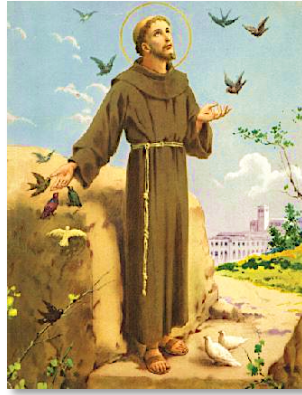


“Seeds of Transformation”

Rev. David Gregory

January 17, 2021

Epiphany 2



Readings

John O’Donohue in *To Bless the Space Between Us*

When we yield to helplessness, we strengthen the hand of those who would destroy. When we choose indifference, we betray our world. Yet the world is not decided by action alone. It is decided more by consciousness and spirit; they are the secret sources of all action and behavior Even in your own hidden life, you can become a powerful agent of transformation in a broken, darkened world.

An excerpt from the *Prayer of St. Francis* (traditional)

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace;
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
And where there is sadness, joy.

We gather this week to offer prayers for our country, that the transfer of power in our nation’s capital will remain peaceful and without any more of the turmoil we have seen in recent days. We pray for the safety of our newly elected leaders, for their families, for members of Congress, for law enforcement, for the National Guard, and for everyone working around the clock to preserve our Constitution. We also pray for millions of people whose lives have been deeply affected by the pandemic, for the spirits of the departed, and for those who have been left to grieve them. We hold in the light all of those at work on the front lines, in health care, in the food supply, and those who are working to mitigate and to vanquish the corona virus. These are just a few of the many prayers that are being offered, and while we affirm the intention and the power of each one of them, it seems like we should be able to do more.

In many cases we have put feet to our prayers. We have voted, and we've encouraged others to do so. We have worked and advocated for everyone's right to vote. We've written letters, emails, postcards, and blog posts. We've lobbied our elected officials to try to do everything possible to ensure the continuation of our democracy. We've been horrified by the recent violence on Capitol Hill, watching aghast as events have played out. Our seeming helplessness has not kept us from being consumed by the things we have seen and heard, as if the world will collapse if we should look away. So we've prayed, we've acted, and we've watched with as much attention, energy, and focus as we can muster. Having done everything that we possibly can, we may still find ourselves asking, "What now?"

One of our oft-quoted poets and seers is the late John O'Donohue, whose words continue to challenge us, and whose ideas provide a lens through which we see the evolving oneness of earth and spirit. A dozen years after his death, he still provides us with expansive metaphors, allowing us to see God, the world, and ourselves in ways that we might otherwise miss. His final work, *To Bless the Space Between Us*, contains poetic blessings to address nearly every human emotion, experience, or endeavor. The final section of the book, called "To Retrieve the Lost Art of Blessing," is more prosaic in form, though it's hard to make that distinction, as even his prose is delivered in poetic terms.

So last week, at a time when I was particularly troubled by events as they were developing, I went searching for something that could calm my nerves and give me a place to center myself. Things felt out of control. I felt out of control, and I needed to find some sense of gravity, a place where I could be sure that my feet were touching the ground, and where I could renew my connection to the earth and my place in it. I happened upon a section of O'Donohue's book entitled *Blessing Our World Now*, and I feel compelled to share some of it with you now.

Sometimes when we look out, the world seems so dark. War, violence, hunger, and misery seem to abound. This makes us anxious and helpless. What can I do in my private little corner of life that could have any effect on the march of world events? The usual answer is: nothing. We then decide to do what we can for our own, and leave the great events to their domain. Thus, we opt out, and join the largest majority in the world: those who acquiesce. Believing ourselves to be helpless, we hand over all our power to forces and systems outside us that then act in our names; they go on to put their beliefs into action; and ironically these actions are often sinister and destructive. We live in times when the call to full and critically aware citizenship could not be more urgent.

Reading these words for the first time, I felt like I was discovering scripture. How would an Irish poet, dead and gone for twelve years, have written words such as these as though they were wholly and completely for this day and time? I found them so nourishing that I had to keep going.

When we yield to helplessness, we strengthen the hand of those who would destroy. When we choose indifference, we betray our world. Yet the world is not decided by action alone. It is decided more by consciousness and spirit; they are the secret sources of all action and behavior.

In the fall of 2018, during my first year serving in this community, I led a four-part meditation series leading up to and immediately following the mid-term elections. I entitled the series “Grounded for Action,” and in my own mind I was seeking to address what I myself was trying to learn. The work of social justice witness often comes from a place of indignation. While anger is a valid emotion, often justified, and energizing in its own right, it is not enough to sustain the deeper work of full and critically aware citizenship. At least not for the long haul. Through some periods of communal meditation, we discovered the power of depth as opposed to breadth. It is the power of multiplication in a world obsessed with simple addition. Shall we whip up a crowd of people agreeable to our cause when instead we could be helping them find the cause within themselves?

When the world seems to be falling apart, we want to DO something—ANYTHING at all—and this desire can send us spinning out of control, possessed by the demons of our own anxieties. Unable to accomplish anything much of lasting importance, we become reactors to the next awful thing, letting others determine our focus, centered on what is wholly external. I suspect this may have been what was meant by these words from the Epistle of James,

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.

Maybe this is a time to slow down once again, to breathe our way into the present moment, and to become grounded first, before we take any anger-based action—as natural and as normal as that might feel.

Here in the Bay area, references to St. Francis are nearly ubiquitous. On the grounds of our church which overlooks the Bay and the Golden Gate Bridge is a weathered statue of St. Francis which stands with us like an elderly friend whose ability to move is mostly internal. While the traditional prayer of St. Francis is of much later origin than Francis of Assisi, it does provide us with a simple way of answering the question, “What now?” The metaphor is of the planting of seeds.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.

I may not be able to produce a bushel of corn in an instant, but I can certainly plant the seeds, water and tend them, see them through to harvest and THEN fill the basket. I may not be able to right all the wrongs I see expressed in the events of our times, but I can certainly plant the seeds of peace, water and tend them, see them through to harvest and eventually be a peaceful presence in the world.

There has never been a time in our generation when we’ve been more hopeful or more desirous of lasting transformation. And I’m happy to report that soil is prepared, ready, moist and fertile, and it can produce anything at all that we’re willing to plant.

