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An Advent Reflection for John 3:7-18

Congregation of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Paul, MN

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How Do We Make Room for God?

I am grateful for the opportunity to share my experience creatively engaging with the word and also invite you into contemplation. Following a visio divina process adopted from Seeing the Word, I listened for a word that spoke to me, engaged in dialogue with it, brought it back to scriptures, responded with an illumination (these drawings you see on the screen), and allowed the process to transform my heart.

The form of this reflection emerged slowly, as I wrote the scripture passage over and over in slow calligraphy, letting the felt tip brush strokes be my pilgrim steps moving towards a moment of which I was not quite certain. When I began by listening, what emerged for me was the question “what should we do?” What should we do while we wait for God? This word “should” can be troubling, one that sometimes paralyzes me with the fear of doing the wrong thing, because there is so much conflicting advice of what we should do with our lives. This reading was an invitation to reframe the question.

In this season of advent I actively waited by observing the dialogue taking form from my daily encounters, books, and art practices, a conversation that was helping me understand what should we do in a new light, as well as to somehow answer the more immediate related question of what should I say today. One of these aha moments was at Our Lady of Victory chapel where I saw the words carved into the altar: Behold, I make all things new. Immediately I knew these were words of wisdom for how to engage with the question of should. Yes, in everything we are called to act in the image of God the Creator by making spaces for renewal.

In the book *Art and Faith*, the artist Makoto Fujimira offers a theology of making, a helpful perspective for not becoming paralyzed by trying to perfectly figure out what we should do. He writes, “Our journey to know God requires not just ideas and information, but actual making to translate our ideas into real objects and physical movements...unless we are making something, we cannot know the depth of God’s being and God’s grace permeating our lives and God’s Creation.” (6). In other words, when asking God what should we do to make your presence known in the world, we have to start co-creating the answer into our existence, so that we can start to observe and respond to the mystery. These processes of making are not exclusive to professional artists. From living in community, I have experienced how cooking dinner nourishes our bodies, decorating our house creates a sense of hospitality, and playing music moves our spirits. We all have gifts of creativity that we can use to make all things new. The ability to know God through the process of making welcomes the incarnate Christ into our hearts and physical spaces.

With these insights on making, I look back to the reading, where we ask what should we do and in turn how to make room for God’s presence in our world as a collective. When we join the crowds in raising this request, we create space for discernment, creativity, and shared renewal. After receiving the call to serve and make their community new, the crowds “were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts John...” Engaging in works of mercy in their community open them to actively look for Christ in the most humble, including John, who seeks to position himself among the lowly. He encourages the crowds to continue waiting for Christ’s coming, to see Christ in the person who receives the extra cloak, or from whom taxes are collected. The processes of renewing their society challenges the crowd to hold attentiveness to human dignity at the forefront of their watchful hearts.

. Each of these images you see here is an illumination that gave form to the ponderings in my own heart. I began each drawing by writing themes that were emerging, and responded to these words with a

community of forms, first the bigger shapes, then using layers of colored pencil to carve out the smaller details, layer by layer. These contemplative mapes emerged from a long process of listening and observing and responding, and I wouldn't say that they are the final step. Using the metaphor of the gift that is so present in this season, I think of them not as a bow tying things up neatly, but as a process of wrapping and unwrapping, opening to new possibilities that are beyond what I can anticipate, beyond what can concretely answer the question of what should we do. This expanding process I discover through making parallels the deepening mystery of baptism. John reminds that while he only baptizes with water, "one who will baptize you with the holy spirit" is coming. By drawing forms that speak of making things new using simple materials, I help actively wait and anticipate and illuminate the incarnation.

The questions of should are here to stay, yet I know now that they hold the underlying question of how do we make room for God, the movement of the spirit and the coming of Christ? Through deep attentiveness to the daily wisdom we encounter, creative practice, collective discernment, and openness to what is to come, we can joyfully renew our hearts and see the presence of the incarnate Christ around us.

Let it be made so.

Question for reflection? What emerged as you joined in exploring the question "How do we make room for God?"

The crowds asked John the Baptist:

"What should we do?"

He said to them in reply, "whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He answered them: "Stop collecting more than what is proscribed." Soldiers also asked him, "Teacher, what is it that we should do?" He told them "Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages."

Now the people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Christ. John answered them all, saying, "I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with water, the Holy Spirit, and fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Exhorting them in many other ways, he preached good news to the people."

