

My cousin John was twelve years older than I and became for me a big brother, blazing the trail ahead during my early years. John seemed larger than life. He was an excellent athlete and a wonderful horseman. To get through college, he worked the graveyard shift at a pulp mill near Tacoma Washington and took classes during the day. Then, just because he wasn't doing anything on the weekends when he was free, he took up mountain climbing -- climbing Mt Baker and Mt Shuksan and other peaks in the northern Cascades. One day, before such a climb, John came home to the farm near Bellingham when I was there with my parents and I was asked to go up and wake him. He was sleeping in the guest bedroom and I cautiously opened the door and quietly came in. In a very soft voice, I said, *John*. The reaction was amazing. John weighed over 200 pounds but at the soft sound of his name coming from near the bedroom door, his whole body reacted. It appeared to come completely off the entire bed as he jerked awake.

To come awake, to come alive and energized, to see anew, is a fundamental concept of religious faith. Buddha in Sanskrit means *I am awake* and Jesus speaks of being born again, of drinking water that is alive. He speaks of new life. And Jesus says in Luke *If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light (Luke 11:34)*.

And so it is that in various ways we are invited to change, to come alive. Today Jesus invites us: *Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.*

This past week Marilee and I went to the Rollo Jamison Museum and the Mining Museum in Platteville. This was my first experience walking down the long stairway to descend 50 feet into the mine itself; to think of the dark confines of the mine lighted only by candles; the men picking away at the rock walls of the mines and then carrying hundreds of pounds of lead rock or galena in small crates to the vertical shaft. These were earnest men paid by the number of baskets of rocks marked on a peg board. Men wearing themselves out against the rock, riding down into the darkness day after day.

As I have reflected upon it, the mine has become for me this week a sort of image for a life lived in darkness. This was the miners' lot, to be sure, but this week I have been thinking of the sheer grind of working bent over, grubbing out an existence. Working in the mine has become for me a spiritual image of the way we often live or at least at times can live, going through our days intent upon basket

after basket of productivity. Milton in *Paradise Lost* has Moloch as the god of the underworld where things are mined and ripped out of the earth. One thinks of Gollum, intent upon his hoarded treasures.

Richard Rohr speaks of this kind of existence as not being in a mine or being underground but simply as being blind. Jesus heals the blind. After one healing, one man says *All I know is that I was blind and now I see*. And this insight is echoed in John Newton's great hymn *Amazing Grace*. Jesus calls the Pharisees blind guides. And the context of salvation, the liberating presence of God, is one in which the blind see and the lame leap for joy.

What can jar us awake? Surely many new and exciting things can. Marriage. The birth of a child. A decision to pursue a career or a new one. But other things can as well. Inner questioning and inner restlessness can hold the seeds of becoming awake and alive spiritually. And difficult things, including suffering and loss can wake us up spiritually.

When we face suffering, looking for God right in the midst of suffering is not often easy. We would rather find God in times of quietude or peace. But God can be a transforming presence in the midst of difficult times.

When I was in training as a chaplain at Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge, every nine days I was on-call as the only chaplain in the hospital with the exception of Frank, the ER chaplain. This was in the days when people came in early and stayed late when they were to have a procedure. Perhaps they would come in for a few final tests and then get prepped for surgery. A doctor might visit and the family would linger a bit past visiting hours. And then the halls would go empty, the lights dim, and one would be left with one's thoughts. This was the time when I did my rounds visiting especially patients scheduled for surgery the next morning.

I remember one individual whose face I still can see through the years. He was a gentle, quiet man and he was in for an extensive and delicate and dangerous heart surgery. He knew the odds were stacked against him. He frankly discussed his condition and the fact of his vulnerability and I was drawn to his spirit as he used this time to unpack some of his feelings. We prayed. Around noon the next day, I learned that he had not survived. Yet, somehow, I felt that in exploring and seeing his condition frankly and openly in the presence of another human being and the Spirit, this quiet man in his last hours had found peace.

Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls.

Years later, in a hospital in Kenosha, I was asked to visit a man from Alaska who was down for another extensive surgery. I came into his room and introduced myself and we just had begun to talk when the anesthesiologist came into the room with a hospital bedside manner that had a blacksmith's touch. He was brutal. *Well, he said, you're going to go through a very difficult surgery tomorrow.* He then began to detail how a great incision was to be made around almost one half of the man's torso to remove a large aneurism that at any moment could claim the man's life. He explained the surgery's long hours, at least 8 and mostly like longer, the heavy anesthetic, the pain, the long recovery. And then he concluded: *It's really like being on the fifth floor of a building that's on fire. You know the jump could kill you. It probably will. But what else are you going to do?* With that he left. And left me wondering just where to begin.

What do you do with an intro like that? But the man, an Alaskan guide who was used to danger, turned to me and said *I'm going to make it. I'm a fighter and I know I am going to make it.* He said that he was not particularly anxious. He believed in God and he was in God's hands. It appeared that the whole experience and living with the likely prospect of death had opened up his faith, his ability to be alive and awake even in the midst of his ordeal. We prayed before I left. The following day, the surgery was long and grueling. I visited again. He fought through the pain and then had a setback, an infection that required a second surgery. But he persisted. Later, when I visited he was walking the halls. He had come down from Alaska and directly to the hospital in Kenosha because the only surgeon in the United States who had been willing to do the surgery because of its great danger and low survival odds, was a doctor in the relatively small hospital in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

Come unto me...and I will give you rest....

To be born again in even difficult moments is to come into the presence of God who can gather us up in the arms of an eternal presence --- a presence that is profoundly for us. Someone beyond our consciousness believes in us. Meister Eckhart proclaims *God is closer to me than I am to myself.*

But we are slow learners. We tend to complicate. Our vision is often clouded. Richard Rohr points to the example of Julian or Lady Julian of Norwich. The holy English anchoress " had an amazing ability to move beyond either or thinking," he states. She could live with paradox, unanswered questions, immense inner conflicts and theological contradictions--and still trust and be at peace. One

wonders if this was the fruit of her womanhood, her nonacademic status, her at least twenty years of solitude in the anchorhold, or just the fruit of one night's "showing, as she called...[her vision]. Lady Julian's awareness, her ability to see, her pathway to Jesus with all the labors and the burdens of a severe illness that brought Julian close to death, opened up a new insight.

Contemplative seeing. Julian once said *First there is the fall, and then there is the recovery from the fall. But both are the mercy of God.* This is the great rhythm of the Christian faith--dying and rising, and it is in that spirit that we proclaim at the Eucharist which celebrates this great rhythm "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

Jesus has the ability to hold many things together. He holds together both his humanity and his divinity. Rohr points out that Jesus has "a male body with a feminine soul."

And we see this gentleness in his invitation to us this morning. *Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for my burden is light. And I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your soul.* Marcus Borg points out that this passage echoes one from the wisdom literature of Sirach which speaks of wisdom's or Sophia, the feminine figure of wisdom, as having a yoke.

It is in this spirit of gentleness and affirmation that the Spirit of God comes to us in Jesus and invites us to rest. This is the holy Being who believes in us, and who is profoundly for us.

The victory of shalom is won not by the sword of the warrior god but by the awesome power of compassionate love, in and through solidarity with those who suffer. When we come awake, we wake up to the presence of this God of love. We see beyond and through the surface of things. We rest in the presence of Christ.