

KEEP FRESH OUR HIGH RESOLVE

“Keep fresh before us the moments of our high resolve, that in good times or in tempests, we may not forget that to which our lives are committed. Keep fresh before us the moments of our high resolve.”
~Howard Thurman

This time of year, celebrating Christmas and the coming New Year holiday for many means embarking on a journey to be with others, traveling over roads, mountains or through the skies.

Airports in particular are busy places at the moment and some of you here this morning I suspect have no doubt encountered one recently, either coming or going, or retrieving those doing the same.

Poet and author Naomi Shihab Nye recounts her own story from Gate 4-A in the Albuquerque, New Mexico airport, after learning her flight had been delayed over four hours.

She writes: “If anyone in the vicinity of gate 4-A understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately. Pausing to realize Gate 4-A was my own gate, I went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, like my own grandmother, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. “Help,” said the flight service personnel. “Talk to her. We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this.”

I stooped to put my arm around her and spoke haltingly in Arabic. The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, you’re fine, you’ll get there, who is picking you up? Let’s call them. Over the next two hours, we called her son and I told him I would stay with his mother until we got on the plane and would ride next to her. We called her other sons just for fun. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for some time in Arabic and found out they had ten shared friends. Then I called some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her. She was laughing by then. Telling about her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies – little powdered sugar crumbly mounds – out of her bag and offered them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo – all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. Then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving us apple juice, and they were covered with powdered sugar too. I noticed my new best friend – by now we were holding hands – had a potted

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plant poking from her bag, some medicinal thing with green furry leaves. An old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around the gate of late and weary ones and thought; this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in this gate – once the crying of confusion stopped – seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too. This can happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.”

I love to dwell in the vastness of possibilities, not only in this holiday season and in stories like these, but especially now as we find ourselves at the cusp of a new year on this first Sunday after Christmas. What might be possible in the coming year? How might our own horizons be broadened, our faith deepened, our lives strengthened? How might we ourselves be challenged and our perspectives and expectations along with it? How do we keep faith and realize that not everything is lost?

The gospel narrative from Luke we just heard puts us right in the middle of another highly charged travel story. A young and weary Mary and Joseph bring their new baby named Jesus to the temple. New parents, poor and of limited means, they have journeyed from Nazareth to Jerusalem, to Bethlehem, back to Jerusalem during a time of emotional and physical exhaustion. They have crossed border after border. The temple in this story represents the much wider array of persons, a community, and resources to undergird them. This was clearly important in the life of Jesus, and is critical for all of us to embrace now in our continuing care and responsibility for one another. It is the call of community to move beyond and across the lines and borders that keep us from affecting a shared world, apparent among and within the proverbial temple of an airport and fellow travelers.

The prophet Isaiah, in the narrative that Susan read for us, speaks of a God who will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all nations. That requires change for a nation to reach its true righteousness. Battles can last for generations before some heartfelt acceptance of a new ethic takes hold. Some will rise to the delights of that promise and others will resist bitterly to the end. All of us know there are plenty of examples to enumerate at the moment in our world and in our own nation. Regardless, it takes every institution to deliver its honest best, which would mean revealing the reworking of the hearts of the people. We who “shall be called by a new name,” declares the prophet Isaiah. How can this be done? We seem so small and preoccupied with our lives as they are. Here such a vision hurts more than helps. It points out the distance between such greatness and us.

We still struggle to live out God’s purposes to reconsider the lines our world is so eager to draw. The publication *America* recently reported that “conflicts over religious and political divides among Israelis and Palestinians result in tragic deaths and ongoing

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suffering. Individuals from West African nations affected by Ebola are quarantined and separated from their own communities in a noble effort to halt its deadly spread, yet stigmas and continued fear have resulted in the isolation of many who have survived. In our own country, the deaths of black men at the hands of white police officers have spurred nationwide protest and anger with renewed attention to the continuing tensions and injustices that remain in these United States around issues of race. Poverty, too, still divides the American experience, where one in seven households are food insecure, despite an estimated \$165 billion we waste on food each year. Families in the U.S, especially those undocumented, continue to seek stability. And yet, discussions about the best way to assist them produces greater divisions among our political parties rather than greater empathy for the families that struggle.”

On this first Sunday after Christmas, the festive mood so doggedly maintained against deadly, daily news is replaced by the post Christmas exhale. We wonder, what does this season really have to do with the days and the year that lie ahead?

Christmas is about crossing borders and thresholds – physical, social, historical and emotional ones. In the celebration of new birth in the Holy Child named Jesus, new beginnings and a new year, let us imagine a world that greets all comers with genuine welcome, beyond church and temple walls. That would be us at our best. The story of this Christmas child sows the seeds of cultural transformation. Such grace rises and walks among us – an endless stream of grace. Embracing our world and all that is in it.

In the spirit of this holiday season and for many the occasion to gather with family and friends, I'd like to offer a poem to you, authored by our niece, age 16. I have received special permission to read it to you this morning.

To Know the World

By Becky Armstrong

If only we could see the sights of all that we pass by.
If only we could truly follow birds up in the sky.
When dawn appears and all we notice is the sky now bright,
We fail to use the gift we're given, the gift we have of sight.

If only we could hear the feeling in the words we speak.
If only we could hear the need of others when they seek.
When we fail to hear all the secrets, whispered in our ear,
We do not use another sense, ability to hear.

If only we could smell the scent of others so afraid.

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If only we could smell the times that someone's day, we've made.
Should we not smell a coming storm that's scent is in the air,
We do not use the sense of smell, of which we must take care.

If only we could taste the hope in triumph and defeat.
If only we could taste the care put into such a feat.
But when we do not taste the love that others give to us,
We leave our needed sense of taste to fester and to rust.

In the midst of our uncertain and often dark times, it is all too easy to settle into our own ways, to hole up in our own corners of church, temple or society. Christ's birth calls us to more carefully consider our place in this world, where we have come from and where we are headed. What borders need crossing? What boundaries have we set for ourselves might we move beyond? Can we rebuild trust in one another? While fear of the other or our own inadequacies may keep us from crossing these borders, we must cross them. The Christmas story reminds us in the words of an angel to Mary and to a host of shepherds to not be afraid. Christ entered fully into our humanity, beginning as a newborn child. To be sure, as the gospel today also reminds us, "this child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom with the favor of God upon him." This Christ of Christmas understood what it meant to feel alone, cold, afraid, and other. Understood the consequences of welcoming those considered outcasts. Understood that following God means experiencing pain and sorrow. That is a vulnerability that we can all continue to learn from and in so doing become signs of good news, compelled to be at our best. The message of Christmas cannot be contained by a single country or ideology. It is meant to be lived and let out through our lives and that of others – by seeking peace, by welcoming the stranger, by being invited back once again to God's inevitable love so that we might build a world that has no borders, one that has always existed and that remains to be seen, one that as we help create is already here. Not everything is lost.

I began this sermon and now conclude with the words of Howard Thurman, the first African American dean of a chapel in a predominantly white institution of higher education and an ever present mentor and inspiration to so many through his writings today:

"I will light candles this Christmas.
Candles of joy, despite all the sadness.
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch.
Candles of courage where fear is ever present.
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days.

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Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens.
Candles of love to inspire all of my living.
Candles that will burn all the year long. "

*God of light and life to all, you bring our Emmanuel, born that we no more may die,
born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth; hark your people sing.
Amen.*