

“As Grounded Beings ... ”

Rev. David Gregory

March 24, 2019

Third Sunday in Lent



First reading

from *Consolations* by David Whyte

Ground is what lies beneath our feet. It is the place where we already stand, a state of recognition the place or the circumstances to which we belong whether we wish to or not. It is what holds and supports us, but also what we do not want to be true; it is what challenges us, physically or psychologically, irrespective of our hoped-for needs. It is the living, underlying foundation that tells us what we are, where we are, what season we are in and what, no matter what we wish in the abstract, is about to happen in our body, in the word or in the conversation between the two.

Second reading

from *Eternal Echoes* by John O'Donohue

When you open your heart to discovery, you will be called to step outside the comfort barriers within which you have fortified your life. You will be called to risk old views and thoughts and to step off the circle of routine and image. This will often bring turbulence. The pendulum will fix at times on one extreme, and you will be out of balance. But your soul loves the danger of growth. In its own wise trust, your soul will always return you to a place of real and vital equilibrium.

As many of you already know, my relationship with the Scriptures—both Hebrew and Christian—has been deep; it has been varied; it has been evolutionary, to say the least. In my early Quaker journey, at least in my family, there was a certain respect for the Bible, but we held the same kind of reverence for Shakespeare, for Melville, for Longfellow, Thoreau, and Whitman. My grandparents used to sit in opposite corners of their library and play a little game. One of them would recite something, and the other would have to guess if it was the Bible or Shakespeare. I was too young to remember who won those games, but what stayed with me was that the beauty of language did not depend on who employed it. The words would stand on their own for ages to come. And the ideas, whether they were ours or not, were worthy of respect. And then, long after my grandfather died, I turned fourteen, and the cool kids in my youth group told me that the Bible was much more than literature. It was the very word of God, breathed out by God, word for word. I decided, then and there, that if God wrote a book for me, I'd better devote my life to its study, and so I did. And that study, as most of you know, led me to college, seminary, and about fifteen years as a Baptist minister. And we all know where that ended up, which is not the point of this message.

On Thursday in Stone Soup we read one of my very favorite passages in all of Scripture from the fortieth chapter of Isaiah, where it says, “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” Over the last forty years, I have returned to this verse again and again, usually at a time of crisis, or at a time I was feeling worn down, burnt out, or otherwise powerless. It has brought me much peace of mind, and it still does today. There is a sense of divine inspiration in these words that is not negated by all of the masculine images and pronouns employed to describe God in the same passage. It was those very pronouns that gave me pause about including them in today’s readings, which leads me to say: When we read portions of Scripture in this place, I hope we can learn to hold them with a certain reverence, and honor the journey of the ancients who wrote these words. I hope we can see them for the treasures that they are, even though we see them through the lens of a more evolved sense of the divine in the balance of masculine and feminine images. When it’s time to throw out the bathwater, let’s just say I’m in favor of keeping the baby. In other words, let’s not get so wound up about the pronouns that we miss the point entirely.

There is this magnificent image of the eagle soaring high above us—a symbol of energy, beauty, and strength. In God, there is this power center that allows us to defy the gravity of limitation, to escape the bonds of earthly problems and get to a vantage point high above it all, where we can actually see what’s going on. Prayer and meditation is what allows us to get above it all. Sometimes it takes us to other places and gives us visions of things we never thought possible. And when we open our eyes, the truth is we’re still subject to gravity. We are living, after all, on the ground. This ground is, as David Whyte says

what lies beneath our feet. It is the place where we already stand; a state of recognition, the place or the circumstances to which we belong whether we wish to or not. It is what holds and supports us, but also what we do not want to be true; it is what challenges us, physically or psychologically, irrespective of our hoped-for needs. It is the living, underlying foundation that tells us what we are, where we are, what season we are in and what, no matter what we wish in the abstract, is about to happen in our body, in the world or in the conversation between the two.

We began a new weekly yoga practice here in the sanctuary this past Wednesday night. If you were here that night you will have noticed that what we did is much more than what we think of as yoga. It involved some music that carried us away, soaring like eagles. It involved some deep meditation that took me a long distance from the world. And all of this took place while I was deeply connected to the ground. What impressed me as I lay on my back looking up (other than some cobwebs and peeling paint) was how beautiful it was to be grounded in this place that is usually full of music, of preaching, of announcements, of laughter and conversation. It was like “Who knew there was this ground beneath our feet?”

The season of Lent, more than any other time of year calls, us to the ground. This year, more than any other, the ground is lush and green, bursting with new life and energy. It is filled with the fragrance of flowers so dense and so bright that their colors can be seen from space. On my walk yesterday morning I was mesmerized with how there is water everywhere. You can hear it running down the hillsides into the valleys and out into the bay. Rain falling from heaven, quenching the thirst of the earth.

As grounded beings who also happen to be attuned to Spirit, we can know this beautiful, gorgeous marriage between heaven and earth. For too long, perhaps, we have looked at heaven as a means of escaping earth, but this is really just a limited expression of western religion, particularly western Christianity. Somewhere along the way, Christianity became a religion from the neck up. Propositions, doctrines, creeds, exclusionary arguments—they have nothing to do with the body, the body which was considered evil and doomed by original sin. If eastern practices have done anything for us, they've allowed us at long last to ditch this duality, to reconnect us with the sacredness of the body, and to connect us with all the life-giving energy from which we have separated ourselves, and to help us get our feet and sometimes our whole bodies on the ground.

We keep trying to take our lofty ideals and bring them to the earth, but we've ignored the fact that this is a two-way street. Heaven brings us enlightenment, and earth brings us healing. We cannot survive without both of them. Our Lenten practice then, is to let the communication flow between the two.

