

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday in Lent
March 12, 2006

Readings: Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16
Mark: 8: 31-38

Hymns: #377 Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore
80 Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley
#486 When the Morning Stars Together

With Ann in Our Hearts
©2006 Ray Bagnuolo

Max Coot, a now retired Unitarian Universalist Minister once wrote:

When love or fear is known,
When holidays and holy days
And such times come,
When anniversaries arrive
By calendar or consciousness,
When seasons come as seasons do,
Old and known but somehow new,
When lives are born or people die,
When something sacred's sensed
In soil or sky,
Mark the time.
Respond with thought or prayer
Or smile or grief.
Let nothing living slip between
The fingers of the mind
For all these are holy things
We will not, cannot, find again.

Yesterday, as family and friends of Ann Gray gathered at the Palisades Cemetery, it seems spring came a bit early. Under the bluest of skies, the season stepped forward: gentle air and warming earth to embrace into itself one whose time here was complete.

It was the kind of day that can only come after a long winter; the kind of day that stirs the consciousness into acknowledging the motion of this planet earth in its orbit about the sun - and how we are entering into that phase that will again, soon, bring life and rejuvenation from its bleak winter slumber.

And, following the service, as mourners greeted Frances, Roger, Maureen, and their families, out of the East, as best as I can tell, a red-tailed hawk – just a bit above the trees, circled in over us; circled once, again, and again – until it was sure we had all looked up, and then rising high as red-tail hawks prefer to so – it rode the currents off to its next destination.

The Dakotas and others believed that the red-tailed hawks carried messages from the Creator and that it should be listened to. One could understand this perception, seeing that raptor yesterday, seeing it as part of the setting much larger than we knew – somehow connecting in a way the hopefulness and the truth of body and spirit.

I couldn't help being led to the thought that As Ann's body returned to the earth from which it had come, her spirit rose to carry the hawk higher and away on mighty currents, wishing us farewell – as the Great Gardener waited, foot-tapping, impatient for Ann to arrive and the heavenly planting season to begin.

How wonderful for Ann and God. How hard it will be, yet, for us a while and longer. But, at least, it can be both – and joy for her life and healing will win out, for she and all the other saints are still with us. Let none of this, as Max Coot says, slip through the fingers of the mind. Our gratitude for her spirit and deserved glory will win out over the sadness.

And, yet, the mind cannot capture it all, can it? I know, perhaps you do as well, the irresolution of things relying simply and however mightily on brain power. Looking out into a star-filled night is enough to leave me clearly aware of my limitations in this and every other regard.

Actually, finding myself in the grips of trying to come out ahead in an argument with one of my 14 or 15 year old students at school, drives this reality home with even more force. Now, there's a place of limitation!

And, so, the unknown – to us - of the part of the whole which we cannot grasp / carries hope for us, because we have some kind of a belief that suspends the need to understand, without diminishing the power or comfort of that which cannot be fully known, until we, too, soar high to the final garden. Whoosh!

Genesis and its marvelous stories are all about this centrifugal force of God in our lives that hold us together, much like the sun holds us in our orbit – God and God's covenant with humankind is a promise that God is with us. It's the center.

It reminds me of that ride I used to love as a kid, the one that you hold on as it gains speed and then, suddenly, you're held in place – spinning sideways, held by the laws of physics – caring less about the science of it all than being able to wave your arms to prove you were no longer holding on, but had indeed let go, entering into some primitive trust of the forces at work.

In some ways, it is this primitive trust that Abram and Sarai knew, long before there were Jews or Christians. It was from this place of being held together by a faith in God that great things were to happen: the Promised Land of Canaan, among them.

These are writings of antiquity, and, as such the after-life was not part of the system of belief. What was known, though, was that God's promise of a land would be realized. Later, this concept of a *Promise Land* would morph into the *Kingdom, Kindom, or Reign of God* that was to come. This was Jesus' promise to those who followed his teachings. It is the central story of his ministry, but it is the same story – there is more than we see; what we see are simply pointers; the sense of the sacred – that can only be fully known when this time here is complete. That is a *promise* not a *threat* – and, certainly, that is part of the Good News!

