

Comfort and Joy
Malachi 3:1-4
December 6, 2015
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church, Clemson, SC

When Hannah and Sarah were in fifth and sixth grades, we visited a glassblower's studio in Columbia called the One Eared Cow. Hannah wanted extra credit for her science class and both girls could meet a requirement for an art merit badge by observing such an artist at work. When we got there, the gallery was fascinating, shelves of precious pieces of glass, multiple colors spiraling, sparkling and glowing on ornaments, bowls, vases, and lampstands. The atmosphere was very quiet, almost like a distant fog hushing each person who stepped inside. The lighting was delicate and focused, designed to reflect the specks of gold or silver or red or whatever color that was key to a particular work of art. Some designs were smooth, others had layers of different colored glass making ridges and there were pieces of humor with drops of varied colored glass that formed bumps. Each was unique and crafted by imagination. While all the pieces were not equally delightful to my eyes, I am sure they must have brought joy to the artists who made them especially after seeing one's visions come to reality.

I told the woman at the counter why we were there and she led us to the back where the studio awaited. Like the gallery there was a hushed silence with only the windy roar of an occasional bellows moaning to fan the oven fires. Four large ovens along one wall and two smaller ones in a corner blazed inviting the glassblowers to swelter over their art. On the opposite wall two garage doors were partially opened to ventilate the large studio. We met the two men who were blowing glass that day and they reminded me of that line in Samuel Moore's story, "He said not a word, but went straight to his work." They simply nodded at us acknowledging our presence as the woman guided us to a few canvas chairs set up behind the workbenches of the glassblowers.

Once seated we could feel the heat from the refining fires and the draft from the open doors. It was an overcast December day with a biting wind that set a chill to one's bones. After one of the blowers finished a small vase, he came over to us and in a whisper described the process of mixing molten glass and powdered pigments for colors. He told us how different designs are accomplished and then said he had a few projects on his list for that afternoon. The first was to be a large, about 18 inch, cobalt blue vase with squared sides and streaks of bright red that looked mountain ranges on the sides. He planned for adding a calla lily on one side and spots of silver that would be added from the inside of the creation and appear on the surface looking like stars once it cooled. This was a design he had seen in a dream and he wanted to see if he could create it.

We watched with eager eyes as he selected the pigment for the cobalt and fashioned the basic shape, still in its cylinder form. At first it was small, but as the

blower breathed into the rod, the vessel expanded like a lung coming to life. Constantly rotating the rod to keep the vessel round, the creator's strength at tolerating a hotter flame as breath continued to expand the glass proved that this was no job for the faint of heart. By moving the glass from the oven's flame to the creator's ever watchful eye, the color began to grow from a darker than cobalt shade to an electric tone. He pulled it from the fire and moved to the bench where he spanked it with tools to flatten the sides into the squared shape desired. There was still constant rolling along the armrest to keep the energy flowing throughout the mass. As it cooled slightly, the color brightened. When the artist was satisfied with that portion of the work, he reached for another rod with just a bit of molten red that an assistant had been working. Both vessels in different fires with different temperatures defined this to me as a complicated process to achieve a more beautiful creation. Once both vessels were ready, the red rod was poured into the mountain ranges that were envisioned in the dream. There, together the colors did not blend, but complimented one another as art. Back into the fire for more refining as the assistant primed the bellows to turn up the heat.

Then back to the bench and pouring a white pigment onto the blue to make the calla lily. After applying it, he swiftly cut the white glass apart from the blue to curl up the petal, then using tweezers he pulled up more white glass quickly making the stamen, crafting a 3-D effect with the flower. It was exquisite and bold at the same time. The rolling and spinning of the vessel continued to keep it balanced in basic form. Back into the fire it went, and I was wondering if the flower would somehow cower in the heat that refined it. Instead when he removed the vase again, the flower glowed a piercing red as if it was wounded and bleeding. Taking it again to the workbench for the next step, the glassblower continued the movement of rolling the rod along the armrest, this time using a round file to shape its neck near the rod. The rolling assured that the mass remained even in form. All that was left to do was to add the silver shards to explode as stars inside the vessel.

