

Sermon – A Hidden Wholeness

Sunday, January 5, 2014

Scripture: Colossians 3:12-17, Luke 2:22-40

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During this Christmastime as we find ourselves on the threshold of a new year, Paul's words to the Colossians about taking off the old and putting on the new are timely. Rather than talk about the clothes one wears outwardly, Paul is concerned with the way we dress our souls. The emphasis is not on personal piety but rather on how we relate to one another in Christ. Listen now for God's word. (*Read Colossians 3:12-17.*)

Throughout Luke's telling of the birth of Christ, he contrasts the old and the new. John, who is the forerunner of Christ, is born to Elizabeth who is beyond the childbearing years. Jesus, the Messiah, is born to a young girl before her time. Today we accompany Mary and Joseph as they present their son in the temple for the purification ceremony shortly after he came into the world. The prophets of old, Simeon and Anna, remind us once again that the Christ child connects the past with the future, embodies the hope for which we wait and leads us on the journey to wholeness. Listen now for God's word. (*Read Luke 2:22-40.*)

The title of the sermon: *A Hidden Wholeness*

Let us pray. Gracious God, older than we can imagine, yet ever new; as we stand on the threshold of a new year, with all the hopes and fears that are a part of this time, help us to embrace the unknown with joy. Help us to face change, having confidence that you journey with us. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

In the Fall of 2012 as Peter and I were anticipating Paul's graduation from high school and what his departure would mean for us personally and professionally, a good friend suggested I read Parker Palmer's book *A Hidden Wholeness – The Journey Toward An Undivided Life*. A gift from Peter on my birthday, this book prepared me for the journey that would lead our family to Springfield amidst the prairie heartland.

I would like to share some of his insights this morning, a few days following New Year's Day as we bask in the beauty of the freshly fallen winter snow and reflect together on the encounter in the temple between the old and the new, Simeon, Anna and the Christ child.

Dr. Palmer is a writer, small group facilitator and activist whose focus is community leadership, spirituality and social change. A member of the Religious Society of Friends, Dr. Palmer sheds light on the importance of silence and solitude from his faith tradition as a Quaker. He begins his book with the metaphor of a blizzard quoting Leonard Cohen:

*The blizzard of the world  
has crossed the threshold  
and it has overturned  
the order of the soul.*

Palmer recalls the practice of farmers in the Great Plains, who, at the first sign of a blizzard, would run a rope from the back door out to the barn. *They all knew stories of people who had wandered off and been frozen to death, having lost sight of home in a whiteout while still in their own backyards.*

Palmer contends that *today we live in a blizzard of another sort. It swirls around us as economic injustice, ecological ruin, physical and spiritual violence... It swirls within us as fear and frenzy, greed and deceit, and indifference to the suffering of others. We all know stories of people who have wandered off into this madness and been separated from their own souls, losing their moral bearings...*

*So it is easy to believe the poet's claim that the blizzard of the world can overturn the order of the soul...that life-giving core of the human self, with its hunger for truth and justice, love and forgiveness.*

Palmer disagrees. He believes the soul's order can never be destroyed, not even by a blizzard. *It may be obscured by the whiteout. We may forget, or deny, that its guidance is close at hand. And yet we are still in the soul's backyard, with chance after chance to regain our bearings.* With chance after chance to make a different choice; to wrap our souls--at the Apostle Paul's invitation--in the warmth of the garments of compassion, kindness and humility.

*His book is about tying a rope from the back door out to the barn so that we can find our way home again. When we catch sight of the soul, we can survive the blizzard without losing our hope or our way. When we catch sight of the soul, we can become healers in a wounded world—in the family, in the neighborhood, in the workplace. As we are called back to our "hidden wholeness" amid the violence of the storm, we are guided home by the light flickering in the kitchen of our soul.*

As we stand on the threshold of the old and the new-year, mindful of the welcome embrace between the aged Simeon and the newborn Christ child, let us journey into the new with the confidence and hope of the old. Let us find our way home, the way of the undivided life...seeking a hidden wholeness that will ground us, sustain us, and strengthen us for the blizzards of life.

Palmer warns that *if we are willing to embrace the challenge of becoming whole, we cannot embrace the challenge all alone, at least, not for long: we need trustworthy relationships and tenacious communities of support. The journey will have solitary passages, to be sure, and yet it is simply too arduous to take without the assistance of others to keep us accountable. And because we have such a vast capacity for self-delusion, we will inevitably get lost en route without correctives from outside of ourselves. (pg. 10)*

How grateful we are today for the trustworthy and tenacious community of Westminster Presbyterian Church, which keeps us accountable on our individual journeys toward wholeness. As we ordain and install new church officers, as we begin a new year and a new chapter in our life together, I am humbled and honored to lead this endeavor with such a gifted staff and so many intelligent, creative and thoughtful members. I am committed, with all of us, to keeping the rope tied from the back door so we do not lose sight of the light flickering in the kitchen of our souls and the wonder and mystery of God's presence in our lives.

I am committed, with all of us to strengthening Westminster not only a place where young parents bring their children to be baptized, but also a community of faith that sustains and nurtures them through the challenges of parenthood and enriches their lives through the intergenerational relationships that are a part of community.

Today we get a glimpse of the world into which the Christ child was born: the relationships within his family and faith community. These relationships are both trustworthy and tenacious and play an important role providing guidance on his journey toward an undivided life. *And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Luke 2:33*

There is something lovely about the meeting between Simeon and the Christ Child in the temple ...something beautiful about the tenderness; the way aged Simeon, the frailties of his years drape over baby Jesus, cradling the infant in his arms, holding the hope of the ages, the yearning of a lifetime.

Listen to Martin Luther's reflections on the incarnation. *God came down, not to thrash evildoers or crush the Romans. God came down as an infant to elicit love, to nurture tenderness...* to join us in our humanity, to give us the courage to journey toward an undivided life, the courage to embrace the hidden wholeness within.

Simeon has waited all his life for this moment. He speaks tenderly to Mary of the glory and the pain that will be a part of her son's journey on behalf of all humanity; a pain, a sweet sorrow that will break her heart. Because of this child, Simeon is ready to go home, calmly, confidently. Simeon can be as hospitable to his impending death as he has been to the child Mary and Joseph brought to the temple, embracing it, blessing God for it. (*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume One*)

*Blessing the God...*

*who could've come like a mighty storm  
With all the strength of a hurricane  
who could've come like a forest fire  
With the power of Heaven in a flame*

*But instead God came like a winter snow  
Quiet and soft and slow  
Falling from the sky in the night  
To the earth below*

*No, God's voice wasn't in a bush burning  
No, God's voice wasn't in a rushing wind  
Rather it was still, it was small, it was hidden.*

*Quiet and soft and slow  
falling from the sky in the night  
to the earth below. (Audrey Assad)*

As we journey into the New Year, individually and as a community of faith, may we listen closely to the still, small, hidden voice of the One who came to us like a winter snow. May we wrap ourselves in the warmth of compassion, kindness and humility as we journey together... into an undivided life...into a hidden wholeness. By the grace of God, may it be so for each one of us and all of us. Amen.