

Earth Day Sunday - April 19, 2020

Gathering Chant

Gathered here in the mystery of this hour.
Gathered here in one strong body.
Gathered here in the struggle and power.
Spirit, draw near.

Psalm 150

Hallelujah! Praise the Lord in the holy temple; praise God in the firmament of divine power. Praise the Lord for mighty acts; praise God for excellent greatness. Praise the Lord with the blast of the ram's-horn; praise God with lyre and harp. Praise the Lord with timbrel and dance; praise God with strings and pipe. Praise the Lord with resounding cymbals; praise God with loud-clanging cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Hallelujah!

Peace Be Still

Peace be still and know that I am God
Peace be still and know that I am
Peace be still and know
Peace be still
Peace be
Peace, peace, peace

Mark 4:35-39 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.

Message: And the earth took a breath

I find the scripture text Tom just read fascinating on so many levels. Not, the least of which is Jesus' gift for power napping. Here they are, Jesus and the disciples - out on the open sea, in the pitch dark when a great windstorm whips up and threatens to break their boat right in half if it doesn't sink first! The disciples are terrified - completely undone and freaking out over the likely prospect of drowning. They are baling water, grappling with wind ravaged sails, and hanging on for their dear lives!

And Jesus? What is he doing to help in this perilous situation? He is sleeping!

Were it not for the screaming disciples, I'm pretty confident we could have heard Jesus snoring. That kind of rest is a gift from God - literally.

But what really fascinates me about this particular text, and the Gospel of Mark as a whole, is how Jesus regularly engineers endings that people aren't expecting. He challenges what we think we know about ourselves, the world we live in, and God. He flips everything on its head. In this case, the disciples are terrified and exasperated when they finally shout, "Don't you care that we are perishing?"

Now, one might well expect that Jesus would defend his need for rest. After all he had been with crowds of people all day teaching before heading out for the other side of the Sea. But, he doesn't question them or delay action. He simply wakes, rebukes the wind and commands it to quiet down; "Peace! Be still," he says, and so it does, the wind ceased and there was great calm.

Huh. How about that. Problem solved. But, of course this isn't a story about Jesus' power and ability to control the weather. This is a different story, one that leaves the disciples forever changed. Last Sunday Pastor Susan, mentioned a favorite quote in her Easter sermon, "There is no real ending. It is just the place where you stop the story." The disciples are coming to Jesus with what they assume is the end of their story - death. And Jesus throws them a life line, "Stop. Take a breath."

We are in the midst of a global storm and the directive we've been given is to stop and take a breath. A month ago I had never even thought about using a grocery delivery service. It felt too indulgent. Not to mention that I didn't believe anyone else would really put in the work to out the best produce and apples like I do.... Yeah, a month ago my biggest concern was avoiding mealy apples! And here we are today receiving (and carefully sterilizing) our Instacart deliveries because it is simply too risky to be out in public - if we can avoid it.

This pandemic is turning out to be a catastrophic virus that has already made millions of people sick and killed over a hundred thousand; it is devastating economies, and has plunged us all into a fearful limbo with no clear ending or path forward. People are terrified, grappling with ever changing winds of information and hanging on for dear life. We are praying more than ever, "Jesus, don't you care that we are perishing?" To his disciples then, and to us now, Jesus has this response, "Peace/stop. Be still/breathe. I'm here. We're in this together."

On the website, *A Reason To Be Cheerful*, David Byrne, front man for The Talking Heads shared this script-flipping reflection about COVID19: "It's ironic that as the pandemic forces us into our separate corners, it's also showing us how intricately we are all connected. It's revealing the many ways our lives intersect almost without noticing. And it's showing us just how tenuous our existence becomes when we try to abandon those connections and distance from one another. Health care, housing, race, inequality, the climate - we're all in the same leaky boat". We don't know how this pandemic story ends. But we have seen that fear and paranoia around catching the

virus leads to panic-buying and the spread of misinformation, anxiety and fear in the general public. Byrne goes on to say, “For many of us, our belief in the value of the collective good has eroded in recent decades. But in an emergency that can change quickly.” We are seeing that change play out in our efforts to flatten the curve by sheltering in place. Healthy people are disrupting their business as usual to protect the most vulnerable citizens among us. And it turns out that the very things that we are doing right now to help and save each other is exactly what we need to help and save the planet. We are noticing that Mother Nature is taking a breath as we hold ours.