At that moment, someone came over to the artist and asked a question about another job, a moment's distraction caused a change in the tempo of his rolling the piece and then we heard it. A sharp pop that indicated stress, cracking the electric blue and fire red creation from the rod near its neck. Within an instant the beautiful thing crashed to the concrete floor to be no more. All this had taken about 90 minutes and now it was gone. I was exhausted from the anticipation and from the tragedy that resulted from such concentrated work on the glassblower's part. *How could one endure such a profession where much of one's work ends this way? What joy is in that?*

With only a sigh and much greater determination, the glassblower returned to his station, gathering a new rod, flipping a page on his clipboard and heading back to the fire. He did not speak but rather focused his energy anew at the next creation. Collecting more glass and some new pigment, and breathing the mass to life, a beautiful yellow sunny creation was born. The object was completed with care, giving renewed confidence to the artist that his work was not in vain, but rather a gift that required patience and perseverance in order to blossom. The ornament was then hung on a line above to cool naturally in the air. After this was completed the glass blower talked to us about the broken art glass and the ornament, explaining that sorrow comes in a creation destroyed whether by natural defects in the glass or stress in the design or

an accident on the blower's part. Loss is always hard, but part of life. Comfort for him came in the form of starting over.

Such was the case for the people of Israel as they weathered the Babylonian exile, were released from their captivity by the Persian King Cyrus and even commanded by him to rebuild the temple to their Hebrew God of the covenant. Israel received comfort from starting over again. They began with the temple and the people were generous, sharing their best treasures to make the new design possible. Cyrus even returned some of their gold and silver that had been plundered years earlier. After the temple was rebuilt, along came Malachi, my messenger, who asks a key question in chapter 2, verse 17, "*Where is the God of justice?*" Of the 22 questions in this brief little prophetic book of 55 verses, this is the most profound question of all. *Where is the God of justice?* It is a question that is followed by another inquiry found in our passage today. "But who can endure the day of the Lord's coming, and who can stand when he appears?" Malachi goes on to describe issues of worship offerings that are not pleasing to the Lord. How can Israel endure God's presence when its worship includes sacrifices that are not sincere?

Like the vessel that is fragile in the making, the church is poised within an environment growing ever more violent and faithless. The heat in the kitchen is getting hotter. If we were to ask today, Where is the God of justice? What would we answer? Is our church like the people of Israel who have been in exile? Trying to figure out how to respond with hope in a hopeless situation. How close to the refiner's fire can she stand? In the midst of the fire or is she consumed by society? Is our worship that which pleases God or is it designed for our own entertainment? Is church just another of the myriad of activities we chose to schedule our time or are we here because we seek a deeper relationship with God?

John quotes from another prophet—Isaiah. The prophecy of salvation for the people of Israel comes not by anything they have done in worship or temple life, but it is by God's gracious act of turning toward the people's suffering. When God turns to Israel, they are comforted, forgiven, redeemed, and the same is true for us when God turned into flesh in a baby Messiah. God pitied Israel's suffering and turned to comfort her. Likewise Jesus is moved by the suffering of others and turns to the cross to comfort us by taking on our sin—what greater comfort can there be?

Our hope is in the reality that we are here today, still seeking God's comfort through forgiveness. But there is more. Emmanuel, God with us is the promise. Because of Christ our companion on this journey, we can have joy after the comfort. We can know the abundant life that Christ promises.

A story I heard many years ago during Advent that rings out this truth.

The Committee of Joy

Tragedy marked the days preceding Christmas in a Honduran refugee camp filled with Salvadorans who had tried to flee the violence engulfing their country. National Guard members had tracked down a young catechist, bound him by his thumbs, and taken him away. When he tried to escape, they mowed him down with machine-gun fire. Later his

pregnant wife and five children gathered around his coffin as a single candle burned in the darkness.

In another part of the camp, a group of women surrounded an infant and sang to him in a dark tent, lit only by the light of a candle. Between the verses of the song, the anguished cries of his mother filled the air. She had fed her son through the night from an eyedropper, trying to coax some nourishment into his starving body.

The child lay in the center of them, his eyes and mouth open. He did not cry. One of the mothers marked the sign of the cross on the child's forehead while he looked at them fervently, as if expecting an answer to a question he could not ask. Then the singing stopped. The child was dead.

