

“Perhaps We’ll Never Know”

Rev. David Gregory

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Lent 4



Painting by Leah Dorian

Readings

Psalm 32:6,7

adapted from the New Revised Standard Version

Therefore let all who are steadfast
offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.

You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of liberation.

“In Blackwater Woods,” a poem by Mary Oliver from her book *American Primitive*

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is

nameless now.

Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

A Hebrew sage whose words are contained in our Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes has said something that every one of us instinctively knows – that there is a time for everything.

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.*

This is a common preaching text that cycles around every now and then, and it usually ends there. But, of course, the ideas continue to flow with these words:

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time.

It may seem like something of a riddle, when in these ancient words, it is said:

God has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

And finally these words that sound a bit like a summation:

I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe.

I've always loved this gritty piece of Hebrew wisdom that tells a story of life from a very human perspective, and I'll be honest and say that I've often read it **not** while things were going well, not so much in times of peace, or love, or dancing, or laughter. It's been in times of war, times of anxiety, times of uncertainty, pandemic, or political turmoil that I've needed to remind myself that there is a flip side to all of it. Somehow, there is in the American psyche this need to look at times of peace, prosperity, and happiness as normal, and times of war, of sickness or pain as an aberration that we must find a way to fix, and so we set about to do the fixing. We look for a political answer, a religious answer, a philosophical or a scientific one, all in hopes of getting us back to what is normal. We apply whatever effort we can to control our own circumstances, as well as the direction of the rest of the world. This seems like a noble pursuit, one that is destined for success, that is until we meet up with a competing agenda, a pandemic or a Putin, or anything else that might not fit our idea of what is normal.

We can all admit it is difficult to find expressions of peace, health, and civility in times of civil unrest or war, but psalmists and poets throughout history assure us that they are there. In fact, there is a flip side to everything we see, whether we perceive what we're seeing as good or evil. We wouldn't know what peace is were it not for war. We wouldn't recognize good health without its absence. And we'd have a hard time understanding what civility is, were it not for the lack of it. We live a life of contrasts, which keeps us at the cutting edge of creation. The Hebrew psalmist sings to us:

Let all who are faithful (steadfast) offer prayer to you; at a time of distress the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of salvation (liberation).

When the ancients felt swallowed up by the distresses of the world, they prayed to a far-off God for salvation or deliverance from those distresses. It's easy to see why. It's also easy to see why we'd do the same, given the images and ideas that splash across our small screens all day, every day. It is quite logical that we would look for something outside ourselves to come to our rescue, a god-like figure riding up on a white horse to vanquish all that is evil, or a Joshua to make the walls of Jericho fall down in a heap, or a Messiah to take up our cause and usher in the utopia we feel we've been promised. It all seems so far away, so dependent on forces outside of ourselves, the whims of dictators, or the capricious acts of a deity who might or might not be mad at us today. Enter Mary Oliver who says:

*Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.*

On the other side of every loss we find salvation, not in a way that is explainable or formulaic, but in a way that just *is*. There are things that have happened in my life and in the lives of those I love whose meaning none of us will ever know: wonderful things; difficult things; happy things; distressing things. I could list them all day, and so could you. But the essence of faith itself is the willingness to see the other side of things, and to allow ourselves to find pleasure in our toil, to look at a shadow and understand the light behind it, to find peace where others might have missed it, and in turn, offer it to others.