



Palisades Presbyterian Church
Palisades, New York 10964
February 25, 2007

*We are a Christian community welcoming all
as we seek to grow in faith and serve others.*

Reflection

A Poem in a Time of Deepest Pondering

There are dreams in my intellect's riding,
Stupendous ponderings, that roll through
my mind as mountains roll through
the bucking light.

In the prance of my intellect's riding
a poem breaks through my mind
as a trout breaks through
the cords of midsummer.

The horns and bells of the earth's music
strike through the governance of suns
as cords of water shine in the bucking light
high on the plains of my intellect's riding.

From Five Seasons of Obsession, New and Selected Poems -
Ned O'Gorman

*Hymn 210: *Our God, Our Help in Ages Past*
* Hymn #80 *Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley*
* Hymn #80 *Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley*

Secure Under the Trust of God -
“Qui habitat in abscondito Excelsi in umbraculo Domini commorabitur”
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Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap. They have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Instead seek God’s kingdom, and these things shall be yours as well.

Matthew 6:25-34; Luke 12:22-31

I’ve given thought from time to time, just how to do this. How to not be anxious about life and all its demands amidst a needy and broken world. We’ve talked about it here. How do we do our work in this world and not burn out or become cynical as Christians or from other faith traditions.

You may recall that a few weeks ago, as a reflection, I placed a quote from Mother Teresa on the front of our bulletin: “Jesus didn’t say love the world, he said to love one another.”

At first blush, the quote almost seems like a loophole in the cosmic command and dimension of love as a world force. An escape hatch from what seems to be a sometimes overwhelming and burdensome charge.

Oh, my gosh! How will we do this? How do I know if I am doing enough? Doing it right? I can’t let up. Got to keep going, working – as if the idea of being faithful disciples in this world requires our own personal bellows to propel love and peace, as if the resultant fire would be in the tempo and intensity of the accordion like motion of our hands.

If you have ever seen Fritz Lang’s Metropolis, it reminds me of the endless worker, serving the greater society, invisible, consumed, and replaced when no longer able to function. Sometime, I feel like this – and sometimes, I even think it is ok.

Now, I’m not talking about martyrdom. At least I don’t think I am. I had a conversation with someone earlier this week, in which I pointed out that I had started a blog to speak directly to some of the roadblocks recent polity decisions in the church have erected in the quest for full inclusion of LGBT folk in the church – at least in my opinion. The site is mine, affiliated with nothing other than me, and it is meant to provoke a bit. In the discussion, I also mentioned that I had always felt that I was on my way out -- as a result of being outspoken in the struggle. My friend said to me, “Hey, you don’t have to be a martyr.” And, truthfully, it was the furthest thing from my mind. I am aware, though, that the work to which we are called in our lives brings with it a certain – uncertainty; all the more reason to trust in God and stay on the path – no matter what. To me, that’s not being a martyr. And it doesn’t mean that I need to burn myself out in the process (although I have, at times, felt as though I have come close to that, as well).

And, as for Mother Teresa, while many of us might think that she was a tireless worker, and she was – she also must have taken time to enjoy the benefits of God’s partnership with her, by allowing God to share fairly in the labor. After all, Mother Teresa lived until 87, active right until she was called home. So she must have learned to take care of herself and understand how to invite God in to share the responsibilities, without feeling as though she were becoming, well...less than dedicated.

Some of the answers are in the quote. She loved one person at a time, the “each other.” She certainly was no stranger to the broader issues of her world, but she worked with those in her setting and let God take care of the rest.

Not easy for some of us who like to take charge? However, the proof of this approach is in her life and others: this loving one another is powerful and effective, and it has ways of changing things we could never imagine.

“Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, about your body...” C’mon, Jesus. What about mortality rates of the young, the starving and poor. “

OK, OK, but Jesus wasn’t telling us to just sit idly by, either. I mean we have to do something, right? Don’t be anxious. Be happy. Good-bye. That’s it? -- No.

Probably many people never get past the “do not be anxious part.” Sure, it makes hoards of sense to embrace that alone, considering how anxious we all can be:

“Let me breathe, not be anxious, Oh, Thank you, Jesus.
Thank you, Jesus. Calm me down...” Good. A good start.

But there is more - and it culminates in the last line: “Instead (of being anxious) seek God’s kingdom, and these things (food, shelter, peace) shall be yours as well.”