And, that is what we have to offer this world. It is no small thing, nor, as Mark says in this morning's reading – something we should be "ashamed of." Not unlike today, some of the first and most effective methods of dispelling new ways or teachings that relied on faith – were ridicule. There is no shame in following the teachings of Jesus or those of other great religions and those who follow their leaders.

Diarmuid O'Murchu is a priest and social psychologist who has authored a book called Quantum Theology. He refers to it as "...an exploration, a bold exploration of the divine co-creativity emanating from one of the most ingenious scientific discoveries of the twentieth century: *quantum theory*." The book jacket adds to this in stating: "For the quantum theorist, the fact that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts underpins all reality. "This," says O'Marchu,, "is not merely a *scientific* principle, it is also a *theological* norm, known to mystics for centuries and now maturing into a supreme wisdom of our age."

Well, as I have at least a few times told this congregation, I knew about this mystery stuff from my early grammar school days, when questions such as, "How could you have a beginning with no end, Sister? That's like having a circle with no beginning!" The answer I always got was, "It's a mystery! Now, get back to work!"

Truth be told, it still is a mystery, and always will be, but the book is interesting and in one part, speaking about *The Central Myth of the Christian Story* and referring to the emerging after-life concept in Jesus' teachings, he writes:

“In the Christian context, the parables serve as subplots in an even more embracing story, which the Gospel writers invariably call the “kingdom of God” or, as in Matthew’s Gospel, the “Kingdom of Heaven.” This is the central myth of the New Testament, the core message of Jesus for humanity and for the world. It is the archetypal truth that underpins all that Christianity stands for, the fundamental norm that makes Christianity unique, not in the sense of being apart from, but in what it has to share with the other great religions and with all people who embark on the spiritual journey of life.

“What Jesus meant by the ‘Kingdom’ (what others prefer to call the ‘New Reign of God’ or, in [inclusive] terms, the ‘Kindom’) is difficult to describe completely. Remember, we are dealing with a story, not a dogma. But the story of God’s New Reign, activated for Christians in and through Jesus, has a particular orientation, which we can describe as follows: It is the invitation to work for a new world order, marked by the right relationships of justice, love, peace, and liberation. It is new in its essential nature, global in ambience (not just for Christians), and practical in its application. It includes but also transcends the religious dreams and hopes of all humankind.”

From antiquity to present and beyond: a Reign of God that includes and transcends all the religious dreams and hopes of all humankind. Are you starting to feel just a little safer and more secure in navigating this unknown, imperfect, and broken time?

I actually love it when Jesus tells Peter, “Get thee behind me, Satan!” when Peter makes the mistake of suggesting to Jesus (rebuking him) saying that he was overplaying the suffering and the resurrection talk. It was an expression of the times that simply meant something like, “Get out of my way...”

There are many who will try to “get in our way,” distracting us from and even ridiculing us in our mission and our work, but they, too, are part of the whole – and their authority has yet to feel the centrifugal force or updrafts of the spirit that hold us in the faith and upon whose wings we will rise one day.

As part of the service for Ann, we read a contribution she had written for “Meditations” on Deacons’ Sunday in January 2003.

In part, she wrote these things:

“Today we are highlighting the role of deacon in service to God through service to our congregation. We all have different gifts, and it is wonderful when an enthusiasm can also be a service.”

The word “enthusiasm” comes from the Greek *entheos* and its meaning: the God within. It seems Ann had it right all along. The God within that makes us a part of a much greater whole, a whole that calls us to what we cannot yet know, that promises us peace and healing and love that can best be practiced and received in service - carrying the Good News of the Gospel as the God who calls us does a new thing in this world, unfolding here, as we speak.

And, remember if you would Coots’ words:

When something sacred’s sensed
In soil or sky,
Mark the time.
Respond with thought or prayer
Or smile or grief.
Let nothing living slip between
The fingers of the mind
For all these are holy things.

And part of the Great Mystery we share.

Amen.