

The Circulation of Love

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Alan Claassen

Food for Thought:

On the Pulse of the Morning

Maya Angelou

A Rock, A River, A Tree
The Rock cries out to us today,
You may stand upon me,
But do not hide your face.
A River sings a beautiful song.
It says,
Come, rest here by my side.
I am that Tree planted by the River,
Which will not be moved.
Here, root yourselves beside me.
Lift up your eyes upon
This day breaking for you.
Give birth again
To the dream.

Scripture:

Romans 8:22-25

All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.

Seven years ago I was serving the First Congregational Church in Murphys, California. Murphys is a little town in the Sierra Foothills two hours south of Sacramento and two hours north of Yosemite. One year, right at this time of the year, Betsy and I and our son and my father went to Yosemite Valley. As we all know, Yosemite Valley is a sacred place. It inspires reflection, humility, joy, and gratitude. It also gifts us with deep questions, such as the one I asked Betsy while we were looking up at one of the waterfalls – water cascading over the cliff hundreds of feet above us. I asked, “When does a river know that it is about to become a waterfall?” to which Betsy quickly replied, “Too late!” And then she took the question to another level by asking, “When do the fish know that their river is about to become a waterfall?” We didn’t have an answer for that one.

Yosemite Valley is a sacred place that asks us “What do I do when my life suddenly changes from stream to waterfall? Will I become a stream again, or has life forever changed?” So as my family and I walked through Yosemite Valley, got baptized by the mists of the dispersed water at the foot of Bridal Veil Falls, watched children play with sticks and rocks along the bank of the river, and saw a wedding about to begin on the beautiful grounds of the Awahnee Hotel, I was thinking about the river that becomes a waterfall, that becomes a river again on a new level. And because of a book I was reading at the time I also began thinking about the Trinity. Yes, I was thinking about the Trinity, the idea that is blasphemous to some and troubling to many; the idea that portrays the nature of the Holy One as the Holy Three.

The book that inspired me to remember the Trinity while in Yosemite Valley is *The Wisdom Jesus* by Cynthia Bourgeault. In her book, Bourgeault imagines a great waterwheel of a grain mill, with three buckets going round and round, constantly spilling over into one another, and as they do so, the mill turns, and the energy of love becomes manifest and accessible (pg. 71). As the waterwheel turns and the buckets filled with water empty themselves, their water fills the bucket below them, and the waterwheel turns. This circulation of love reveals God’s innermost nature through a continuous round dance of self-emptying (pg. 72). “My bucket is filled with love and I empty it into yours,” God says to creation. Let there be light. And it is good. “My bucket is filled with love and I empty into yours,” Jesus says to humanity on the way to the cross. Let there be peace. And it is good. “My bucket is filled with love,” the Holy Spirit says to the lost disciples. Let there be community. And it is good.

This is how I saw the Trinity in the river above, the river below, and the waterfall in between. Just as a waterwheel turns and the buckets filled with water empty themselves so that their water fills the bucket below them, love moves from river above to river below with the self-giving release of trust, courage, and transformation.

This is how I saw God, as I stood in one spot on the valley floor. God, as complete unknowable mystery, is the Yosemite Valley in its awesome entirety. There is no way to describe Wholly Love, Holy Mystery. It's best just to immerse oneself in its glory and say "Amen!" God is the river before it becomes waterfall, high above the valley floor. Jesus the Christ is the complete act of trust in God, self-emptying love, bringing love to the valley floor. The Holy Spirit is the water become river again, nourishing the meadow and the animals, providing a place of joy for the children, and a place for the fish to swim. And then I placed my life in this image: as river above, thinking that I know where my life is going; become waterfall, falling, losing shape, trusting, letting go; become river again, the next step in my journey, where I can find my place with a new life and a new community.

As I saw myself in the three phases of the river, I begin to sense a way to pray our way into an answer to the question I asked earlier in this sermon: "What do I do when my life suddenly changes from stream to waterfall? Will I become a stream again, or has life forever changed?" Meditating on the wisdom of the waterfall, I caught a glimpse of the reality that my true self is not defined by a riverbank, or a job, or a relationship. These aspects of life become important when I define myself by my work or personal relationships. And they *are* important, they are good, they are life-giving, identity-giving. But sometimes they fall away. Sometimes the course of our life changes, just like a river that knows too late it is about to become a waterfall. Meditating on the wisdom of the waterfall, the Trinity, the waterwheel, I caught a glimpse of the reality that my true self is water that can and does take many forms. How do I ride the falls? What do we do when our life has changes from a river to a waterfall and from waterfall to river that provides habitat for life as it nourishes the land, and the tree that will not be moved? How do we ride the falls? How do we ride that impatient moment when something new is born within but has not yet taken shape or form? How do you expectantly wait for a new vision for Community Congregational Church, and a new visionary minister to ride the river with you? Perhaps we need a trail guide, someone who knows the Yosemite Valley very well. Who else could that be but John Muir?

Hiking. I don't like either the word or the thing. People ought to saunter in the mountains, not hike! Do you know the origin of that word *saunter*? It's a beautiful word. Way back in the Middle Ages people used to go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and when people in the villages through which they passed asked where they were going, they would reply, "*A la sainte terre* – to the Holy Land." And so they became known as *sainte-terre-ers* or *saunterers*. Now these mountains are our Holy Land, and we ought to saunter through them reverently, not "hike" through them.

We can give ourselves to trust and love rather than fear and doubt. We can choose to remember that God is with us in the river above, the river falling, the river below. And remember that just as John Muir had the training to walk the ground as if it were holy ground, we have the training that comes from our spiritual practices and from being in community together. We can empty our water bucket, filled with love and regret and brokenness, fear and confusion, trusting that we will be filled again, trusting that our life will once again be one that nourishes our true self and our community. The wisdom of the Trinity is that all of life is in relationship. There is not one God, there is not one hero, there is not one favored nation; there are holy relationships, where one thing is tied to everything else. The question of the Trinity is not whether or not we want to be right, but whether we want to be in relationship. The river can take many forms: above the cliff, over the waterfall, carving a new valley, something that knows we are all ocean-bound. Love that empties us, love that fills us, love that keeps the water wheel of life moving.

I would like to close with more words from Maya Angelou's poem "On the Pulse of a New Morning."

Lift up your hearts
Each new hour holds new chances
For a new beginning.
Do not be wedded forever
To fear, yoked eternally
To brutishness.

The horizon leans forward,
Offering you space to place new steps of change.
Here, on the pulse of this fine day
You may have the courage
To look up and out and upon me, the
Rock, the River, the Tree, your country.

Here, on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up and out
And into your sister's eyes, and into
Your brother's face, your country
And say simply
Very simply
With hope –
Good morning.

Let the people say "Amen."