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2nd Sunday in Advent

Pilgrims in the Wilderness

It is hard to talk about anything other than the horror of the killing of black people by white policemen these past few weeks. Especially after seeing on video the person who seemed to be holding up his hands in surrender only to be taken down by several police officers, one whose choke hold seems to have ended his life. His violation of the law?... selling cigarettes on the street corner. Are those the facts? We don't know do we? We are in the wilderness.

The same goes for the young man in Ferguson Missouri who was killed after putting up his hands and calling out "Don't shoot!" And what about the young 12 year old boy in a recreation park. Sure the toy gun he was waving about looked like a real gun... and the officer who shot him in the stomach possibly did so with a motive to disable rather than to kill, but, the result was the same. Another black youth shot to death. Another mother, sister, brother left to grieve. And more black people feeling justified in fearing rather than trusting policemen. Do we know

the facts? No, we are in the wilderness as far as that goes. But we do know this is not the way God would have us behave.

So, what do we do as individuals walking in this wilderness of death and sorrow? Are we blameless just because we were not there... we did not sit on the jury... we did not hear testimony... we don't know? Or do we have some responsibility in these matters of racial injustice? We each are pilgrims in this wilderness... wandering and wondering what is right, what is just, what is ours to do? Shall we vigil? Shall we write letters and to whom? Shall we educate ourselves in matters of "white privilege?" What is our place as Christians in a world where violence against minorities appears to be escalating? This week's Advent devotional readings offer several reflections that may help us to figure out what to do next.

To begin with, on December 4th Emily Heath writes about *chesed*. *Chesed* is a word I learned in seminary. It became a favorite word... a word whose sound strangely reverberates somewhere deep in my soul. It is a Hebrew word, spelled with a "Ch" but the C is silent in the pronunciation. I learned it in my Old Testament class with Professor Greg Mobley... a crazy guy who loved the Hebrew bible and taught it well. It means love, but a particular type of love. To quote the devotional, "It's been translated as "mercy" or "loving kindness" or

“loyal love.” In short, it’s the steadfast love that all of us want, and want to give, but that only God manages to consistently achieve.”

She goes on to say, “Hosea uses this word when he tells the people that their love is often found wanting. Theirs is more ephemeral, like the quickly-disappearing morning dew, than rock-solid. It’s there when we start the day with the best of intentions, but by sundown it’s often long gone.”

Chesed, loving kindness is the kind of love we need to call on when we deliberate over the horrible injustice happening in our world today. We need to apply *chesed* to all involved. To the one who seems to have done something wrong, to the ones who are “doing their job” to uphold the law and keep our citizens safe, and even to ourselves as we worry through what is right and wrong. What is it that we, as God’s children, are called to do? This can’t be right that all these African Americans are being killed and those doing the killing are cleared of any wrongdoing. There’s something wrong here, but what do we, you and me, what do we do about it? How do we behave as a *chesed* people?

The author of the next day’s devotion, Martin Copenhaver offers and illustrates what can be the only answer of how to begin to know what to do... of how to determine what our next step might be, yours and mine. Pray constantly. “*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing.*” (1 Thess.

5:16) as the author of 1st Thessalonians says. (If you're not sure how one could possibly do that and still manage to get food on the table, and a day's work done, check out page 8.)

And why pray without ceasing? It makes room for the Holy Spirit to step in. It is in fact an invitation for that to happen. And, while God is present always and ever ready to help, inviting God's assistance will guarantee a response rather than leave it up to chance. When we start out our day with that invitation and when we repeatedly invite God's voice throughout the day, it opens the door to our heart...or maybe it's the ears of our heart, to hear what God might have to say about any one thing. Our job is then to listen and follow... not necessarily easy but it takes a bit of the pressure off of us to make all the decisions alone.

When I read the scriptures of the prophet Isaiah or those written about John the Baptizer, I can see how they lived a life of prayer. Each step they took, each word they said was informed by God and done in the glory of God, to bring the people to God. Wow! Could any one of us ever be like that?! I bet we could but it would take a real change of heart. I bet we each have our moments when we are like that, but as for me, I would say it is fleeting. I may start with good intentions of letting God take the lead but in no time, I am calling all the shots yet again, all by myself. Argghhhh! *Chesed*...see this is the perfect moment to apply

ched toward myself... loving kindness toward one who is so weak in spirit that she can't stay on course in keeping God on the front burner!!

The thing about inviting God in on every decision you make, every action you take, is that, like a pilgrim in the wilderness, you never know what you will end up doing next. Somehow you find the courage to speak to that one you have been avoiding. Somehow, your mind begins to think differently about a situation. Somehow, out of the blue, where anger or hurt once was, compassion enters in and your heart softens and next steps become clear. Somehow, like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz or George Bailey from *It's a Wonderful Life*, you end up back home, but you are not the same person as when you started out. (see reflection for Dec 6, p. 8)

God, help us to see the issue of racism through your eyes. God, please help those policemen. God, please help me know what I can do to help. Open my eyes and my ears so that I might hear and see where I can be of assistance in this matter.

We can trust in God to respond to our prayers. Even if God's response seems to lead us to new and scary places and experiences, we can trust that God will never leave us alone in the wilderness. Because the glory

of the Lord endures forever...and isn't that glorious... that God is ever present to us and for us?

Donna Schaper in the devotional for today reflects on the scripture "The grass withers, the flower fades... but the glory of the Lord endures forever" a line taken from today's lectionary reading in Isaiah 40, verses 1-8. She reminds us that "Advent begs us to prepare for the coming glory."

With some tongue and cheek humor, she suggests the way church people prepare for the coming glory during Advent is by lavishly decorating the church with a mass of Christmas poinsettias. Then she says, with an equal dose of humor, "Others prepare for the glory of the Lord by fixing the universe, despite itself."

And then softening she refers to the practice of preparing "for the inevitable glory of God's arrival as a baby with Advent calendars, opening small doors on large mysteries." She, on the other hand prepares by checking to see if her poinsettias, which she confiscated from the left overs at the church last year, had the courage to bloom again. Through all her humor you get the larger point that by taking small steps, whether that be praying without ceasing, practicing *chesed*, or in sacred ritual, we open the door for our hearts to be changed in large

ways. We open the door to the mystery known as God. It is within that mystery that we will find our way home.

To close please join me in prayer as written by Donna Schapper...

“Glorious God, drown us in traditions of color and flower and let this Advent make us less afraid of the wilting and the fading. Amen.