

The Ancient Sleep of the Heart

Jeremiah 14.7-9, 19-22 (The Message)

September 11, 2011

Holy Spirit - giving life to all life, moving all creatures, washing them clean, wiping out their mistakes, healing their wounds - you are our true life, luminous, wonderful, awakening the heart from its ancient sleep.

- Hildegard of Bingen (adapted)

We know we're guilty. We've lived bad lives— but do something, God. Do it for your sake! Time and time again we've betrayed you. No doubt about it—we've sinned against you. Hope of Israel! Our only hope! Israel's last chance in this trouble! Why are you acting like a tourist, taking in the sights, here today and gone tomorrow? Why do you just stand there and stare, like someone who doesn't know what to do in a crisis? But God, you are, in fact, here, here with us! You know who we are—you named us! Don't leave us in the lurch. God, have you said your final No to Judah? Can you simply not stand Zion any longer? If not, why have you treated us like this, beaten us nearly to death? We hoped for peace— nothing good came from it; we looked for healing— and got kicked in the stomach. We admit, O God, how badly we've lived, and our ancestors, how bad they were. We've sinned, they've sinned, we've all sinned against you! Your reputation is at stake! Don't quit on us! Don't walk out and abandon your glorious Temple! Remember your covenant. Don't break faith with us! Can the no-gods of the godless nations cause rain? Can the sky water the earth by itself? You're the one, O God, who does this. So you're the one for whom we wait. You made it all, you do it all.

“We hoped for peace - nothing good came from it...” Jeremiah says. It occurs to me that this expression describes our situation ten years removed from that infamous September 11 tragedy. There is little evidence of peace. Sure, there are pockets here and there of good will and cooperation. This afternoon in Kansas City, for example, Christians, Muslims, and friends from other faiths will walk for peace in an event sponsored by the Kansas City Interfaith Council. This walk and events like it across the land signal hope and good will; but at the same time raucous voices continue to call for vengeance in expressions full of anger and hatred. Many continue the

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search for a scapegoat to blame for this tragedy, and unfortunately there is one ready to hand for many people.

Why have we not found peace? We have mourned our dead and built numerous monuments, waged two wars and toppled a dangerous dictator. And we've even executed Osama bin Laden. Yet we have not found peace. I suspect that Hildegard of Bingen is on to something when she observes that our hearts slumber in an ancient sleep. Why do our hearts sleep? Why can't they wake to the beauty and goodness all around us? As the Psalmist says in so many words, even in times of brokenness and stress there is beauty and goodness coursing around and through us... yet our hearts sleep.ⁱ

I would suggest that this slumber is caused by fear. Our hearts are bound by a fear that isolates, separates, and cocoons us away from the world; and even as we walk in the light of day we're bound, we slumber and are unable to embrace the goodness and beauty of life, and unable to connect intimately with others. When I say "heart," I'm not referring to the biological organism - itself a wonder- that beats within our breast. I'm referring to the very spirit, the very soul of humankind. I'm talking about that *Je ne sais quoi* that was created in the very image of God ...and yet sleeps an ancient sleep.

Fear holds us fast asleep. Fear, firstly, of being wrong. You may have heard about the old Texan who famously said, "I may not always be right but, by God, I ain't never wrong." As a matter of fact, I once met this man, or one just like him. He lived beneath Chris and me in our first apartment in Houston. He hunted deer in or out of season – as he pleased - he stuck a bumper sticker on his car to remind his fellow Texans of their right to secede from the union at any time, and he exhibited a vigilante spirit ready to punish wrongdoers when the law failed to do so. This guy knew the truth and stuck to his guns. Most of us aren't so lucky. Most of us are afraid of being wrong, or more aptly put, afraid of failing, so we don't reach out beyond ourselves. Heaven forbid, we might fail and look foolish. And so we sleep.

Sometimes our hearts sleep, secondly, because we are afraid of being exposed. We know in our heart of hearts that the lofty ideals we claim for our lives, for our country, are just that ...ideals. We can't claim them as fully realized possessions, wrap ourselves in the flag, and decry anyone who dares challenge us. In our heart we know that we have to live into these ideals. They demand much of us, and we are often not up to their challenge. Yet we seem to be afraid to admit that

they are always out front, always requiring more of us: more effort, more vigilance, more self-sacrifice.

Let me be the first to admit; I'm not there yet. I admire and am committed to the ideals of freedom and equality to which we aspire, but I don't always live up to them. Neither does "We the People," but we can live into them, we can aspire to more, and in so doing honor the lives of the many who have been sacrificed in defense of those ideals, and who gaze on us asking only for honesty and more effort. Can we, will we hold up these honorable ideals and aspire to them day by day?

Our hearts sleep because we're afraid of being wrong, afraid of being exposed and, thirdly, afraid of what we don't know. I've run out of words to defend the religion of Islam against the accusation of terrorism. I don't know what else to say. We don't hold the Christian faith to blame for the bombings in Oklahoma City. We don't hold the Christian faith to blame because our beloved land is home to countless paramilitary groups that bear a striking resemblance to terrorist cells. But because we don't understand our Muslim neighbors and their ways, they easily become a scapegoat for our loss. It is interesting - but not surprising - to note that a recent poll indicated that an overwhelming majority of Americans who harbor no ill will for peace loving Muslims actually know some Muslims, or at least know something about them. In like manner, an overwhelming majority of Americans who blame Muslims – all of them – for the 9/11 tragedy have never met a Muslim, or studied anything about their religion and culture. Everything they know they have learned from fear-mongering radio talk shows, some of them Christian in name, what they read in tabloids, or a skewed view of history. I've run out of words with which to defend Islam against the charge of terrorism, but as a Christian, as a pastor, I must continue to try; I must reaffirm and reassert the need to hold those accountable who *are* accountable, and not poison our world with a false hatred.

Lord knows, there's bloodshed and blame enough to go around when you look back in history. All three of the faiths that hearken back to Abraham - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - have blood on their hands. But that is all the more reason to put anger, hatred, and prejudice behind us. Put the blood behind us ...be the first to say we will not go there again; be the first to say we will look for peace in God rather than in revenge or conquest. We will look for peace and find it in God ...or we won't find it at all. We are not capable – on our own – to take such a

revolutionary, radical stance as peace and tolerance for all. But it's not up to us alone. We are incapable, this is true, but the God of Jeremiah, the God of the Psalmist; the God of Jesus is present to us, in us, and yearns to be present through us into our world. Let's put our fear behind us. Let's go forward with God unafraid. We will fail. We will stumble. We will fall short of the ideals that are God inspired in this country that we love so dearly. But with God's help we can - one day at a time, one step at a time, one relationship at a time - find shalom, find peace in God's world.

¹ Psalm 84.5-7 (The Message), "And how blessed all those in whom you live, whose lives become roads you travel; They wind through lonesome valleys, come upon brooks, discover cool springs and pools brimming with rain!