

We are beset with so many reminders of sin and suffering in the world. We see and we hear so much news about this 20th anniversary of 9/11, now with stories about conspiracies and cover-ups. And we have the constant onslaught of numbers regarding the Covid 19 virus and vaccinations, and controversies about government mandates, which of course goes right to the heart of political polarization, about how much government control do we want? We are not sure who to believe and who to trust. As people of faith we turn to our holy Scriptures, and we are reminded that over the centuries, people have thought of God as the source of WISDOM, from a higher place, a divine Wisdom.

The scriptures are clear that we humans are by-in-large NOT very wise, that we get things wrong so often. The Proverb was talking about so many that “refuse to listen,” that “ignore counsel,” that “hate knowledge” and “love being simple!” Another proverb that I like states clearly that wisdom comes through an “abundance of counselors.” So even though we will never understand all, it is “wise” to seek out knowledge and understanding from many sources.

So let’s take some wisdom from the disciple of Christ named James. James insists that we all make mistakes, and that THE TONGUE is a “restless evil, full of deadly poison.” Obviously we make a lot of mistakes in our speech, even harmful mistakes in our words. We all know this to be true. There are so many sayings about the tongue ... We often say, “I wish I could take that back,” or I should “bite my tongue.” We also interrupt people often, and sometimes have to “have the last word!” We know we would like to give some people a good “tongue-lashing!” But we also know it is never right to beat or whip people in any manner, so neither is it right to demean, degrade, or belittle with our words. One of the things that irks me most in our political

polarizations is the tendency to insult, even demonize someone with opposing views. The tongue can indeed bite with “deadly poison.” I often stop listening when extreme language is used in controversial issues, when things are painted as only black or white. The reason they are controversial, worthy of debate, is that there is usually some truth on both sides, always some grey areas.

The Bible itself can be guilty of the dangers of dualistic thinking; many of the psalms and proverbs speak of good and righteous people, in contrast with those who are foolish and evil. A wise understanding of such scriptures I believe is that extreme language is often used as rhetoric, as tools of persuasion, as teaching through using opposite concepts. Jesus used such methods in his stories: such as the wise and foolish maidens, or the parable about sheep and goats. We could even consider that Heaven and Hell are such teaching tools, regardless of if they refer to actual places, or simply to states of being. They are teaching tools; surely everyone has both heavenly and hellish moments in our lives. Part of hell, in my opinion, is believing there are just two ways of being, and two destinations! The way of Jesus, the way of peacemaking, is knowing that there is usually a 3rd way, an option outside the box, a middle way, a compromise, etc..... This applies to so many areas of our lives from the personal to the political.

At the personal level (as the song says: “let peace begin with me!”), it is Wisdom that there is rarely pure right and pure wrong, pure good and pure evil. Sure, some scientific facts may be so, and some plots for death and destruction may be so, but usually people are fighting over right and wrong when there is some merit on both sides of the dispute, and some negotiation and compromise could be done.

So I conclude that Wisdom, even God’s pure Wisdom is best discerned in community, with an “abundance of counselors.” If the tongue can be such a deadly poison, then it follows that more listening is the best thing to do, hard for all of us! Usually in a fight, no one is really listening, just preparing one’s counter punch. Listening and understanding better are what can create peace. It is said over and over that Bible study is best done in a group to get insights from diverse minds. Most churches and service organizations have concluded that wisdom and good decisions come not as authoritarian dictates or mandates, but from respectful dialogue, involving the voices of many.

There have many voices and many lessons learned from 9/11 and the following years. I want to leave us with the wisdom of one particular observer of 9/11, one lesson learned. Nino Kamalic was an oil painter who made a lovely painting of the Twin Towers prior to the tragedy of 9/11/2001. Apparently there were children playing in the snow nearby, making snow angels, and they pleaded with him not to “step on their angels.” So he was indeed careful, and you can see the angels in his painting. Years later, after 9/11/2001, the painter wrote a poem about his painting, and a few years after that he asked me to write a song about his experience. As you will hear, in Wisdom (a Wisdom from beyond, I believe) Nino transformed the ugliness and terror of that day into a lesson he learned from the children. Though the destruction is different in kind and degree, he related the destruction of the towers and lives to the feared destruction of snow angels! The transforming moment, the God moment, the wisdom given to Nino, was the commitment not to destroy and to be careful of anyone else’s creative work ...

Here’s Nino’s poem: *Towers in the magic mist...Reaching up in the sky with long brush, An artist stood... A touch of bluePurple haze... Silver hue.*

Up and down the snowflakes fell, on the Snow Angel's covered hill. Help me angels! How to convey this grief - this feeling of dismay... this void of love - the empty hole... Anger! ... And I promise... I will never step on snow angels!

Here's the story in song: *A painter on a hillside one frosty winters day, hears the laugh of children, as in the snow they play. Towers are his subject, a skyline through the haze; angels in the snow escape his steady gaze. Years later on that hillside, towers we do not see. The painter now reflects upon fallen majesty. Also in his memory, he hears the children's cry: "Don't step on our angels, as you're walking by!" It's in us too, an ignorance, things we do not see... the hurt and the shattering, if we act thoughtlessly. Who has done this, don't they know the love and the pride, in this creation now destroyed, anger we can't hide! Towers in the mist, how could they have come down? Angels in the snow, are also holy ground. So I will watch more carefully each step that I take... to safeguard creation, the precious things you make! I won't step on your angels you carve into the snow. They are your fresh creation, the beauty that you show. If I step on angels that surely are around, to me it may seem nothing... to you it's "towers torn down!" (It's in us too, an ignorance, things we do not see... the hurt and the shattering, if we act thoughtlessly. Towers in the mist, how could they have come down? Angels in the snow, are also holy ground. So I will watch more carefully each step that I take... to safeguard creation, the precious things you make!)*

The world is full of destruction and weapons of mass destruction, but let's be people who listen to the counsel of "angels." Let's commit to compassion for all who suffer (children and adults), being more careful where we step and where we trespass. We can take the lesson even further into daily interactions and conversations, and commit to not being destructive, even with our tongues, our sometimes careless and vengeful tongues. Amen!