful reactivity. Tell me, how does it work if you try to get your way by demanding that a child or your partner or a colleague do X? Parents can inflict their will for a while, but it's not a creative long-term strategy. Co-workers and spouses won't tolerate behavior like that – it's ultimately deadly to any kind of constructive relationship. In the long run, force doesn't work.

Paul points to that deep structure of creation when he says that God's weakness and foolishness are stronger than the world's supposed strength and wisdom. The Star Wars myth weaves another, subversive version of this truth by naming the attitude of vulnerability to relationship with all that is, "the Force."

In the last few months the Lakota, First Nations people of what is now North and South Dakota, showed the world weakness and foolishness, and stopped a pipeline under the Mississippi river near their homelands. This pipeline² threatens the water source for the Standing Rock band's tribal reserve, it crosses treaty lands, and construction has disturbed ancestral burials and sacred sites. The Lakota gathered their relatives – all the bands of Sioux, and representatives of First Nations and indigenous peoples from across the globe. They camped out near the pipeline route, they prayed, they sang and danced in snow and rain and wind for months. Allies came to serve and support the effort, chopping wood, cooking food, building shelters, and sometimes getting arrested. The pipeline stopped in December. This week the new

¹ Amos 5:24

² Not the Keystone XL, but the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL)

president ordered the federal agency responsible for the section under the river to get it moving again. In the short term we have no idea who will prevail, but we can be sure that God will continue to use the weak, the lowly, and the despised, and eventually the world will see justice, both in the Dakotas and here. Eventually the black snake will be crushed underfoot – whether this pipeline or others.

Canada and British Columbia have had some remarkable witnesses to the power of God's foolishness. I met one in early 2001, at a meeting in Texas just before I went to Nevada as bishop. Jim Cruickshank was the Bishop of Cariboo then, and he spoke about his work with native communities which had suffered the violence and abuse and cultural cleansing of residential schools. He told us about sitting in sacred circles to listen to the stories of those of former students and their families. He went as a proxy for those who had committed those sins, receiving the stories of abuse and pain and anger, and doing it over and over and over again. He was beginning the process to commit all the financial assets of the diocese to the healing work needed in those communities. He did, and the Diocese dissolved. That is divine wisdom and godly foolishness that echoes Jesus' own journey to death on Calvary. I know there were times when he and the people of Cariboo were anxious, but they opened themselves to the way of justice and more abundant life, as hard as it was.

What is needed to find peace in our hearts, and ultimately, in the world? It starts with a humble heart that knows we're not God, but that we can bring a measure of peace and justice to those around us. It takes vulnerability rather than the will to dominate, and it takes a kind of 'sheer holy boldness'³ that won't quit, but will use creativity and humor to respond to the dominating powers around us. I think that's what Jesus meant by being 'wise as serpents and innocent as doves' and 'turning the other cheek and going a second mile.' The other cheek and second mile are about creative non-violence that put the oppressors off guard – it does not mean roll over and play dead!

If people of faith are going to act creatively in the face of the world's violence, we have to practice humility. At least some of that means sitting with those who come from other perspectives, or are terminally anxious, or voted another way than we did. There will be no constructive peace in the US if Republicans and Democrats can't learn to listen to the fears and anxieties of the other, or for that matter in an England dealing with Brexit. Europe and the Middle East have the same basic challenges as we do in the Americas – offense given and offense taken, unilateral political responses and stalemates, and damned little humility except among those who are suffering the most.

Jesus names them as the poor in spirit, the grieving, the ones who yearn for justice and peace – who know the earthy realities of living at ground level, and by the grace of God manage to keep some sense of hope. The people of Haiti know something about this – suffering one disaster after another – political coups, rampant corruption and failed leadership, flood and earthquake, deforestation and erosion, plague and invasion – yet when you go there, you find hope and joy in abundance. There is a deep connection between humility and humor – and being deeply human. When earthy people can sit down in the mud and laugh, you know the connection's been made.

I've heard a lot about the in-tents experience you've had here over the last year – and that the relationships built in the midst of that in-tents-city moved this community to listen to the people literally on the ground, and then join in giving voice to the indignities of homelessness. You have been persistent in doing justice, and loving kindness, and walking humbly with the

³ Toni Cade Bambara's phrase, from *The Salt Eaters*

images of God-with-us right here in this neighborhood. The ability to do that hard work, and to be persistent, grows out of a deep well of hope.

That hope is nurtured from the ground up, even sitting in the dirt and laughing or crying at our collective state. It reminds us that we're not hapless or helpless – we are most deeply happy – joyous, even – when we're doing that hard work of justice. Feel the ground – get down and really touch it – feel the ground, find God there, and fear not!