

PUNCHING HOLES IN THE DARKNESS.

A Homily for the Community at Monte Sano United Methodist.

Robert Benson : 1st March 2015

Good morning to you. Thank you for including me in your worship this day.

I always enjoy being up here on this mountain. I have been here before and I have some friends now.

Including Dale. We have been friends for nigh on twenty-five years now. Long enough to know that we were friends before we even met and will be for e'er should we never see each other again. We have traveled some of the same trails to the same places together. He wears hiking boots, of course. I generally take a taxi and meet him at the bistro at the end of the trail. He counts on me to go ahead and order for him, so that he does not have to eat more granola.

Thank you again, good friend Dale for your hospitality. I am always happy to be with you and your friends.

Dale and I talked about what I was going to talk about this morning. He was full of talk about Revelation and images and saving action and altar art and Matthew and the coming judgement and verb tenses — ‘Notice how washing robes is in the active tense rather than the passive tense,’ he said to me.

He is a preacher, I am a poet. He went to homiletics, I barely passed home room. He works in sermon series, I work in sketchbook scribbles.

His notions and mine of a good sermon on the themes of Revelation are different. Except for where they are exactly the same. We shall see, shall we not. Let us pray —

Almighty God, Author of all things beautiful, the One Whom angels delight to worship in heaven : Be with your servants we pray who seek through their art to perfect the praises of your people.

Grant to them even now glimpses of your beauty and make them at the last worthy to behold your beauty for ever more.

In the Name of the One Who made us, in the name of the One Who comes among us, in the name of the One Who will sustain us until we are Home — Amen, so be it.

Three Scriptures from our Holy Writ :

The first is from John, from his Gospel.

In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God and the Word was God. All that came to be was alive with His life, and without Him was not anything made that was made. In Him was life and that life is the Light of the world. The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness has and will never overcome it.

The next is from Matthew.

When the day comes, the Kingdom will be like this. There were ten girls who went out to meet the bridegroom

So you know the rest of this story, right? I am going to skip over it.

Because if I read it all, then we all will start worrying whether we are good girls or bad, whether we have any oil at all, whether or not ushers are exempt, whether or not there is a rear entrance, and on and on. I want to be sure you hear the word at the end of the story, lines that we often miss.

Keep awake, then; for you never know the day or the hour that the Kingdom will come When I was hungry, you gave me food; when thirsty; you gave me drink;

when I was a stranger, you took me into your home; when naked, you clothed me; when I was ill, you came to my help; when in prison, you visited me And anything you did for one of my brothers or sisters here, however humble, you did for me.

In another place, the One Who Came among us said this : *The Kingdom has already come. It is within you and without you and it is all around you and you do not see it and you do not hear it.*

Evidently, there are two Kingdoms. One is here and now and the other is to come. I live in the first and do not know much about the second.

I am around enough churchfolk to know that some of us are terribly discouraged that we see so few signs of the kingdom that is already here in the days in which we live. We who have been so honestly and powerfully and hopefully proclaiming it sometimes see no signs of it all.

How did we miss it?

And no one else knows much about the second one, either.

What little we know about the next Kingdom comes from John, from his mysterious and often confounding Revelation.

'After this I looked and saw a vast throng, which no one could count, from every nation, of all tribes, peoples, and languages, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb These are the ones who have passed through great ordeals; they are washing their robes to make them white in the blood of the Lamb The Lamb will be their shepherd and will guide them to the springs of the water of life.

My father's favorite passage of the Holy Writ was the Prologue to the Gospel of John. *'All that came to be was alive with his life,'* were his favorite words, I think.

He got it in his head that it would be a good idea for the youth choir — as some people called it — to recite dramatic readings from Scripture after we had scared people to death with our music. We, who thought of ourselves as the vanguard of the Christian rock and roll movement, thought it was completely ridiculous and decidedly unhip that we should stop in between what were clearly powerful and penetrating versions of ‘modern youth music’, a new music that was going to revolutionize the faith, to quote in unison some piece of Scripture. It was lame, to the third power.