Worldwide social-distancing measures have produced quantifiable evidence that the earth is healing faster than anyone thought possible, across sea, land and air. You’ve likely heard the stories - people from Venice report being able to see fish swimming in the clear canals, and swans returning for the first time in decades. Ocean ecologists are eager to study marine life’s stress levels and reproduction cycles in the absence of cruise ships that routinely cross their migratory routes. People in India can see the Himalayas, wildlife is reclaiming Yosemite since the National Park was shut down to visitors in March. Less planes, passenger trains and freeway traffic has seismologists on multiple continents reporting a substantial downward shift in noise pollution. Have you noticed how quiet it is outside? I notice it most prominently with the non-stop sounds of birds. And satellite images of earth have detected a significant decrease in the concentration of a common air pollutant, nitrogen dioxide, when compared to images this same time last year. What specifically does this have to do with the Corona Virus, you might ask? According to the World Health Organization, air pollution kills 7 million people per year worldwide and worsens the symptoms for those infected with COVID19.

I don’t want to give the impression that the answer to climate change is a pandemic. But, the Coronavirus is exposing some serious disfunction in our society and inspiring new ways of caring for each other and the planet. More and more people are getting outside to walk or bike in their neighborhoods, restoring a sense of community - even if at a distance. We are learning new ways to work remotely and collaborate across sectors in ways lawmakers and corporations have said were impossible. This pandemic is showing us that we *can* change our ways, and change them quickly.

As much as it is an environmental issue, it is a justice issue as well. Millions of Americans have applied for unemployment benefits. This demonstrates, as reported in the Guardian, “the extent of US’s growing inequality, not only between the super rich and the rest of the country, but in the quality of jobs and the social protections that come with them.” Elise Gould, a senior economist at the Economic Policy Institute in Washington, said: “It has drawn into focus those disparities in a way that it’s not just about jobs, it’s not just about wages. It’s about health and working conditions and access to health insurance. All of these things highlight that there’s two different societies in this country. Because of rising inequality, more people are vulnerable.”

The privileged are learning (I hope) that when the underprivileged are sick even the rich become vulnerable. Right now, the people of Singapore, who thought they’d seen the

worst of the virus are experiencing a spike due to the cramped living conditions migrant workers face as they return home after working for the Singapore elite. If there ever was a time in history that we should finally recognize ALL of humanity is connected - this is it. We all breathe the same air! We are learning - in real time - that how we treat each other AND how we treat the natural world matters and contributes to our collective well-being.

Earthday.org asks us: "What would it look like to absorb the lessons of pandemic and fight for a world in which everyone can thrive?". It's a powerful question. We cannot un-see the social inequalities and environmental impact that this historic event has highlighted. Whenever we get to the other side of this storm, I pray that we don't just return to normal. Normal wasn't normal. Normal was harmful and unjust. I pray that we are forever changed.

So, people of justice, the earth is giving us our cue, "Peace, peace," she says, "I'm here. We are in this together." What we have to do right now is stop, take a deep breath and notice: we are all in the boat together, supported by the precious resources of this planet, sustained by God who understands the sacred need for rest and accompanied by a teacher who walks with us through the storm and the calm

Even in this time of pandemic storm, or maybe especially because of it, the Spirit of God is moving in our midst, here with us in this very moment ready to transform our darkness into her light.

May it be so. Amen.

Move in our Midst

Move in our midst, thou Spirit of God.
Go with us down from thy holy hill.
Walk with us through the storm and the calm.
Spirit of God, go thou with us still.
Touch thou our hands to lead us aright.
Guide us forever, show us thy way.
Transform our darkness into thy light.
Spirit of God, lead thou us today.
Strike from our feet the fetters that bind.
Lift from our lives the weight of our wrong.
Teach us to love with heart, soul, and mind.
Spirit of God, thy love makes us strong.

Kindle our hearts to burn with thy flame.
Raise up thy banners high in this hour.
Stir us to build new worlds in thy name.
Spirit of God, O send us thy power!