

October 17, 2010 – Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. [PDF] (Ecclesiasticus 38:1-4, 6-10, 12-14; Luke 4:14-21)

This past week many of us watched with joy and thanksgiving as 33 miners in Chile were rescued after over two months underground. It was a little bit of good news in the midst of what often seems like a lot of bad news. This miner miracle did not change the world all that much. No wars or famines were ended, the destruction of the environment and the warming of the planet continued. But when 33 people survived after being trapped in a hole in the rock for over two months, somehow it made everything else a little easier to bear for a little while. It might be what I would call a little kingdom of God event since I believe God must have been working in there somewhere.

St. Luke, the patron saint and namesake of our parish whose feast we celebrate today, collected a number of similar kingdom of God events in a writing we call the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ according to Luke. Like the miracle of the miners, none of the events in the Gospels significantly altered the fabric of the world at the time, at least not in ways that could be counted or measured. And yet the world was changed forever when a man named Jesus who was dead came out of a hole in the rock very much alive. It was the ultimate kingdom event, an event that revealed the goodness of God, an event that opened the door for a new creation.

As followers of Christ, we're to be on the lookout for these kingdom events. For these signs of new creation, moments of healing and transformation, portents of God making the world good again just as it was in the beginning. Kingdom events need witnesses, witnesses that will tell the story to others. Now, the story of the Chilean miners will probably not live on in this part of the world for too long. Other stories will steal the spotlight, at least until it gets made into a TV movie or something of that sort. Even then it probably won't last long against all the other stories that get told about our world, most of them bad. It's hard to witness to good news. It's hard to preach about a new creation when the one in which we live often seems so broken. It's hard to bear witness to kingdom events in the midst of so much bad news.

When the miners were rescued, I was inspired, I was moved by their accounts of faith and the heroism of the rescuers. And at the same time I kept thinking, well, they wouldn't have been down there if the world didn't need so much copper. The world demands copper and coal and iron and a whole host of other minerals and metals that come only from mining, from digging holes, blasting holes in the earth to which workers must descend at the risk of their lives.

Now, somewhere along the line human beings decided that we didn't have enough of what we needed on the surface of the earth so we started digging for it underneath. I note in the creation story of Genesis in chapter one, God gives humans permission to fill the earth and exercise skillful mastery over it, but God never says anything about blowing holes in it or releasing the toxins that rightly belong under the ground. At one point Jesus refers to having faith such as you could move mountains, but I doubt he had mountaintop removal for coal mining in mind. It's hard to tell the story of a new creation, to bear witness to what God is doing when so much is broken and so much is sick. When the world is sick, when we are sick, how do we bear witness?

In this morning's scripture reading from Ecclesiasticus, the writer says, "My child, when you are ill, do not delay, but pray to the Lord and He will heal you." Now, let me just digress for a moment and talk a little bit about Ecclesiasticus because for years I didn't know the difference between Ecclesiastes and Ecclesiasticus and it was sort of like I saw the little abbreviation E-c-c-l-u-s in the lectionary and I went to look it up in Ecclesiastes and I couldn't find it and I was like, "What is going on with this Bible?" So for those of you who may have had a similar experience, Ecclesiastes is one of those Old Testament wisdom books written in the voice of King Solomon. It's where we have the famous line about, "To everything there is a season," all of that. Ecclesiasticus or the book of Sirach as it sometimes is called is not in the Old or the New Testament. It's in the middle of the Bible in those books we call the Apocrypha. They didn't make it into the original collection of the Biblical books, but they're still very significant and you'll hear them read in Orthodox and Roman Catholic and Anglican Episcopal churches. So just in case you're like me and for years you were like, "What is Ecclesiasticus and how is that different from Ecclesiastes," quick Bible lesson. It says in Ecclesiasticus, "Pray to the Lord and He will heal you." It also says that from God "health spreads over all the earth." There is hope of healing in this sick world of ours. From God "health spreads over all the earth," the scripture says.