Except that the words have never left me.

‘All that came to be was alive with this life.’ Evidently, wherever there is life at all, it is the Life of the Light of the world, the life of the Word first spoken.

My father lived that way his whole life, under the influence of those few words. At least the part of his life that I saw and can remember.

Even the parts that I cannot remember, the parts that come to me by way of story or letter or photograph in these near thirty years since we could no longer reach him on the telephone or see him standing at the end of the driveway or hear his tiny voice on a stage or in our ear — he has never actually left those whom he loved and who loved him in return. — remind me that he truly believed that all that was alive was alive with the Light of the world.

He would walk into a shop in Nantucket and while the rest of us would see pretty stuff to take home, he would see that the eye of the buyer had somehow seen into the heart of the Light of the One who Came Among Us.

He would read a book that all of us read as well, and we would see its power and he would see its pain.

He would take us all to a party and we would would have a grand time

and he would have spent the afternoon in a corner listening to someone who had no one to listen to them.

He would spend his day at some large conference, being the gospel hero onstage in front of a few thousand people, and call me long-distance at midnight to read a sentence from some obscure monk, a sentence calling him to humility.

I have come to believe that what my father taught me was this : If what you are looking at has life, then that life is a reflection of the Light of the world. All that is alive is alive with that life.

Whenever you see light, it is *that* Light. There is no other source of Light.

And the darkness has and will never overcome it.

I have lived a religious life. Not to be confused with a pure and smooth and clean life, but a religious life. A life lived within the frame and reference and strictures and habits and practices of Christian religious folks in the times in which I have lived.

I think I am ready to say this : The point of all our religious life is to learn to live in the Light, the Light given by the One Who Came. And the religious life can often lead to exactly that. I know, I have seen it. And so have you. But it can also lead only to itself if we who are religious are not careful.

We who travel the road of the religious need to be sure that we understand that the destination is the life of the Spirit. Religion, even the one we hold dear, is not a home, it is a road.

We will not be known as the children of the Holy One because we are

successfully religious, but because we learn to live and love in the Light. We will not live such a life simply because we know how to behave in what we think will be the Light of the world to come. The Life is meant to be lived in the Light of the Kingdom that is already here.

It is spring and I am at home in one of my birthplaces. If you have been born again as often as I have, then you have several birthplaces.

Nearly twenty-five years ago I first came to this this old Methodist campground in what passes for mountains in northern Alabama. Almost forty years old at the time, more broken than I ever expected to be in my life, and even more broken than I knew at the time. People I did not know took me in there, and became my friends.

It is where I learned about the art of the liturgy and the practice of prayer, and the wisdom of drawing on the wisdom of the ones who went before us. It is where I learned to make a friend and to keep one through years and miles and heartaches and changes. It is where I first sat in a circle and learned to tell my truth to another.

Now I am sitting in one again. The circle is different now, I am one of those who teaches or presents or speaks or whatever the proper way to describe what writers do when they are not writing and are asked to come and be a guru. The best I can ever do, it seems to me, is to simply to be present. among the people you face when you stand up each day at the appointed time. It is holy ground and the best that you can hope for is that you will not get in the way.

‘The job is impossible,’ wrote Clive Barnes about his art and craft, ‘and one can only hope that one will be only moderately incompetent.’

It is evening and our days' work is done. The folks who are the leaders for this week gather up for yet another round of death by sharing. We have said our prayers and taught the classes and managed the logistics and put out the fires that broke out behind the scenes, and we are all tired and spent.

And one of my first friends from those long ago days is sitting in the circle.

'So, Robert, how is your journey these days?' he says.

I have a split second to make a choice.

On the one hand, I can say the things that I know they would like to hear me say. My life is good, my work is going well. Everyone at my house is happy, joyous and free. I am being blessed beyond measure in my art and my home and my spiritual life. Are those not the things that an adjunct faculty member should say? After all, I have been invited here because of my rich wisdom and deep piety and balanced life, have I not?.

