

Movement for Wholeness: The Journey Is Home 9-13-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Isaiah 43: 16-21

¹⁶Thus says the Lord,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
¹⁷who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
¹⁸Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
¹⁹I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
²⁰The wild animals will honour me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
²¹ the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

Micah 6:6-8 What God Requires

⁶With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?
⁷Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Religion has gotten a bad name in recent years. In fact, many people who say they believe in God, people who have a hunger for a spiritual connection, have given up on religion. It seems to many, that rather than being part of the solution, religion has too often been part of the problem. Many see the way religion has been used to raise some up and put others down, and its seeming lack of care about the big issues we face as a global community. Religion has become associated with narrow-mindedness and self-righteousness, not to mention hypocrisy. And the truth of the matter is, too often religion and sacred texts like the Bible have been used as weapons creating division and strife, drawing lines in the sand and excusing inexcusable behavior. It's no wonder people are leery of religion.

But religion, in and of itself is not bad. The purpose is noble - to share beliefs and engage in practices that connect people with God. And, if you think about it, we do need some structure; some common ground; something around which to gather and find meaning and encouragement and connection. Religion is surely meant to enhance life

and to make people better and the world better. When it is at its best, religion does just that. It enlarges life, bringing hope and grace and a sense of abundance and generosity and peace. Religion at its worst diminishes life, fostering division and greed and self-centeredness; hatred and violence.

The prophet Micah was called to speak at a time when religion was at its worst. Micah looked beneath the surface of Judah's society and saw fundamental flaws that would result in its downfall; like greed and dishonesty, callous disregard for the poor and unethical business practices. And all this while Judah publicly professed to be faithful to the one true God and to the divine law handed down to the people during their wilderness wandering. They had become hypocrites giving a bad name to religion, and, as the prophet Micah proclaimed, God was angry because of it. After all, if the purpose of religion is to connect people with the majesty and mystery of God and instead they give God a bad name, that just doesn't sit well.

When religion loses its way, when it is no longer an agent of God's love and grace, when it becomes too narrow or corrupt or petty, it is right to be skeptical. That's when it is time to remember that God is bigger than religion. The great, "I Am," the God who said, "I will be who I will be" cannot be put in a box or confined to some set of beliefs or ideas. God is always mystery and love and energy and grace that we only get glimpses of. God is alive and doing a new thing, as the prophet Isaiah tells. So when religion becomes static, when it dwells in the past or refuses to address the needs and concerns of today, or worse, confuses the beliefs and practices to connect *with God for God*, it no longer serves its purpose.

So if religion is about connecting with God, the source of life, that which is beyond us as well as in and through us, what does that look like when it is working? That's where Micah is so helpful. These verses I read earlier are kind of a "nutshell" version of how it is that we connect with God. "Shall I come before God with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? How about thousands of rams, or ten

thousands of rivers of oil? How about my firstborn? Is that the kind of offering or sacrifice I need to make to be close to God?" No.

"What does God require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Jesus put it another way. He said to love the Lord your God with all you heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself. That is the heart of religion because that is the heart of God. And there as we experience the heart of God we connect with what really matters, there we find healing and wholeness, and there we are released from those things which hold us back from seeing and entering into the new thing God is doing.

Today we begin a new focus or theme for our worship which will continue all the way to Advent. Three words to captivate our imagination and invigorate our spirit - Movement for Wholeness. Jesus didn't come to start a new religion. He didn't come to give us the answers. In fact, he often answered questions by asking questions. He wasn't interested in easy answers or one-liners. Jesus didn't give formulas to memorize or creeds to pronounce. Instead, Jesus told

stories and expected his followers to uncover deeper and deeper levels of meaning; to struggle; to wrestle with the important questions - the ones that matter to God and which bring the potential to tap into abundant life. With Jesus, it wasn't so much about the law as it was about the spirit. What brings connection? What brings healing? What does love demand? Those were the key questions for Jesus - questions worth living into and even dying for.

You see, Jesus saw life with God as a journey unfolding in every situation. When Jesus called someone he didn't say, "Come, believe in me." Rather, he said, "Come, follow me." The early followers of Jesus were called followers of The Way. Faith in Jesus was a lifestyle, a way of being in the world, a way of moving toward wholeness, a way of engaging people and systems with the power of God's transforming love. Following Jesus, we understand that responding in love and compassion is more important than being right. Giving to one in need is more important than being on time. Healing a wound is more important than

the Sabbath law. And asking the right questions is more important than having all the answers.

I went to a church conference some years back and the speaker offered what I thought a most helpful image. He said, "If you think about God as the center, then it is in moving toward God that we find abundant life. It doesn't matter so much where you are or how far from the center find yourself, what matters is that you're heading in the right direction.

If you look at your bulletin cover or at one of these banners, you see there is a center of energy and power. If you look closely you see the form of a human body moving toward that center, that place of wholeness. You will also notice that there are many of these human figures of various sizes and markings, and they are in various places surrounding the center. But they are all moving in the same direction. They seem to be pulled toward that light, toward that place of healing. Between now and the end of November when Advent begins, we will explore having a living faith that connects us with and causes us to be a

movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. If you want to know the weekly themes you'll find them on our website - www.fccames.org. Once we give up the need to have certainty, we are free to be at home living into the *Mystery* as *God* draws us in and makes us whole and empowers us to be healing agents in the world. I invite you to come to worship and fellowship and classes and prayer gatherings not so much to get answers, but to join the journey as *God* leads us and does a new thing in our midst. Amen.