

Advent III Year A 2016

Many of you know that we provide meeting space for what used to be called, "South Alabama Cares." Now it is called HIV support and Prevention Services. This group has been meeting at All Saints on Tuesday evenings as long as I have been here. It used to be comprised of mostly white men... now it is mostly African American men... that figures because statistics show that HIV AIDS that was once a disease among white men predominantly... now it is more prevalent among black males... that has socio-economic implications: education, poverty and access to health care, among others.

Over the last few years I have gotten to know some of these men. We have Rector's Forum on Tuesday evenings, and often in our passing each other in the hallway we speak and greet one another... Sometimes I've taken time to talk with them... They always tell me how much they appreciate the opportunity to meet here... that this is a safe place... a home of sorts... I've come to find out that there are not many churches that will allow people with HIV to meet on their premises.

This past summer I was asked by William, the convener of the group, if I would speak at their annual state-wide conference to be held in Montgomery... the conference was scheduled for December... He asked me in July, so it was easy to say yes... So this past Friday I drove to Montgomery for the conference, not

knowing what to expect... not knowing why I was asked to speak.... There were probably a hundred folks at the conference, mostly black men.... But women as well.... What they all had in common was that their lives had been drastically changed by either being HIV positive, or having someone close to them who was HIV positive... Their worlds rocked... I heard stories about being so very close to death... accounts about the adverse effects of the drugs that keep one alive while living with HIV... and I heard stories about being abandoned... abandoned by one's family, and being abandoned by one's church... I was the only pastor there... there were two former pastors there, but they had been defrocked and banished from ordained ministry because of their disease... Some of the older folks spoke of children they had lost to AIDS... and how their church had told them it was God's will... God's punishment.... But the ethos that characterized this gathering, far from being resentful and bitter, as one might expect... the fellowship of these gathered was animated by joy and gratitude... and a vibrant solidarity and... love for each other.

I knew that I was in the presence of a great mystery... I was among the present day lepers of our world; and I was in the presence of a loving God; a God who does not judge, but a God who gives life, and hope, and dignity to those who the world casts out. That is the alchemy of love... It is love that transforms fear

and despair into courage and hope... It is love that transforms shame into dignity... It is love that binds us together as a community able to bear our wounds where the weight is not so great... it is love that makes room always for joy and it is love that engenders praise.

Go tell John what you hear and see, Jesus tells his disciples... John has asked the question from prison, as to whether his prophecy about Jesus is true... Is he indeed the one to usher in the new age... John is on death row. His ministry is over... and what shall become of the Cause... what shall become of the resistance against injustice and violence... the mission of healing and inclusion and embrace... and of course Jesus gives him the answer that he already knows... Matthew the writer being rhetorical here.... What do you hear and see? The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised... The kingdom of God is already coming Jesus tells him..... but the kingdom of God doesn't come from the seats of power... from the top down as it were... the kingdom of God comes from the margins... in comes in the desert, in the wilderness, in the prisons, in the hospital wards, in the projects... The kingdom of God comes among the least, comes from among the outcasts of our world... It is from the margins that God's work is being done... it is from the least of our world through whom God speaks... If we think this coming, this Advent, will come from

our soft self-satisfaction, we will wait forever.... Do not look to our bright and shiny self-sufficiency for God's coming.... The light of the world is begotten of the dark.... The healing of our world begins among the wounded.

Jesus' admonition to us in this gospel is to keep awake... and by that he means to keep awake to where God is already appearing... keep awake to where God is already showing up.... And God is showing up wherever there are wounds, wherever there is despair, wherever there is suffering and pain.... If you want to find God; if you want to find out what God is doing in the world.... Just see and hear that the dead of our world... the sick and the poor, the lost and the shamed... are being raised up to dignity and joy... and the love that is engendered there will change everything... from top to bottom... It is an irony, a paradox, a mystery that is real and alive... But brothers and sisters if we want to see it, experience it then it is to these outlying places we must go.... And it is the people who live there whom we must embrace.

If we are paying attention... If our hearts desire is to see God... we will know beyond our doubts and post-modern skepticism that God's coming has already begun... that the kingdom is already taking shape... that joy in a mortal world falling apart is not only possible, but present... That is the privilege offered to us

as the baptized.... Not just to see and hear of God's coming but to participate in it, and to share in the joy of it.

Today we baptize Lila Jane Williams.... Lila Jane... for a while we'll have to take good care of you... make sure you don't bump your head... make sure you don't run out into the street... For a while we'll all help to keep you safe as you grow.... But dear one... there will come time when (she, like us) you must go to the places where there is pain and death, where there is shame and even danger... you will go there bearing God's image of love that is alive in the world.... It is for the broken that we live.... And it is the broken, irony upon irony, who will give us the vision of the true God alive among us... the true God in the artful process of restoring all things to the way they should be... That is our gift to you. We claim you for that life.... May you one day have the courage to live it... and may joy come on the wings of mystery.... Mysterious, but real and alive. That is not just our hope.... But it is the world as it is... if we but keep awake.