A word about language here: Many of us, these days, replace the word “kingdom” with kindom, or something like it. In Jesus’ times, everyone knew kings, and rulers, and lords. The writers of the gospels portrayed Jesus as a new King and Lord – juxtaposed to the Roman kings and lords. It was a language and a societal thing that made clear the new separation that was taking place from the dominion and domination of the Romans. It made sense. Today, it is offensive to many.

But seeking the presence of God in one another – in this world where we now live – was what Jesus and Mother Teresa and others have taught us...opening ourselves to the presence of God in such a way that we actually know its touch between us. That’s about as intimate as we can get on this spiritual plane, temporarily in union with the physical. Some seem to know this better than others, Jesus may have know it better than anyone before him, including Moses, Elijah, and everyone since.

So, as much as I love to zoom out on Google Earth and rotate the globe and heavens at the click of a mouse, it's really more about the relatively small bits of terra firma upon which we walk. It's about our life lived over a period of time in a particular setting. If you and I had historians or writers following us around for years or decades – their books or documentaries would always be a compilation of events, sometimes telescoped to portray the way that faith or philosophy played out in our lives, rather than the exacting historical timeline and specifics. Narratives, written or otherwise are always at best a summary of sorts, never totally able to take into account all the events or the *sitz in lieben* – our individual places in life – during which such things happened.

We are always, no matter how much we try, part mystery. And, I think we need to get to know that part better.

Clearly, the synoptics, John, Paul – all wrote about Jesus' life as a compilation of events, nuanced by each of their perspectives, with pericopes or sections of their writings about Jesus to be used for worship and instructional purposes.

And, in truth, Jesus didn't help them sometimes – with parables and allegories and saying that sent even the likes of Nicodemus into a frenzy, “What do you mean I need to be born again?!” But therein lies the beauty and the inherent contradiction to arguments for literalization of the Scriptures and their meaning – Jesus never explained a thing. Think of it, he left us a set of beliefs - a way of living that has as many different interpretations as there are believers – in one way or another – and it is still an effective and timeless message and way of living for all who care to follow. There is nothing exclusionary or literal about this tradition, in my opinion. Maybe yours, too. Maybe not. But it does make one think, doesn't it?

And this morning's reading of Luke (paralleled in Matthew) is a good example of this, in this sort of broadly brushed landscape of Jesus' life, the writers acknowledge the temptations Jesus faced over the time of his ministry and the decisions or choices he made – compacted into one reading.

It was understood during the time it was written. The desert was well-known to the listeners. They lived there, or on the edge of it. They knew how choices in such a climate had to be made for survival on a regular basis. The parallel of Jesus' ministry and teachings as choices in a hostile environment of oppression and injustice -- choices that were based on a new compassion and love – that's what the writers wanted to convey. Choices for a new kind of survival – for which Jesus would pay the ultimate price. A clear statement that Jesus had committed himself to all the teachings they knew from the Old Testament – in fact his answers are all right out of Deuteronomy 6 – 8 – and to a new embrace of the least among them.

Remember the times, and realize that Jesus could have decided to do this differently – as a high priest, a ruler, or other elevated place in the temple and society. But he didn't. He made choices to stay faithful to what he believed. Probably, time and again saying and

being heard to say – “Get thee behind me, Satan” – when folks would try to dissuade him from his ministry.

It is about choices, for Jesus, for us. Always. The earliest of the gospels has the least to say about this section known as “The Temptation.” It’s all of two lines: And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days (that is, a long time), tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on (were with) him.” Mark 1:12-13.

Jesus knew the wilderness, the desert, the times of desolation...and went there (and other places, too) to remember that he was under God’s care. That’s the message:

“Qui habitat in abscondito Excelsi in umbraculo Domini commorabitur”
The one that dwelleth in the aid of the most High, shall abide under the protection of the God.

You know, here’s a good example of just how he taught: if Jesus needed to get away now and then to pray and meditate – Jesus – then surely we need to do the same. He needed not be worn out as a machine part, as a martyr in the theological infrastructure of the day – but to be clear and prayerful about his decisions and how each day he would live his life in the shadow the “umbraculo” under the care of God with total trust and confidence.

This is, in many ways, the time of Lent into which we have entered. It is in the shadow of the cross we now walk, through a rich and challenging desert in the church calendar. We are in a place where we are called to prayer, to silence, to the discernment of how God is in our lives today and how we move with the Spirit, with the same steadfast love and convictions as the one did 2000 years ago.

But on this desert journey, let us not forget – that as in that terrain that Jesus walked, as in ours, there are oases, too. The greatest of these, the ones that exceed the raiment of Solomon and the lilies themselves, are the ones that we find in seeking the kingdom of God, one kin at a time.

Amen.