

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable to you oh God, my strength and my joy... Amen

For those of you who don't know, I started my pastoral internship during the peak of COVID, before there was a vaccine, during the George Floyd protests, and the following riots that rattled our country.

Not only that, but I was on internship very far from home, as I was called to a congregation in Vancouver, Washington, which happens to be just north of Portland, Oregon.

And the first time I ventured into Portland was with a co-worker from my internship site. It was a beautiful sunny day and my co-worker decided to show me one of her favorite running paths—the Portland bridges.

She offered to drive and, on the drive, I noticed how beautiful and clean Vancouver was. Then we crossed over the sparkling waters of the Columbia River as we drove over the bridge and into Oregon.

And how quickly the landscape changed... There seemed to be an abundance of spray paint everywhere, covering bridges, buildings, and signs. There was garbage, litter, and dirty clothing strewn all over, and tents upon tents covered the landscape.

Now these were not the fancy tents, the one's most people think of when embarking on a journey out west.

No. The tents I saw were full of holes, mold, tape, and were barely standing. In fact, there was even some make-shift tents that were created out of garbage bags or worn-out tarps. And there were tons of houseless people.

This was truly upsetting and heartbreaking... And it didn't stop there, as while I was on internship, that trend trickled over into parts of Vancouver as houseless people took root there.

I was so overwhelmed by this situation, that I didn't know what to do to help... And so, I didn't do anything, well besides pray about it...

After all what could one graduate student living on a small stipend do to make a difference in this situation?

I know that this topic has many, many differing opinions. For example, why are people houseless when there are so many places looking for help right now?

Which is followed by – well, how can you apply for a job when the application calls for an address, phone number, and email – because if you don't have a house, you don't have an address, and you most likely don't have a phone or a computer to check email... And then to start a job you also need a drivers license, a social security card, or a passport for legal purposes...

Needless to say, this issue is vastly complex. There are a ton of moving parts, and a ton of differing views and opinions...

And yet, this issue is nothing new...

As we heard Jesus tell the story about a poor man named Lazarus.

A story that embodied contrasts and reversals...

For example, the rich man has no name, yet the poor man does – he is Lazarus.

The rich man dresses in purple—which is a symbol of wealth and luxury, while Lazarus is dressed in sores.

The rich man feasts sumptuously and Lazarus is lucky to just think about getting the crumbs that fall to the floor.

The rich man has a proper burial, Lazarus does not—but Lazarus is carried away by the angels.

And the story is concluded by the final reversal of all... where the rich man is tormented in Hades, while Lazarus is nestled by Abraham's side.

Yet throughout all of these reversals, we never hear that the rich man was bad or evil... The only thing he was faulted with was not seeing Lazarus and therefore his needs.

So how does this story fit with us today?

Specifically, here at St. John... As you all donate either time, through the community dinners, or money, through different drives, to those who are houseless or in need.

And since we have our routine donations be it of time, money, or both... It can be hard to hear this parable in regards to everyday living...

Because this topic is overwhelming. Which becomes more complex since most conversations tend to be rooted in politics.

So perhaps one thing we can do is reframe how we think. By taking off our political lens, and using our theological lens.

And when we go back to Scripture, I can't help but notice the emphasis placed on Moses and the prophets.

And from that, we think Moses, hey, the 10 commandments. Which are definitely important...

But, when we go back and re-read the Old Testament, there is so much more to Moses. As Moses also led his people up out of Egypt, and into the wilderness, where they wandered and wandered, waiting to enter the promise land.

So, let's try thinking about Moses the wanderer, and how Moses chose to follow God despite the difficulties of the wilderness.

Because after all, as we wander through life, we also have a choice... And if you are here, I'm guessing that is also your choice to follow God... But in that choice, we also have other choices.

For example, we can choose to be present in our wandering, to absorb the landscape around us and within us... Or, we can choose to be tunnel visioned and focus on our own footsteps.

After all, the rich man was so focused on his own footsteps that it blinded him from seeing Lazarus. And because he didn't see him, he couldn't help him.

Meaning Jesus is telling us how imperative it is to be fully present... So that we can experience the world as it actually is...

And this dovetails beautifully with the teachings of the prophets...

Because prophets were not so much about predicting the future. Prophets interpreted the present age.

And they did this by being fully present and acknowledging societal life.

Which allowed them to identify injustice and corrupt systems. And then through God's word, called people to change their behavior. As God called people to repent.

And we all need the reminder of repentance from time to time. As repentance means quite literally to turn from what you are doing, and turn towards what God commands...

But this of course can be uncomfortable.

Because to change our behavior we need to be present in our bodies and the world around us.

And when you tune into your senses and absorb the world around you... God can show you things you didn't notice before.

And, yes at times that is going to be information overload and overwhelming...

Like all of the tents and houseless people I saw out west... But the good news is, is that things can always change, or be reversed.

For example, the city of Vancouver has now organized safe rest villages for people in need.

Because all people deserve to have their needs met.

And you, just might be the person to help someone meet their needs...

But before you can do that, you also need to have your needs met. You know the classic example of when you fly on an airplane... Fix your own oxygen first, and then help others.

So, take time to be present with yourself and present with God. As this will allow you to be fully present with others. And to notice the wilderness around you.

Because Jesus calls us to be a part of that hard work, to reverse the evils and injustices in this world.

As that is what Christ did on the cross. Christ reversed the cosmic order of death.

So, that there is nothing to fear.... So that we can invite the kingdom of God here and now.

So, root yourself in that hope, open yourself to courage, and be present, because when you experience the world, God can guide you to be the change the world so desperately needs... Amen