

“In Spite of Everything”

Rev. David Gregory

November 8, 2020

Pentecost 23



Readings

Icon of Sophia (Wisdom)

Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-14

New Revised Standard Version

Wisdom is radiant and unfading,
and she is easily discerned by those who love her,
and is found by those who seek her.

She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her.
One who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty,
for she will be found sitting at the gate.

Everything is Going to be All Right

Derek Mahon, from *Selected Poems*

How should I not be glad to contemplate
the clouds clearing beyond the dormer window
and a high tide reflected on the ceiling?
There will be dying, there will be dying,
but there is no need to go into that.
The poems flow from the hand unbidden
and the hidden source is the watchful heart.
The sun rises in spite of everything
and the far cities are beautiful and bright.
I lie here in a riot of sunlight
watching the day break and the clouds flying.
Everything is going to be all right.

Last week we invited you to BREATHE. This week we remind you that breathing involves both inhaling AND exhaling. Regardless of your political persuasion, the fever pitch of the last few weeks—and especially of the last few days—cannot pass without some sort of major exhale, and my hope is that you are finding that space for yourself. I know that I certainly am.

Three years ago when we were making the decision to move from the east coast—specifically from the NORTH east—to the west coast of northern California, we did not fully comprehend how our move would redefine the word “season” for us. We came from a place where we had four of them to a place where there are two. Instead of spring, summer, fall, and winter, our year is made up of the wet season and the dry one. While we are not quite there yet, the wet season is coming, and a couple of days ago I felt a sudden change in the air. It was more than a drop in temperature. It was the look of the sky, the feel of the air, and of course the constant and gradual lowering of the arc of the sun as the earth tilts to give the southern hemisphere its fair share of warmth and light. With this noticeable shift comes a brand new day, one that is welcomed by a slight majority, and one that is deeply disappointing to the rest. There are celebrations all around us with cries for unity and passionate pleas for oneness, nearly all of them expressed by those whose candidates prevailed.

In our community we highly value oneness. We are the UNITED Church of Christ, a moniker that was not selected at random. For more than sixty years our denomination has been seeking oneness, coming from four major strands of Christianity that make up our heritage. Unity has always been our ideal, and it seems as though achieving it would be neat and tidy. The reality, as we all know, is a bit messier than that. Union is never perfect, meaning we never quite get there. This is not a failure of the system nor of the people who populate it. It simply means that there is always room for more: more expansion, new creation, greater learning, and most of all, deeper love.

In the wider community of American culture we live the same ideals and possibilities, always aimed at forming a “more perfect union.” We all know the glaring omissions that occurred at the beginning, particularly around issues of slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow, and later, civil rights. The founding fathers got us started, but they didn’t get it all done. Lincoln tried to keep us together, but he didn’t get it all done. Martin Luther King ignited a non-violent movement toward social justice, but he didn’t get there. John Lewis didn’t get there. We won’t get there. We can call that failure, or we can call it the green growing edge of co-creation that never stops. We can put down stakes and say “Here I stand; I shall not be moved,” or we can get into the flow of peace, justice, and humanity, and move with it as far as we possibly can. Having said that, if there were ever a time for wise actions and wise words, it is now and in the days ahead. This is not a time for bitterness and vitriol, but for curating our own emotions and for making careful choices about what we communicate to the world.

For wise words we turn to the apocryphal writing called *The Sophia (or the Wisdom) of Solomon*, which reminds us that what we’re looking for is not found in some riddle understood only by an elite few. “Wisdom,” we are told, is “easily discerned.” If you get up early you will easily find her waiting for you at the gate, not hiding, but in the open air, recognizable, and ready for a nice long chat. Her voice can be heard in many places, and today especially in the images and ideas of the Irish poet Derek Mahon, whose recent passing is mourned across the world. As the seasons change, as the clouds clear, we learn that in spite of everything the sun is still shining. There is always a thing called death, and we probably spend more time than we ought to contemplating it. “There is no need to go into that,” he says. In this riot of sunlight we are reminded of something that is eternally true. “Everything is going to be all right.”

This is something we very much need to know. The world may not be what we thought it was. From right or left, the facts can be disheartening. We live in a divided country. It isn't about red states or blue states, for those designations have proven to be fluid. Alternate perceptions of reality exist within every state, within communities and families, within religious traditions, ethnicities, and subcultures. But where do these competing perceptions come from? The phrase "alternate universe" is an oxymoron, but you'd never know that from what you hear in mass and social media. Somewhere in the last forty years or so, reality—or what we might call "truth"—came to be perceived through the lens of whoever we listen to. Our ideas of what is true have been delivered to us via algorithms based upon what artificial intelligence supposes we want to hear. Scientific research has been manipulated and bent to popular trends, and it might have gone on unnoticed this way but for hundreds of thousands of people who have died because of these manipulations.

We are waking up to something deeper and stronger than shifting political winds. Whether it is the Sophia of Solomon that waits for us in plain sight, or the beauty and grace of the poet who sees the "clouds clearing beyond the dormer window," we are opening our eyes to a better world that even a new president cannot give us. There is a deeper and fuller expression of life that is seeking to spring forth from us, and in spite of everything, it's going to happen.

We've all seen that a blade of grass can eventually push its way through asphalt, and this is the same energy that pushed the founders to seek independence from the British monarchy, the same force that empowered Lincoln to insist that a house divided cannot stand, the same determination that kept Martin Luther King preaching and John Lewis marching, the same science-based wisdom that landed human beings on the moon, found a polio vaccine, and created the internet. It's the same energy that flows through you. It is called life. It is Divine Spirit. It's what we call God. It is a voice you can easily find, one that you can listen to if you take the time to discover it and quiet yourself enough to listen.

It was Steve Jobs who told us, "Don't waste your time living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma—which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your inner voice." Well, here's what my inner voice tells me: in spite of everything . . . everything is going to be all right.