On the other hand.

On the other hand, I am so discouraged on the evening they ask this question I can barely breathe.

Some of my discouragement is purely personal. But some of my discouragement is based in the life of the world in which we live. On that evening, I found myself thinking, yet again, that if the kingdom has already come, for the life of me, I cannot see it.

My old friend looked at me, with that same sweet grin with which he has always held me, so I told the truth. If you cannot tell the truth at home, then where are you going to tell it.

I generally try never to blurt. I could not help myself.

I complained bitterly about what I perceived as the failure of the Church to respond to the several important issues of the times — issues involving climate and tolerance and feeding people and caring for people's basic conditions.

I ranted about our collective culpability in wars that made no sense, political struggles that hurt people instead of helping them, our seeming quickness to divide and exclude rather than include and be welcoming.

I criticized our leaders, from the pulpit to the parish, from the city council to the Congress, from the evangelical to the enlightened.

It was honest, and it was quiet as I seldom raise my voice. But it was awful. As I voiced my hopelessness, I was painfully aware of my helplessness.

My friends simply listened to me. Bless them, they are better men than me.

One of them was wise, one of them was gentle, one of them opened a window for me that will change the way I see the world for the rest of my life. I went into our time together an angry, disappointed, discouraged man. I came out very different.

'All that came to be was alive with this Life. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will never overcome it.'

I can hear my father saying it to us, and I can hear the motley crowd of young people at the church saying it back to him.

I hear my three friends saying to me that there is a very real possibility that I will never notice the Light of the Kingdom that is already here if I keep spending all of my time looking at the dark that seems all around us.

‘The kingdom does not come at future time and place, it is already here. It is within you and it is without you and it is all around you and you do not see it and you do not bear it.’

The kingdom is not confined to those rooms where we gather up to worship and practice our piety and devotion. It is everywhere and we simply do not see it, He seems to have been saying, saying to them and saying to me and saying to you.

Perhaps it is because we are not looking. Perhaps we are so aware of the dark that we simply do not see the Light.

One of my father’s dearest friends was a man named Champion. His mother, perhaps in a fit of hope or longing gave him that name. His friends have always just called him Champ.

Champ lived in the same house with my folks when they were all at seminary in Kansas City. I have no memory of it, but he would babysit me and my brother, while my Dad went to classes. He still takes credit for teaching me to ride a tricycle.

Champ is a larger than life sort of character — raconteur, writer, preacher, professor, theologian, pundit. The sort of person who commands a room whenever he walks into one. Just thinking about him makes me smile.

Champ’s voice came to me across the years that night as I sat with my friends talking about the dark and the Light.

I ended up with a fair number of my father’s letters after he passed away. Many of them are from Champ. Just holding the old onionskin with the typos makes me weep with joy.

‘Keep punching holes in the darkness, my friend,’ is how he would close

his letters. Evidently, that is how the Light of the sneaks in, I have begun to say to myself in reply.

I stumbled upon two things very important that night in the circle with my friends with Champ's voice ringing in my ears.

One was that my friends evidently love me enough to listen to me, hear me, and hold me close in spite of me.

The other was this : The Light is in the world. The Kingdom has already come. My not seeing it is not a function of it not being here among us, it is a function of my only looking at the dark.

People I know, people I do not know, people I will meet someday, people I will never know, people down the pew from me, people across the street — untold numbers of them — are all punching holes in the darkness. They are the ones who are washing their robes and somebody else's to boot.

'Starting now,' a favorite sung phrase from an Ingrid Michaelson song rings in my ears these days — poets are found everywhere, if you listen.

Starting now, I will spend my days and hours and minutes looking for the Light of the world. I do not want to be a happy idiot who is not aware of the Dark that is around us.

But I will live my days, the ones I have left, believing the Darkness will never overcome us. Starting now, I plan to no longer miss it by looking only at the dark.

Keep punching holes in the darkness, my friends. That is precisely the way the Light of the world sneaks in.