

Having a Heart Attack
Advent 2B, December 4, 2011

Yesterday I had my own personal Advent.

A pain in my chest, like by a thief in the night, waked me up at about 4:30 am.

In moments, it became a full-fledged fake heart attack – only because, I'm pretty sure now, I knew all the symptoms I was supposed to get!

So off we went to the hospital where I was hooked up to a thousand things.

We spent the day wakeful, watchful, and waiting – wide awake to all the worst possible outcomes, watching my heartbeat skip across a screen, and waiting for test results which all came back better than good.

It took till evening for me to get it, to see that it was, indeed, a heart attack, a wake up call to my heart life.

It wasn't my body saying, "Take better care of me!" In fact, the last doctor said to me, "You don't need any meds or treatment. We don't even recommend any lifestyle changes!" I mean, what doctor says that these days??

But the doctor was wrong. My husband Jim and my friend Linda Williamson helped me to recognize that a change in lifestyle was precisely what all this was about.

Indeed, the pain in my heart, the monitoring of my heart, in the heart unit, by the heart specialists, well d'uh! My life *is* demanding a change of heart. My heart is asking for more attention to its life, its rhythm, its needs, for more attention to my love life with God. Much less doing, way more being. Dwelling, through silence, solitude and stillness, in my belovedness to God. Learning to justify my existence not as superpriest (supermom-grandma-wife-friend-sister-daughter) but as a beloved child of God.

That is our name, you know: Beloved.

Not Be-Perfect, Be-effective, Be-relevant, Be-successful, Be-reliable, Be-respected, Be-admired, or Be liked.

But Be-loved. Beloved ones, just let yourselves be loved.

I wonder why is that so hard for us?

Here is this adoring, extravagant, ever-faithful love, always pouring all down and around us, like that great river Ezekiel imagined he saw gushing from the Temple doors, flooding out to the whole world and every one in it, and we're too busy to notice it, too skeptical to believe it, too ashamed to just accept, enjoy, and respond to it. Not only that, but we put a thousand obstacles in front of it:

Frantic, soul-killing schedules. A church, with its canons, rubrics, councils, and ecclesiology. Addictions to a thousand things - not just substances, but overwork, fear, and our own unworthiness,

We put so much in the way of that love that eventually we find ourselves exiled. Exiled from the God of our hearts, forgetting who and whose we are, either lost in a strange land, like the Jews in Babylon to whom Isaiah speaks today, or, like the Jews in Palestine whom John addresses today - home, but still exiled from their own lives by the Roman occupation.

Today, Isaiah tells God's people in Babylon, John tells God's people in Judah, and both of them tell us right here and now:

God wants you home. God wants you home.

And your home is God's love. Which means

Which means you can be at home, in Babylon, or occupied Palestine, or in exiles of loneliness, uncertainty, or loss. God's love is your home, if only you'll let it be.

And if you can't find your way there, let God himself lead you, evening out and smoothing a path for you, just like he did for his people in Babylon, a path strewn with flowers and running with rivers of love.

And if you think you have to do something to earn that love, or become worthy of it, just remember how John led the people away from all that.

You don't need to make blood sacrifices up at the Temple, to get near to God, he said. Just come out to the desert and bathe your heart in the waters of repentance. Which isn't beating the breast in guilt, but just turning around in hope.

The Greek word for repentance is "metanoia" which means to change your mind, to turn around. To turn toward the God within you who is adoring you there and waiting right there to show you the wonders of his love.

John O'Donohue, in his book *Anam Cara*, says,

"It is strange to be here. The mystery never leaves you alone. Behind your image, below your words, above your thoughts, the silence of another world waits. A world lives within you. No one else can bring you news of this inner world. If you become

addicted to the external, your interiority will haunt you. You will become hungry with a hunger no image, person, or deed can still. No one else can undertake this task for you. You are the one and only threshold of an inner world.”

It's not easy to convert the heart to its own inner beat, rhythms, purpose, and call. Sometimes you need a heart attack. It almost always means crossing a desert. Notice how often the Jewish people had to do so. To leave their slavery in Egypt, they crossed a desert. To leave their exile in Babylon, they crossed a desert. And now, again, to get to John and his birth waters, they must cross a desert. But the desert- either the wilderness of daily living, or the aridness of our own souls - is the persistent landscape of the spiritual life and it can't be avoided, circled round, or ignored.

It must be entered, embraced, and traveled to discover the living waters springing for us, within us, from God's own heart.

The poet W. H. Auden wrote this:

The Garden is the only place there is but you will not find it until you have looked for it everywhere, and found nowhere that is not a desert.

So, look for the Garden, if you must, in the deserts of busyness, self-sufficiency, fear, and control, in shopping malls, substances, and stuff. Go ahead and walk through all those arid places till you're dry enough, weary enough, thirsty enough to turn toward your home. And when you do you will discover the love which upholds you every minute, the love that is waiting for you, yearning for you, ready to welcome you home to that secret interior castle where you most truly belong.

Amen.