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The Transforming Presence

Luke 4:21

Tom Long has described the experience of driving through the rural countryside on a Sunday morning. His mind was on the cool mountains to which he was headed. He had been listening to the radio. The station was fading. He twisted the dial to find another. Then he discovered that he had passed through some kind of time zone. He had not gone from Eastern Standard to Central Standard, but from the profane to the sacred. It was 11:00 a.m. and on station after station the programming had been replaced by church services. Long chose not to settle on one station but to move the dial back and forth to sample the variety of small town Protestantism that was on the air. His first observation was that services of worship should never be broadcast on the radio. "It was like listening through the wall to a drab party in the apartment next door; you just hoped they were having more fun in there than it sounded."

While acknowledging that the quality of worship can never be judged from a distance, Long finally decided that he recognized in all of these services a common flaw. He describes it in these words:

Judging by the monotony that came over the air, the worship leaders exposed their belief that they were in the presence of people to be amused, organizations to be maintained, agendas to be completed, people to be taught and persuaded, tasks to be done – but the leaders of these services communicated little sense of mystery or wonder...the key dimension which seemed missing from those services was an awareness of the presence of God. As Frederick Buechner said somewhere, "God was, of all the missing persons, the most missed (Thomas G. Long, *The Senses of Preaching*, John Knox Press, page 90)."

Jesus addresses this issue in the fourth chapter of the gospel of Luke. As the guest preacher in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus opens the scroll and reads the startling words from Isaiah 61. These are words that promise good news to the poor, release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind. Then he says, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing (Luke 4:21)." Luke understood these words to be Jesus' mission statement. This is what he planned to do. These ancient promises were to be fulfilled in the context of his ministry. But Luke saw something even more important going on here. Jesus is announcing the presence of God. This is not something that will happen in the distant future. It is happening today. God has come to the people. But God's presence is not for the purpose of praising their wisdom or their goodness. God is not impressed by their strength. God has come to touch their brokenness.

The presence of God embraces our brokenness so that we can be transformed. When Jesus reads from the scroll in the synagogue he is announcing that the table is set. There is a place for each of us, but we must come in our brokenness. We must be prepared to be changed.

Nancy Ann Dawe has written of how her life changed when she experienced the brokenness of a knee injury. One day as she was crossing a parking lot she turned her foot and lost her balance. She avoided falling, but in the process of regaining her balance she twisted her knee, tearing the cartilage.

Suddenly her active life was brought to a screeching halt as she faced months of rest, treatment, and therapy. During her long period of being immobilized she tried to follow the advice of a theologian who wrote that we should befriend our brokenness. She came to see that her patience and cooperation were essential to letting her body heal. She learned to befriend her body by resting when it needed rest and exercising when it needed exercise.

While she feared that the inactivity would be stifling, she found it to be freeing. Since her only job was to heal she could put aside all other pressures and responsibilities. But most important of all, grace was revealed to her along the way. She was supported by family, neighbors, pastors, and friends. She received gifts of food, books, and notes. She was blessed by visits and phone calls to check on her progress. In learning to depend on others Nancy Ann Dawe experienced a peace that was profound. It was nothing less than the presence of God which embraced her brokenness and changed her life.

This is what happened to the exiles who returned from Babylon. In the 8th chapter of Nehemiah we read that they had come home to face grim realities. Their brokenness was revealed in their long separation from the institutions which had for so long defined Jewish life. No more was there a temple or an altar. During their years of exile and once again after their return they must find their strength in the nurturing power of a community shaped by the word of God.

The Book of Nehemiah describes how they gathered in the public square before the Water Gate to listen to the reading of Scripture. Ezra the preacher rises to read from the Torah and the reading continues throughout the morning. As the people listen they begin to weep. They weep in their recognition that the scroll from which Ezra reads conveys the reality which has held them together during these difficult years. The message of Scripture has sustained them in their brokenness. In that moment they are embraced by the presence of God. Suddenly the tears of lament are turned into songs of joy. In their brokenness they have found the place reserved for them at God's table. And they know that they have been changed.

In the city of Cairo, Egypt, there is a church called "The Coptic Orthodox Church of St. Simon the Tanner." In Egypt tanners are at the bottom rung of society. This church was formed when a group of garbage collectors discovered that Jesus Christ had come to meet them in their brokenness. In this church people who are outcasts in their society have learned to celebrate the presence of God. They have created health clinics, schools, vocational programs, and advocacy programs to promote fair wages for workers (Heidi Husted Armstrong, "Revolution From the Bottom Up," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, December 4/11, 2006, page 9).

The ministry they performed together goes far beyond what they thought was possible. The presence of God has embraced their brokenness and they have been transformed. This is the fulfillment which Jesus offers to us today.