Jesus proclaims hope in the Gospel reading we hear today when he quotes the prophet Isaiah, "He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." One of the miners in Chile told his version of the hope of healing when he said that God and the devil were fighting over him and God won. There is hope and promise of healing in this sick world of ours and that hope needs witnesses, that promise needs people who can tell the story.

St. Luke, the evangelist, told the story about love and power of God through Jesus Christ. St. Luke, also called the physician, would have known a thing or two about healing in a sick world. He would have known that healing is often slow. That doctors and pharmacists rely on their God given skills, but they also rely on the healing power found in the earth itself, the medicines from slow growing plants and animals and minerals. Healing takes time. And Luke would have known that healing does not occur in isolation, but in a web of relationships that form God's creation, cannot be healed apart from the sun and the air and the earth and the water and the medicines that come from plants.

And when Luke wrote down his account of the Gospel, I think he was trying to bring more people into a web, a web of hope so that Jews and Gentiles, believers and yet-to-be believers could all bear witness to a new creation, the kingdom events. Luke shared the story so that others might proclaim that new creation in the midst of a broken world. He knew it wasn't coming all at once. When Jesus says, "This scripture has been fulfilled," that didn't mean it was happening all at once. Even Jesus didn't cure everybody. Sickness and poverty, starvation, environmental destruction, such sicknesses persist, but we can still tell the story of the new creation and still bear witness that from God health will spread over all the earth. Not all at once perhaps, but in a series of kingdom events. And it's our job, brothers and sisters, to be watching for these events. To be witnesses of these events and to tell their story amidst all the bad news that threatens to drown out everything else. Today we celebrate St. Luke's Day and we lift up our parish and all of the kingdom events that have happened in the life of this place, all the little

things that didn't change the world, but changed somebody's world, kingdom events from which health will spread over all the earth.

I had an experience yesterday I want to tell you about. I'd call it a minor kingdom event. A few months ago our brothers and sisters at the Episcopal church across town, Iglesia El Buen Pastor in East Durham, they learned some good news that their church property was a lot bigger than they had realized, but the largest part was behind the church and overgrown with poison ivy vines and bushes and trees and trash and it didn't seem very usable. But Father Martin Juarez, the priest, and his congregation they saw some potential **for** this part of land, a soccer field, a place where adults and children could gather and enjoy God's creation and exercise and share fellowship together, invite new people into their midst. And so every Saturday since the summer Martin and members of his congregation have been out there clearing the land little by little. Yesterday, because of our Episcopal diocese of North Carolina, an event was organized with youth from Durham and Raleigh and Wake Forest and Hillsborough, youth and adult leaders, to help with the clearing of the land. When we started, it was really hard to see the possibility of a soccer field. And when we finished, it was still hard to see the possibility of a soccer field. But I said to Father Martin what we're doing here is kingdom work. It's kingdom work because we can't see what's going to happen, but we know it's going to happen because God is in it.

And I wasn't just talking about a soccer field. I was talking about youth from El Buen Pastor and youth from St. Luke's, youth from St. John's, Wake Forest and other places working together, talking together, crossing boundaries, getting to know one another. I've been wanting that to happen for along time. When strangers from different towns could commit a Saturday to just come and clear some vines and trash because they believed God somehow was working in it, and that made it a kingdom event. Not as dramatic as 33 miners being rescued or Jesus Christ rising from the dead, but a sign that God is at work through us healing the earth, one neglected patch at a time. God is at work through Jesus Christ and the church, through us healing God's people and reconnecting us to that web of creation. God is at work making strangers into friends, making strangers into brothers and sisters who cross boundaries to work and share and worship God together. God is at work, my friends, my brothers and sisters. Pay attention. Look for the kingdom events and participate in the healing work that God is doing and tell the story. Tell the story and God will use our witness to spread health over all the earth.