Despite such sorrow, when Christmas Eve came, the camp burst into joyful preparation. Women baked sweet cinnamon bread in an adobe oven, while men butchered hogs for the making of special pork tamales. The children made figurines out of clay from the riverbed for the nativity scene, adding local touches to the usual characters: pigs, an armadillo, and baby Jesus sleeping in a hammock. They painted beans and kernels of corn in bright colors and strung them into garlands. They made ornaments from small medicine boxes and shaped figures from the tin foil that wraps margarine sticks and hung these on a tree branch.

The children dressed as shepherds and passed from tent to tent, recounting the journey of Maria and Jose in search of shelter. "This Christmas we will celebrate as they did," said one mother, "looking for a place where our children can be born."

A refugee woman asked a U.S. church worker in the camp why she always looked so sad and burdened. The worker said she grieved about the suffering she saw around her and the limited amount of time she could give to help the refugees.

The woman gently confronted her: "Only people who expect to go back to the United States in a year work the way you do. You cannot be serious about our struggle unless you play and celebrate and do those things that make it possible to give a lifetime to it."

She reminded the worker that every time the refugees were displaced and had to build a new camp, they immediately formed three committees: a construction committee, an education committee, and the comite de alegria—"the committee of joy." Celebration was as basic to the life of the refugees as digging latrines and teaching their children to read...

Just as people with the least are often the most grateful and generous, I have found that people who suffer most are often the most joyful—another irony of faithfulness. Their joy is something wholly other than the sort of shallow happiness that the world offers. It comes not from trying to avoid pain by accruing comforts but rather from moving deeply into the world's pain and finding reasons to rejoice in the midst of embracing what is difficult...

Living as we do in a world that suffers so much, two opposing possibilities can easily tempt us: either to turn our backs and live oblivious to the pain or to allow the pain to overwhelm us and despair to take up residence in our hearts. The truly faithful option is to face the pain and live joyfully in the midst of it. Those who suffer most remind us of how tragic and arrogant it would be for us to lose hope on behalf of people who have not lost theirs. They are teachers of joy.¹

How does one have joy in the midst of suffering? I think the answer is the same answer that I received as I watched the glassblower return to his final creation on that chilly December day. This time he was adding small yellowish brown pieces to a larger vase base that was already made. I could not determine what he was creating, but I kept noticing the expressions on his face were ones of delight and amusement. He worked long slender pipe-like pieces and placed them on either side of the larger vessel. These wrapped around to meet at the front. They almost looked like handles, but he added a third one onto another side so that my guess at handles was discarded. Then he made tiny white pieces and added them to the first two pipes. He smiled as he pulled the white glass into what appeared to be mittens, then cut them into fingers and made gloves. As each small piece was blown and added, it began to look like one of those little monkeys who perched on an organ grinder. It was silly and funny and cute and clever. As the designer added the final piece—a small top hat, he reached down to the floor and picked up another little monkey just like the one he had made. He compared the two, grinned as he tilted his head and with his own gloved hands picked up the newest creation and placed it gently on a rod for the final firing. Into the flame a final time to burn off the dross and purify the finished work of art.

When the glowing mass was removed from the heat, the artist looked it over closely and satisfied he began to swing it upon the rod. Later I learned this was one way to cool the glass forcing the outer surface to seal and harden. When it was hard enough and cool enough to remove from the rod, the artist carried it tenderly to a wooden crate filled with sawdust. There he laid the little creation and I thought that it looked somewhat like a babe in a manger. When the glassblower had removed his gloves and invited us to look at the still warm within creation, I asked him how he knew when it was ready to remove from the fire. He said, “Oh, that’s really easy. I know it is just right when I can see my reflection in the glass.”

I believe that is how God wants us to answer the question of “*Where is the God of justice?*” The God of justice can be found whenever we reflect God’s justice in our daily relationships and in our responsibility to speak out prophetically the gospel message in today’s wilderness exile. I also believe that in the midst of exile is where we are called to create the committee of joy. In tragedy, pain and the suffering, the fires that purify and cleanse cause us to risk our own comforts so that we will come out of the fire reflecting the countenance of our Creator!

ⁱ Joyce Hollyday from *Then Shall Your Light Rise* as printed in *Alive Now* (November/December, 1999), pages 35-37.