

LED BY A CHILD

Matthew 3 : 1-12
Isaiah 11: 1-10

Faith Community
December 9, 2001

Introduction

I read a couple of years ago about an interesting experiment. Scientists put a breed of fleas into a container, and put a clear lid on top. As the fleas jumped, they hit the lid and fell down.

After a while the fleas learned not to jump so high, so they wouldn't hit the lid and hurt themselves. When several weeks had gone by, none of the fleas were jumping high enough to hit the lid of the container. They had learned the reality of their lives.

Then the experimenters took the lids off the jars to see if the fleas' behavior would change. It didn't. They continued to jump low enough so that they wouldn't get hurt if the lid was on.

They had learned their limits. But they stayed with those boundaries even after the boundaries were removed. They limited their ability because of an experience they had had.

Invisible fences that people use to keep their dogs in their yard operate on the same kind of principle. The limits of the yard are set up, the dog is shown that if he goes beyond those limits he will receive a shock, and the dog stays within those boundaries. The dogs quickly learn about reality.

Even if the electric current is taken away, the dog still won't go beyond the limits.

We can understand that. We wouldn't want to risk getting a jolt of electricity on the chance that maybe someone had turned off the power. The reality of the situation is: if you push the limits, you might get hurt. So why risk it?

Albert Einstein said, "Reality is an illusion, albeit a persistent one."

I

When Isaiah announced the new king who would come, he threw out the old reality. The past assumptions were gone; he asked people to imagine a new era – a time when a wolf and a lamb could lie down together, when the leopard and baby goat played together in the field, when the young calf and the lion fed side by side, and when a child could play with a snake and never be hurt.

Isaiah encouraged people to think outside the box. Imagine a world transformed. The heart of this new order is justice, equity, and faithfulness. Try to imagine a world you haven't thought possible. That's what Isaiah is getting at.

Confined thinking is a prison. It may be for some of us a large prison with vast space, lots of room and high walls off in the distance, but it is, nevertheless, confinement. Imagine tearing down those prison walls like the Berlin Wall crumbling under the dissatisfaction of a people held in confinement.

Isaiah is saying don't accept "reality," look beyond reality.

II

And before too long Isaiah's words came true: God sent us one beyond belief. God sent the Christ child into the world in a way that no one could imagine.

While many were carefully watching for a king, a social leader, one of the royalty, one who would be born among the sophisticates, Jesus was born in a little out-of-the-way town to peasant parents in the back stable of an inn that was so full it couldn't handle one more guest.

God came into the world in the last place you would look for the Son of God. He turned down the best, most comfortable, most prestigious, and chose just the opposite.

Most people would say it could never happen there. God wouldn't do that. Be realistic. But that's just what God did. Imagine a new world.

III

As God's son grew, that visionary life continued. When he chose his followers, he didn't pick the highly educated, the sophisticated, the powerful, the most admired and wealthy; he called some fishermen, an outcast tax collector, and women of questionable reputation.

Any realistic person would look at that crude group and say, "They will never amount to anything. Nothing good can come from this outfit."

Jesus took his word not only to the powerful and elite, but to the lepers, prostitutes – those friendless, rejected, and frowned upon.

The message he brought was a revolutionary message - when you are hit, turn the other cheek; don't return evil for evil, but answer evil with good. Pray for those who harm you. Give to those who ask from you. Don't do the usual - the ordinary, the expected. Think different.

The famous preacher, Ernest Campbell, told of watching the Senate hearings during the Iran-Contra scandal. One of the head military people was testifying.

In the course of the discussion the general responded to a question about the harshness of the military response. He said, "Well, when you're in this kind of situation you don't call on Mother Teresa for help."

As he was listening to this, Campbell said right out loud, "Why not?" It struck him in that moment that we could do worse than call on someone like Mother Teresa.

What they were doing wasn't making things any better, and in fact they had fouled the whole thing up miserably. Maybe bringing in Mother Teresa would be a good thing. Try something different. Think outside the box.

IV

Can we catch Christ's vision today - in our own lives? Can we think beyond the parameters of "reality?" Can we imagine the impossible? If we can't, we may never be able to see what God is doing.

With our same old eyes, with our commonly accepted view of reality, we can't see God's son born into the world. To the world's reality all that happened is impossible. But to eyes that see beyond the boundaries, God can do anything.

The thing about God is that God acts in the most unexpected ways. If we think we have God figured out, we can be sure of one thing – we're wrong. God doesn't act within the confines of what human beings think is possible.

I remember reading Rabbi Kushner's famous book, When Bad Things Happen to Good People. It is an excellent and helpful book, but in it he talks about the senselessness of praying for good test results in the days after you have had medical tests.

His thinking is that the results are already in. They are what they are. If there is something in the blood, it will be there. Praying isn't going to change any of that. It's too late. So, he says, don't bother to pray for healthy test results after you have had the test done.

Rabbi Kushner's argument is absolutely logical. It is realistic, and it makes sense.

But that's the problem. He isn't thinking big enough. He's putting God in this prison of human reality. God is bigger than that.

Kushner is assuming that God functions in linear time. That is, he assumes that for God there is a past, present, and future, and that God doesn't know what is going to happen and can't act retroactively, or proactively.

But, if God isn't limited to time as we know it then, for example, God might know three months ahead of time that you are going to have tests done, and that you are going to pray that those tests come out well. God can act long before you even know you are going to need God's help.

This is just one situation, but the point of all this is that we underestimate God. We try to limit God to our world, and what we know of reality. We try to confine God to the world we live in. God is bigger than that. God is bigger than what we can imagine.

Think beyond reality. Dream bigger than what you think is possible. Unlike those jumping fleas in the experiment, jump out of your container, and be free.

Conclusion

Advent is a time for new vision. So often how we see the world is clouded by what we expect, or what our past experience suggests is true.

This season reminds us that God's world is bigger, more mysterious, more amazing than we have even begun to understand.

This is Advent - the coming of the Lord. When the Lord is coming, things will be different, unimaginable things can happen.

Think outside the box. Dream of what has never been before. Imagine the impossible. Because, who knows, maybe God will do it.....again.

Amen