

December 4, 2011

Isaiah 40:1-11
Revelation 3:20

“Hurting and Holidays”

Forty Christmases ago I was a 21 year old new mom of a 3 month old baby. We lived over 2,000 miles from any friend or family member in a small town in Quebec. Rimouski was 200 miles northeast of Quebec City on the St. Lawrence River, and was a town where English was never spoken.

I worried through that holiday with nagging concerns deep inside me. The baby cried so much for so many hours. Doctors told me it was just colic. Sometimes fear flashed through me; sometimes anger- even towards the baby: “Why won’t you stop crying?”

Finally, in late January, we got a diagnosis: hydrocephalus, “water on the brain”. Our daughter was admitted for further tests, then moved 200 miles to a hospital in Quebec City for surgery. The baby was in the hospital for one month. Parents were not allowed to stay overnight.

It was then I learned why we say emotional pain “hurts”. I learned why we call sorrow “heartache”. I marveled in some little scientific corner of my brain as I observed:

My heart really hurts!

Separated from my child, I found my arms literally ACHED to hold her.

Winter Carnival was going on around me. I looked at people in the streets and it seemed like they existed in another dimension. None of it seemed real.

The end of this story is happy- the surgery was successful with no further surgery needed until our daughter was 14—but that’s another story.

My experience taught me that life includes pain. There are times when we hurt. The hurt actually hurts, it aches, whatever kind it is--- physical, emotional, spiritual.

And I learned that hurt is even more painful when others around you are celebrating; when they are “merry” like at Christmas.

The realization of this truth has led us to offer a “Longest Night” service, to be held Wednesday, Dec. 21, at 7 p.m. in the chapel. Rev. Tom Walker will lead our worship. This is a service on the longest night of the year, and is for all whose hurt is accentuated by the holiday season: the bereaved, divorced, unemployed, those battling illness.

Hurting and holidays: how can we draw them together?

Well, I believe the message of Christmas is meant for the hurting, more than the “merry”. Let me explain.

In Revelation 3:20 Jesus says, “I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”

Many of you probably remember a sweet picture that depicts this verse. Jesus, shining with light, stands at a door poised to knock. The image has been cherished as a visual metaphor of how it is with God and humans.... About how Jesus INVITES, rather than FORCES us to be in relationship with him. The God we discover in Christ is not a coercive God.

I cherish these truths. I do believe God invites and is not coercive in his dealings with us.

But, one image alone cannot contain God and God’s ways.

About 18 years ago I was dealing with significant chronic physical pain. I did not know that it would soon be diagnosed as a condition called fibromyalgia.

At a day of retreat and renewal for clergy, we were drawn into a guided meditation based on Revelation 3:20. I saw myself in a bare room, like an austere hospital room or a prison cell. I was seated on a narrow bed, huddled into myself, aching with pain. The leader kept encouraging us to hear Christ at the door, calling and knocking. We were invited to picture ourselves opening that door. I couldn’t. I just couldn’t move.

Suddenly, in my mind’s (or spirit’s!) eye, the light in the small room began to change. It had been cold, filled with blue light...now it turned amber, golden, rich like honey. And to my surprise the door crashed open and in

came Christ. He was full of energy and vitality. I could feel both being transmitted to me. At first my image of Christ was similar to the painting based on the verse from Revelation, but then he became something like a lion cub, and so did I. His message filled my heart: “I’ve come to get you out of here...let’s go!” We ran off like playful cubs to a sun-drenched beach where we played in the waves and the sand.

That prayer experience taught me:

- I have a vivid imagination through which God speaks to me in prayer;
- The image from Revelation isn’t the whole story.
- Yes, there is freedom for us to choose Christ or not. He will not FORCE us.
- However, there is NO LIMIT to the lengths God will go in order to reach us.

Dare I say this? I think Jesus actually crashes through doors sometimes. He crashes in the way a mom or dad will crash through a burning hallway to rescue their child. He crashes through saying, “It’s me! It’s going to be all right! I’ve got you, now! I’ve got you!”

The image from Revelation must be accompanied by the Christmas story. The Christmas story is the answer to the question, “Who can help me when I’m hurting?” The Christmas story is DIRECTED TO the hurting, rather than the “merry”.

What is in this Christmas story? The testimony of our God...who CRASHES through the doors of eternity into TIME, who CRASHES through the doors of divinity into HUMANITY, who CRASHES through the doors of heavenly peace into EARTHLY STRIFE.... To be born in the flesh, a vulnerable, tiny baby in a cold shelter for animals on a dark night.

Who can help us when we’re hurting? The One who came, who lived, who died, who rose... who will gladly crash through all doors to reach us saying, “I’m here now—I’ve got you.... I’ve got you now”. Will we welcome his embrace? Will we follow where he leads? Will we put him above everything? Will we speak of him to others? Will we?