Peter Haresnape

Ant, Badger, Locust, Lizard.
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Rehumanizing: Season of Peacemaking II

Proverbs 30:24-28 - Four things that have no strength, yet are wise.
Matthews 11:2-19 - John on Jesus, Jesus on John.
Matthew 11:25-30 - God has hidden these teachings from the wise and revealed them to the children. Be at rest.

Before there was Jesus, there was John the Baptiser. Jesus went into the cities, into the villages, into the wilderness, into the boat, into the world. But John stood out at the river Jordan, and called people out. John condemned the religious leaders and counseled the men of violence, and everyone came to see him. John calls out, and Jesus enters in, and one day Jesus comes to be baptised too, and he enters into the water and God greets him as beloved Son. John has been waiting for this revelation. And Jesus goes into the wilderness, and John is hauled away to prison.

And Jesus emerges from the wilderness, having been tempted with imperial power and wealth and majesty, and having chosen instead to say the same words that John said “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand”. Like John, he calls people. Like John, his disciples learn from him and work with him. Unlike John, he moves, entering into new territories, and his disciples stay with him, travelling from place to place among the people.

But John is in prison. He has seen the beginning of God’s good news, and from prison he hears what Jesus is doing: sending his disciples out without weapons or money, telling them to preach peace, preparing them to suffer imprisonment and flogging and to run away from persecution, telling them that the sword of division will be within their own families, not raised in rebellion against the oppressors. Is this God’s Messiah? Has he put his trust in the wrong person?

John sends a message with a question, and I am going to ask you a question shortly. John's message asks 'Are you the One?' and Jesus replies 'tell John what you hear and see'. The gospels are written to the future followers of Jesus so that we can know what Jesus taught, what he did, and what happened. So, what are some of the things that these people saw, and heard? What did Jesus do and say during his life?

Pause for responses. Prompt for healing stories, teachings, actions.

John likely assumed that Jesus would raise an army or at least start spreading sedition. But Jesus embodies good news to the poor in a different way. Violence is not the way of God's kingdom - and God's kingdom cannot be achieved by violent force, regardless of the attempts made every day to claim God's blessing for warfare. These strange words of Jesus appear to be just as true today as when they were written: "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and violent people take it by force."

Whenever the violent attempt to claim God's blessing, it is the powerless who suffer the attempt. God's authority cannot be seized, because it is not found in the palaces and the places of power. God's authority flies away from all who take up weapons and it rests with those who have weapons pointed at them.

Jesus said 'to what can I compare this generation' - the people he was speaking to. But it is the same today. It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not mourn.' (Matthew 11:16-17)

He has healed, taught, revealed God, but he dances alone to his heavenly tune.

God's kingdom is joy, justice and peace (Romans 14:17). Yet here, the song of the kingdom is a mourning dirge. It is sorrow that God's Love has entered the world, and found suspicion, mistrust, and agendas. It is the loss of centuries of conquest and struggle, and millennia of dragging God's name into petty human greed.

Look how easily we dismiss each other. It is so easy for a human being to be regarded as a foreigner, a stranger, a criminal, a crazy person, and pretend that we don't owe them love and care and attention. We have whole philosophies ranking people as valuable based on how much money, clout, or danger they represent.

Jesus notes with irony how easily he is dismissed: John is as straight-edge as they come: keeping a strict diet, refusing alcohol, and he was accused of having a demon. Jesus openly feasts and drinks, sharing a table with those who trade in sex and money, and is also accused. You could laugh if it wasn't so tragic.

You know, don't you, how the claims of the followers of Jesus are dismissed. This is a time of year when it happens. The sacrifices of soldiers and those who speak for them have a stronger voice than the children killed in bombing, or the elders starved of medicine and care. In this country, thank God, we are allowed to believe in peace so long as we don't insist on forcing our views into public. So long as we keep paying our taxes, we can visit our MPs and ask them to close down factories that produce weapons to kill Yemeni victims, to end the collaboration with US weapons manufacturers shipping bombs to Palestine. Our MPs will carefully weigh the matter: considering jobs, trade, international relations, and human lives, before making a decision. And they know we'll vote for them, because there's a much worse politician waiting in the wings.

We play the flute for you, and you do not dance; we wail, and you do not mourn.

Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds. One translation says 'wisdom is shown to be right through her children'.

"At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants." (Matt 11:25)

There is another power than the violence of the desperate and the lost, a power beyond the illusions of Caesar and his executioners and accountants, a power that is every power rooted in the living way of the children of Creator.

There is a power in being small humans, and weak as the world sees it, and foolish enough to try something. This power is called ‘satyagraha’; soul force. It is called ‘sumud’; steadfastness. It is called ‘mino bimaadiziwin’; the good life. It is called ‘shalom’; wholeness. It has eight billion theorists, some of whom are awaiting the invitation to start their work.

This is a power which miscalculates the odds, because it refuses to count people as numbers. It is a power which gathers in song circles and mutual aid cooperatives, in games around the campfire, in vigils at the killing fields and in the courts of justification. It is a power that roots deep into our souls, although it comes from beyond us, before us, around us, it comes from the very beginning, and it will carry us to the very end, thanks be to God.

It says things like ‘hosanna’, and ‘hallelujah’, and ‘join us’, and ‘stop this’. It says ‘I am a Man’. It says ‘Ain’t I A Woman?’ It says ‘this is what democracy looks like’. It says ‘peace be with you’.

