Waiting Room

Isaiah 55:6-13

Buckingham Church

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“Overwhelm is an invitation to stop and pay exquisite attention to what is emerging.” (Susan Beaumont, “Overwhelm: Not a Problem to be Solved, 10/12/21, Congregational Consulting)

That sentence comes from an article entitled “Overwhelm: Not a Problem to be Solved” by church consultant Susan Beaumont. She writes that in the midst of everything that has been going on during the time of the pandemic, and as we are so sick of Covid and all the collateral issues (supply chain problems, worker absences, the uncertainty of winter and the status of the virus and other variants, children and issues with masks at schools, vaccinated people with breakthrough cases) and then add to that whatever may be going on in your life (work, school, church, family), it’s easy to get just a wee bit overwhelmed by the world.

Some folks deal with overwhelm by just withdrawing; how many of us now watch or listen to the news a lot less than we used to? Or binge watch something mindless. Some people are cocooning. Others deal with this by obsessively trying to fix things. Others just obsess, or they complain loudly and regularly about anything that isn’t the old normal. Others just try to slog through it day to day, sometimes denying that it affects them at all.

But it affects all of us one way or another, even those of us privileged enough not to have gotten sick or had a family member or friend die or lost a job or had a job radically changed or struggled with kids at home or suffered because of climate change fires or floods. The very air around us exudes stress. Overwhelm, as Beaumont calls it.

Her advice, contrary to what most of us are doing, is “to pay exquisite attention to what is emerging.” She writes that in a time like the one in which we are living in society, in the church, in the world, “systems and processes break down because they are supposed to. We cannot discover a new beginning until something ends. Much of our overwhelm comes from trying to preserve or adapt things that are meant to fail.”

One of my kids a few months ago said, “I’m tired of living through history.” Yeah. I remember the sixties and Dylan singing “The times they are a-changing.” Well, they are again.

But today I go a bit farther back than Bob Dylan, back to the singer of the book of Isaiah, singing to a people in exile, anticipating changes all around. “Seek the Lord while he may be found,” the prophet says. What does that mean? That God is going away? For sure, not. The prophet reminds the people that when so much is in upheaval, so much is “overwhelm,” that’s when we have an opportunity to stop and pay exquisite attention. To stop and seek for God’s activity, for God’s presence, for the new things that God is up to in the world. As the white rabbit says to Alice in Wonderland, “Don’t just do something, stand there!”

How do we do that? Maybe, instead of quickly reacting to the world, seeking to fix or complain or fight change, we might instead seek for the deeper meanings inside what’s going on. That requires listening to all the voices around us, listening to the earth, listening to the spirit inside each of us that is trying to compete with all the noise of the world and needs us to be quiet.

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth (says God), it shall not return to me empty but shall accomplish that which I purpose.”

We need to listen to figure out what God’s purpose is.

The UCC has had a slogan for a long time: “God is still speaking.” I believe God is, but I also know that this implies that I need to listen. To pay exquisite attention to what is happening around me, not so I can react or feel overwhelmed or depressed, but so I can discern how God might be speaking to us. God, who has been especially active in times of change forever past and forever forward. Who says to the people over and over again that things are going to change, and we need to see where God is going so that we can follow that road down which God has already gone. Over and over in scripture, we see the image of a journey, not a settlement. On a journey one anticipates change. Perhaps even looks forward to it. And we are always, with God, on a journey.

So how do we do this? I don’t think it means withdrawal to a monastery. I do think it means carving out time in our lives to be quiet and pay attention. Sometimes I do this in prayer, where I focus my mind on one issue or another and sit in silence and listen. Too often, I think, we equate prayer with sharing a list of concerns with God, but that is only a tiny part of what prayer can be. “Seeking the Lord” who wants to be found is what prayer can be. Not seeking to get something ***from*** God but seeking in order to discern how God is moving and how we might move with God.

Paying exquisite attention can also mean not listening only to the very loud voices around us, or only to the voices that say what we already believe but seeking out other voices which may have been silenced. Paying exquisite attention can mean listening to our own conscience, or own inner stirrings that may be prompting us in directions we’re not sure we want to go, or that we desperately want to go but are too afraid to make changes that big.

**We really don’t want to miss this opportunity, living through this “history,”** as my son said, to catch what is percolating, gestating, what seed is starting to sprout around us. We will find ourselves by the side of the road if we just cling on to what has been or allow ourselves to be so overwhelmed that we are paralyzed.

The last lines of this passage in Isaiah call us **not** to give into those impulses, but to trust that the road ahead has exquisite possibilities. “You shall go out in joy and be led back in peace. Instead of noxious weeds, beautiful, fruitful plants shall grow, and you shall see God within what is happening,” the prophet assures us.

God is going to accomplish something wonderful. Because that’s what God does. Let us pay attention, exquisitely, and join the journey forward. Amen.