

“Quiet Miracles”

Rev. David Gregory

September 4, 2022

13th Sunday after Pentecost



Bathing in the Holy River
Dominique Amendola

Readings

Psalm 139:1-6

adapted from the New Revised Standard Version

Holy One, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

“A Blessing for Presence”

from *To Bless the Space Between Us* by John O’Donohue

Awaken to the mystery of being here
and enter the quiet immensity of your own presence.

Have joy and peace in the temple of your senses.
Receive encouragement when new frontiers beckon.
Respond to the call of your gift and the courage to
follow its path.

Let the flame of anger free you of all falsity.
May warmth of heart keep your presence aflame.
May anxiety never linger about you.
May your outer dignity mirror an inner dignity of soul.

Take time to celebrate the quiet miracles that seek
no attention.

Be consoled in the secret symmetry of your soul.
May you experience each day as a sacred gift woven
around the heart of wonder.

At no other time in human history have we had such a great capacity to see ourselves. It is one thing to look in a mirror and evaluate whether our hair is in order or a shave is called for. It's quite another to see oneself on social media—moments of our lives captured and shared with others, seeing ourselves as others see us. And now in the age of Zoom, we can see our faces in real time, in a line of other faces, adjusting our mannerisms, our facial expressions, and even the tilt of our head, while we ask ourselves, “Is that what I really look like? Is this how I sound?”

There's a moment I'll never forget in 2011 when marriage equality became the law in the State of New York. I was serving the North Congregational Church in Middletown, New York, and given the influx of same-gender weddings that were happening, the church leadership wanted to make it public that their doors were open and their pastor was available to assist. I was contacted by the regional cable news channel for an interview in the church sanctuary, and every half hour through the weekend, there I was, right on television for all the world to see. I have no idea what I said. What I remember vividly is the feeling I had watching my mouth move and listening to the sound of my voice. The whole thing was cringe-worthy at the time, but in the evolution of the pandemic world, there's my talking head all over the internet every day for anyone who wants to click on it.

So here we all are, in a rapid swirl of change, trying to keep our heads above the water of evolution, trying to keep up with the reformation of human existence that includes our faith traditions and religious life. And just as it was at the dawn of the printing press, our evolution is being accelerated by technology. Technology can only be resisted for so long. Eventually, you either get on the ride or stay off of it, but the truth is, it's here to stay and it will only increase. And as it always has been, an essential feature of what makes us human is that we have the capacity to recognize and practice our oneness, our unity with each other, with all people and all things in whatever arena we find ourselves, whether it's wanted or unwanted; it doesn't really matter. It will happen by design or by default, but it will happen.

Gratefully, through the millennia, we've had our seers, poets, and sages who have given us windows of understanding at a pace that we could comprehend at the time, a pace which was definitely slower than our current experience. The ancient Hebrews had their prophets and psalmists, the speakers and the poets and singers with equally prophetic voices to bring meaning and sensibility to the reality of human life. They had their patriarchs, their Moses, their Elijah, to embody the direction of their lives and to give them continuity with the broader human experience. The early Christians had their Jesus, their Paul, their Augustine, and many others who interpreted their reality in the context of Roman dominance. Later it was the reformers like Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, who said, “No, do it this way. This is how it is now.”

In each era there are those who would codify and categorize a given moment in human history and say with a sense of finality, “THIS ... is how it is.” This is the complete religion, the correct theology, the philosophy that works for time and eternity, and now that we've found it, we're going to enforce it from here on out for the good of humanity. Then we come upon our modern sages—ones like the late John O'Donohue, whose work I continue to revel in years after his death. Some of his work has been reorganized and republished posthumously, making his words brand new again, as if his death gave them a new life and character altogether.

We often use the analogy of the spiral when we talk about the evolution of things, how things move in cycles, gradually ever upward. Today I'm thinking more in terms of the telescope—the effect where one thing becomes the extension of another and then another. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all telescope from a single Abrahamic root. Christianity moved from its early universal monolith into multiple streams of protest, and then streams branched into tributaries of denominations, brand names, and local traditions. We humans evolve whether we like it or not. Some do it kicking and screaming, and others get in the flow and enjoy it. It's not difficult to determine which ones are enjoying the ride, and which ones are miserable in the process.

Our religions, our ideals, and our spiritual practices are all found within the lineage of human transformation, and a demonstration of this lineage is how an ancient Hebrew psalm can flow flawlessly into a blessing by John O'Donohue in an unbroken thread of wisdom. We get to feast upon all of it in ways that our forebears might not have had opportunity to do. And a thousand years from now, the cutting edge will be a new one and a new one and a new one. Creation never stops. You might call it the God who makes all things new. If there is any task in life, it is to become fully present to what *is* and never married to it, to create a lean-to in the wilderness without digging for a permanent foundation.

Jesus moved in this energy when he said, "You have heard it said ... but I say to you" These are evolutionary words, if not revolutionary. There is the Law of Moses, but you can't stop there. There is the Council of Nicaea, but you can't stop there. There's the Westminster Catechism, but you can't stop there. There's the idea of God that you grew up with, but you can't stop there. Who are you today? What is your relationship to self, to others, to the divine, that you might not have had words to describe yesterday, or maybe even today? But you know you're moving forward. Spiritual growth is just that—growth. Its goal is not enlightenment, it is creation. It's the doing in the world that comes from being the True Self, knowing yourself in relationship to all that is divine. It's a quiet miracle that is happening within you in the present moment. John O'Donohue calls it the "secret symmetry of our souls, and the sacred gift, woven around the heart of wonder." Do not be afraid of change. Embrace it as a sacred river, and it will carry you downstream to everywhere you want to go.



Waiting for the Miracle
painter unknown