This is the logic that says when you are outnumbered, it’s time to advance. It is the work plan that starts the week with rest. It is the hand-drawn poster proclaiming liberty and the memory of the times when we looked after each other. These are the hands that take perfectly good assault rifles and beat them into farming tools. It is the impulse that leads songs in the gaol cells and holds silence for the precious words of truth spoken at last by the abused and disbelieved.

The kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and violent people take it by force. And each time they do they find their hands empty, filled only with obligation and expensive weapons, with the miserable need to keep grasping. Meanwhile, streets

away, the kingdom of heaven alights in the dreams of the downtrodden, unkillable, laughing, blowing where she wills.

I can't tell you what this power is, I can only tell you that it is the most human I know how to be. It is the humanity of Jesus that I strive for, the humanity that God herself strives for, setting aside the grandiosity of heaven and settling into sole and measured human truth: 'I can do no other'.

This power is an Anglican priest, half my weight, interposing her body between me and the burly and traumatized man who has told the prayer group that he wants to beat me up, he needs to beat me up, and her words shielding through air, clear and honest, telling him that we are sorry for what the church has done to his family, and that he is right to be angry, and that maybe he doesn't need to beat up Peter today.

This power is a woman scooped from Iran as a baby by missionaries, brought to the United States, fighting in the courts for others who crossed borders, scouring the books by night to understand the convoluted mechanisms of land theft and oppression, always holding onto the knowledge that whatever the world says, she carries love's stamp throughout her being.

This power is a scrawny Catholic priest, passing through an airport named after a war criminal, interrogated by a border agent trying to weed out troublemaker, and to every question brightly declaring for all to hear the utterly truthful, utterly inoffensive, utterly revolutionary phrase 'Oh, I believe in peace!'

We are besieged by the absolute certainty that some must die, or be unhoused, or be displaced, for the good of the economy, for the security of our border. That we must have an army, a navy, cyber warfare divisions. And yet the world that God has made teaches us other lessons. It has been said 'the man who believes that violence is the only solution learns a different way when the mosquito is on his testicles'.

So consider with me the wisdom of the ant, tiny, diligent, focused. With the labour of a summer, the ant can feed itself and ensure its survival. The ant knows how to act when the season is right, and it knows how to plan for hard times ahead, yet it has no possessions of its own, not even a copy of *Simply in Season*. Jesus says that anyone who builds a tower should first know that they have enough money to finish it, (Luke 14:28-33) and he mourns over those unable to read the signs of the times (Matt 16:1-3), and who are not prepared for what is to come (Matt 24:15-20).

This wisdom is how the badger, 'a people without power' can make its home among rocks with only its claws. The badger shows us how to live in hard circumstances and hostile places, how to be exiles and strangers and still make a living place. The badger knows how to make a way where there is no way. It has the faith to know that even a mountain may be moved (Matt 21:21-22). In the same way, Jesus talks about the persistent widow who refuses to let the unjust judge have peace until she has received justice (Luke 18:1-8). Persistence and presence are the gifts of this power, to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.

There is wisdom belonging to the locust who march in ranks like an army even though they have no king. No one is excited about seeing a locust swarm in the neighbourhood, but listen to what they know. Like the locust, we have learned how to organise ourselves without arbitrary power, with authority that is not authoritarianism. Jesus tells the disciples that the kings of the earth lord it over one another but it will not be like that with us (Matt 12:25-28). The disciples gather and the Holy Spirit comes upon them all - different genders, different ages, regardless of individual backgrounds and personal histories. Maybe this looks strange to the neighbours, but this is who we are. (Acts 2:1-13)

There is the wisdom of the lizard, so small and fragile, you could grab it in your hand, and yet it is found in the palace of the king. The lizard is able to cling, creep, and be present unseen. Jesus speaks a parable about the tiny mustard seed growing to shelter birds, and the woman mixing flour with yeast (Luke 13:18-20), both substances

small and unclean, but with power to provide shelter and sustenance. And he speaks of good crops that grow alongside the weeds until the day of harvest (Matt 13:24-30).

What are the metaphors and parables that help you to see power differently? The scriptures are full of these stories if we are willing to hear them.

Consider the way that Jesus entered in - passing into court rooms, sick rooms, locked rooms, and places of power. Jesus entered into this world, into our lives, and his movement reshaped our reality. Consider faithful John, who took his stand at the Jordan and called everyone to the water, who offered transformative truth, who refused to compromise.

Consider Mary, who shows us the power to bear. She bears the promise of the world in her womb, and she bears witness to God's faithfulness in song. She bears Jesus as a baby and child in his most vulnerable years and she bears the knowledge of his status in silence. When she is with him in his death, she bears that as well.

Consider Paul, Simon Peter, Junia and Phoebe and Veronica and Joanna. All these ancestors in the faith have gifts and stories to offer us.

Today is All Saint's Day, which you know because All Hallow's Eve was last night. It is a day to remember those heroes of the faith, and the church in its wisdom sets aside tomorrow, All Souls, to remember the unknown faithful ones, or those whose faith is known to God alone. Perhaps it is a shame that this time is best known for scary monsters and superheroes. The dead are not scary, no more than we are. They are sometimes flawed and foolish, they are sometimes lamented and loved. But like all of us they are held in God's merciful judgement.

In our lives we each have to determine how we will be faithful partners with God in the work of peacemaking, reconciliation, and creative imagination. The church is here to help you find your own little saintly way of foolishness. Let us take heart that we are not alone. We are in good company. Thanks be to God.