



“I felt my heart strangely warmed” said John Wesley following the hearing of a reading of Martin Luther’s commentary on the Letter to the Romans. “Were not our hearts burning within us” said the two men on the road to Emmaus. There is a reason that our service has two main parts, with the Peace serving as a hinge between them.

We start with the Liturgy of the Word – or as our bulletin lists it: The Word of God. This is the section of our worship where the work of the people is to read, hear, discuss and contemplate the word of God revealed through the Scriptures. The readings in our Revised Common Lectionary are designed, in part, to help us see the connections between the word revealed in the Old and the New Testaments. The readings help us to see our place in the great arc of salvation – from Genesis to Revelation. We are not set apart but rather we are set within this understanding of who God is and who we are in relationship to God and to Christ Jesus.

Heidi Neumark is a Lutheran pastor whose memoir, Breathing Space, recounts her time at Transfiguration Lutheran Church in the South Bronx. It was a church with a long history- formed in the 1920s, it had been a place of real community for the Puerto Ricans who lived in the neighborhood. By the 1970’s however, construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway had split the neighborhood in half. Later decisions by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development were designed to deliberately “shrink the Bronx”.

Heidi found when she arrived in 1984 a church where the first order of the day was to repaint the front door. Each day new graffiti marked the door. The communion wafers and rat poison were stored side-by-side under the altar.¹ Was it possible for this church to survive- or should she call in the bulldozers and watch it be swept away as so much else had been in this neighborhood that too many had forgotten?

She persevered and her memoir shares the joys – and the heartaches - of her time at Transfiguration. She learned, again, during that time that the “connection is everything. Relationship to God and to each other is life itself.”²

The two men walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus were connected. They had hoped that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel. They had watched him be handed over to death, instead.

¹ Heidi Neumark. Breathing Space (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 9

²² Id, xvii.

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Ps. 116: 1-3, 10-17; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

Connected to each other through their following of Jesus, now they were returning home, perhaps, wondering how to pick up the pieces since the dream was gone.

The stranger appears – and they stand still. Perhaps in disbelief that what had meant so much to them was not known to this stranger. They assumed “everyone” knew about Jesus and his death. They stopped still, looking sad. But apparently they soon continued on their way, but this time with the stranger.

Funny thing – they who had known Jesus, were taught by the stranger about their own scriptures. This stranger is the one who, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, interpreted to them the things about Jesus in all the scriptures.

The door to new life seemed to be closed to those two men on the road to Emmaus. The one they hoped would redeem Israel had been crucified. They could not see another way forward.

Neumark says that there is a blessing in being without answers, ‘traveling in the belly of a paradox.’ While she was visiting Hamburg, Germany, she came upon a statue of Archbishop Ausgar who is credited with bringing Christianity to that city in the 9th century. That statue reminded her of an arrogant ecclesial model that assumes we carry a prefabricated, everything-included, unquestionably correct, model church around in our arms to plop down wherever we find ourselves. On the contrary, she says, we have discovered the church at Transfiguration in relationships where we encounter the Spirit already present and at work. The church is established as we are built together, ‘living stones’ as St. Peter put it.³

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus were certainly traveling in the belly of a paradox. They had seen Jesus crucified. They had seen their hopes that he would be the one to redeem Israel dashed. But the women had astounded them by insisting the Jesus was no longer in the tomb. That Jesus was in fact alive. What do you do when your hopes are broken? What do you do when what you thought you knew isn’t so – or seems not to be so?

Despite their own sorrow, they offered hospitality to the stranger who met them on the road. Lifelong habits and teachings about extending hospitality to strangers and the alien overcame their own despair.

And the stranger becomes the host. The stranger takes the bread. Blesses it. Breaks it. And gives it to them. That simple act of hospitality becomes the means through which Jesus, the Risen Lord, is made known to them.

The usual, the mundane, becomes the means by which God breaks through their sorrow and their despair to let them know they are not alone. They not only have each other – they have the ongoing, living presence of God, through Jesus, in their lives.

Jesus is not made known to everyone in exactly the same way. We are each individuals with our own stories and our own hopes and dreams. God finds ways to speak to each of us – each valid and life-changing if we will let it be. The simple acts of hospitality. The connection to each other

³ Id, 14-15.

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Ps. 116: 1-3, 10-17; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

through shared space working side-by-side to help those impacted by disasters such as storms, tornadoes and now floods. Relationship is key. “The church is established as we are built together.” Faith requires both head and heart, in my opinion.

“Head” in the reading, learning and inwardly digesting the scriptures, as one of our prayers goes. Head in the willingness to engage with each other to learn and to determine what the scriptures say to us, in our place and time. Head in the willingness to accept that not everyone we go to church with – let alone everyone we meet- will agree on what those scriptures mean. And that it is ok even so. And “heart”- understanding that “love transfigures perception.”⁴

Love of God that led Wesley to a meeting in Aldersgate where his heart was strangely warmed.

Love that led the two men on the road to Emmaus to acknowledge that their hearts were burning within them as they heard the scriptures beginning with Moses and all the prophets.

Don't check your mind at the church door.

Neither check your heart.

For some of us, the love and knowledge of God comes in a flash or in a sudden revelation.

For most of us, loving and knowing God is a process of discernment –

one that occurs over time and in spurts.

Neither is to be preferred to the other.

God speaks to us in ways that acknowledge our particular circumstances.

It might be you are like Mary at the tomb –

It might be that you are like the men on the road to Emmaus-

It might be that you are like Paul on the road to Damascus.

Whatever your life holds, God is waiting for you.

Engage your whole mind, your whole soul and your whole spirit.

One or even two alone are not enough.

All are required.

Yes, doors close.

Yes, new doors open.

Sometimes we look so long at the door that is closed that we miss the one that has opened.

Be warmed by the word of God.

Be open to the stranger who may be bringing the good news of Jesus Christ.

Take this bread and eat.

Take this wine and drink.

And He was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

⁴ Id, 27.

Oller: Three Easter

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Ps. 116: 1-3, 10-17; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

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