

Seeking the Depths...
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Shortly after the reading in Luke, the Pharisees ask Jesus a question: "When will the kingdom of God come?" And Jesus replies:

"The coming of the kingdom cannot be observed, and no one will announce, 'Look, here it is,' or, 'There it is.' For behold, the kingdom of God is among you."

Whenever I think about the kingdom of God being among us, I think of Michelangelo's painting: "The Creation of Man." It was painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in 1512 and depicts God's finger touching that of man – in an act of physical or intellectual creation.

The image of this painting and Jesus' statements about the kingdom of God being among us (or at hand), combines with a third piece of ancient Eastern sensibility: liminality. In Greek: limnos and in Latin: limen – the meaning is the same – that of a threshold: an in-between time when what was, is no longer, and what will be is not yet. Some think of it as a time rich with ambiguity, uncertainty, and the possibility of creative fomentation: that is a deliberate and intentional triggering of trouble.

Bring these three together and I think we can create a landscape that embraces both of today's readings in a way that has relevance for us in our daily lives.

Let's see what happens: First, back to Jeremiah:

We all have an idea of Jeremiah, this prophet who began his ministry in Jerusalem around 627 BCE and who witnessed the final years of Jerusalem before it fell to Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BCE.

This morning Jeremiah is instructing the captives to settle in for the long-haul, contradicting what some others had been saying would be a short stay with the Babylonians and Nebuchadnezzar. Further, he tells the captives to keep their faith and way of life alive by building, planting, marrying, and multiplying. One might get the sense that they are actually in some form of incubation, a threshold or liminality for what is next, following what has just transpired. A time rich in uncertainty and possibility – certainly with a tinge of the potential for trouble – now or later; but without question recognizing and remembering that the kingdom of God, the God of Jacob and Abraham was with them – as indicated by the

opening words to this letter: “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.”

What emerged, in fact, was that Babylon became the most important center of Jewish life during the Exile. Imagine that...

We come to the reading, perhaps, with our own sense of the meaning of captivity of modern or post-modern times, but its meaning was different back in the 6th Century BCE. The Babylonian policy allowed the Jews to settle in towns and villages along the Chebar River, which was actually an irrigation channel. They were allowed to live together in communities, to farm, and to perform other sorts of labor to earn income. Many Jews eventually became wealthy. In any case the Jews were treated well, and tablets that were found near the Ishtar Gate confirmed this. The Ishtar Gate, by the way was one of the eight gates of the inner city of Babylon built during Nebuchadnezzar’s reign. It was the main gate to the city of Babylon, dedicated to the Goddess Ishtar, the Babylonian High-Mother-Goddess of fertility, love, and war.

So, surrounded by captors, living along an irrigation channel (an interesting symbol in itself, bounded by foreign gods, rulers, and ways of life – the Jews overcame their hardships and grew in faith and numbers for the kingdom of God was with them, among them, and they navigated the rich uncertainty of their times – because they really, really believed, and when in doubt – they always ended up back relying upon faith in uncertain times.

The limen was a place of fomentation for them that some say continues today, forty years after the establishment of the Jewish State of Israel.

But that’s moving a bit too far ahead. Let’s shift over to Luke’s teaching this morning. In reading several commentaries on these verses of Scripture, one in particular caught my eye. It was an article by an Episcopal priest, Mark Harris who titled his commentary: “And Jesus Laughed.”¹ He broke with the general “rebuke” idea – that is that Jesus’ comments about, “Where were the other nine who were healed,” suggesting instead that Jesus tossed off that comment with a laugh.

To make his case, Mr. Harris goes back to an earlier section of Luke, in which Jesus sends out the seventy into towns and villages around Jerusalem with commissions to heal the sick and say, “The kingdom of God has come near (in touch with) you. (Luke 10:9) They went out healing in Jesus’ name making the connection in this “in-between, threshold time” between Jesus and the advancing kingdom.

¹ Mark Harris, an Episcopal priest, is executive director of the Global Episcopal Mission Network and the author of The Challenge of Change: The Anglican Communion in the Post-Modern Era (Church Publications). He lives in Newark, Delaware. This article appeared in *The Christian Century*, September 26-October 3, 2001. p.16

Luke records that when the followers returned, that they reported back “joyfully,” and Jesus rejoiced, as well and prayed: “in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou has hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea Father, for such was thy gracious will’” (10:21) It seemed to be a celebration of a time rich with what was emerging from the uncertainty of just what this power they shared in was capable of achieving. It also appeared from Luke’s writing that there was some relief that the power of which they spoke and experienced – had not been given to the oppressors of their time, that in fact, they had had their faith affirmed – even in the midst of their oppressive State and had been given a power beyond that of the ruling bodies.

A time of a little fomentation, perhaps?

So, against this backdrop, Harris thinks that when the one out of the nine lepers returned, that Jesus – continuing to be amazed at what this power could do – sort of smiled, shook his head, and said, “weren’t there ten of you? Go, your faith has healed you. Today, you came near the kingdom of God and you were healed – more deeply than in having your illness cured.”

Could it have been that Jesus, too, was walking in this place of uncertainty, learning more and more about the power with each passing day and interaction with those around him, discovering more and more that this kingdom of God was the liminality he knew, that the finger of the Creator was, in fact, a hand on his shoulder, guiding, encouraging, and giving him strength to perhaps the greatest of instigative acts that God and humankind were about to participate in on the intersecting bars of the executioner’s cross?

What emerges for me from these readings and the study behind them is that these are stories, narratives about the journeys of faithful people – really believing, relying on one another and faith, when in doubt, and trusting in God. They have found the “kingdom of God” the presence of God – in a way that transcends their surroundings, conditions, and uncertainty.

They not only believed, but they relied on their beliefs – individually – like Jeremiah and Jesus – and in community: like Jeremiah and Jesus.

So, what’s the lesson? I can only tell you what it is for me and then you can go from there. For me, it is about knowing that whatever happens – whether captive or witnesses to the amazing power of God in our lives – or anywhere in between, that we are going to be just fine because this is all about the kingdom of God – better: all about God. The more I can move into that direction with abandon – the more useful and faithful I will become.

The more likely I am to say, “Geez, did you see that!” And the more likely I am

to give thanks, which I think is the greatest indication – for me – that I really do get it – even in the midst of all the uncertainty of these, my small slice – of the times we share...we say thank you.