

“Wonder”
Stouffville United Church
Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Cunningham
Sunday, September 13, 2020

Psalm 114

We turn to the bible for the stories that anchor our faith, from the Old Testament stories that tell of a God who rescued and redeemed the people that God so deeply loved, to the New Testament that continues with God’s message of unrelenting love, and of a forgiveness that has no end. We turn to our Bible to understand Christianity and its movement across the land as the disciples, as Peter and Paul, shared their faith with everyone they met.

The Psalms contain 150 writings that in many ways show the continuing struggle of a people who in one moment believe in their God and in the next struggle to find God. Their struggle is no different from our struggle – where in one moment we know and believe in the God who walks with us. And then in the next minute, we’re saying, “Where is God??”

Our psalm for today is Psalm 114. To help place the psalm, I want to read a bit from the Psalm that comes before it and after it. Psalm 113 describes a God who is in relationship with the people. We read, “Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap.” Psalm 115 writes, “Our God is in the heavens. God is [our] help and our shield. The Lord has been mindful of us; God will bless us.” These psalms help to describe the relationship between God and the people.

Now look at Psalm 114. While the psalm is about the presence of God, we discover the relationship is on a very different scale. “When Israel went out from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language, Judah became God’s sanctuary.” These first two verses refer to the event of the parting of the Red Sea, when God caused the sea to move, exposing the bottom of the seabed, allowing the Israelites to walk through to freedom on the other side. When the Israelites reached the other side, God caused the waters to fill in again, drowning the Egyptian armies who were chasing them. In Verse 3 of our psalm we read, “The sea looked and fled; Jordan turned back. The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs. Why is it, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back?”

Gone from this psalm is the typical language of the things God will give the people, what the people can expect from God. Gone is the description of relationship that we are comfortable with – a God who blesses, who saves, who rescues. Gone is the language we’re accustomed to, where it’s about God and us. In this psalm, it’s about fantastic images of a sea that flees, of a river that turns back, of a mountain that skips. It’s as if nature is getting the heck out of God’s way.¹

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year B, Homiletical Perspective, 343.

What do we do with this? Do we just turn to the next psalm, to one that we can understand better? Or do we stay and linger around the discomfort of the startling images of a sea that flees? Do we stay with this mystery that defies understanding?

“The sea looked and fled.” What did the sea observe? And why did it flee? Well, the sea witnessed God’s power when God parted the waters of the sea and the people crossed over to freedom. And the sea, recognizing the power, decided to get out of the way. The sea looked and fled. The sea recognized God’s off-the chart, off-the scale energy, power, and force. And the sea’s response was to get out of the way.

The psalmist says our response should be to ‘tremble’. “Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turns the rock into a pool of water.” So, we have a sea that is fleeing and people who are trembling. Not exactly the words of comfort I was looking for in a psalm.

When I think of trembling, a line from a hymn comes to mind. “Were you there when they crucified my Lord, oh sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble. Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” On that day of Jesus’ crucifixion, we read in Matthew 27, “From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon ... Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split ... Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified, and said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mt 27: 45, 50-51, 54)

What this tells me is that Nature was in tune to the dying moments of the Son of God. Nature sensed that the power of God was filling the void of hopelessness. And the sun disappeared, the earth shook, the rocks split in two. And the people who witnessed this, trembled.

How much of God’s presence goes unnoticed by me because I walk around with a lens that controls what I see, how I see it, where I see it, and when I see it. Maybe there’s a whole lot of trembling going on out there that I do not see because my eyes are closed. Maybe there’s a whole lot of God’s mystery that I don’t see because I only see the things that I can explain, that I can describe, that I can define, that I can understand. And this brings me to a realization of my limits. There is only so much I can understand.

Think of an iceberg, floating on the sea. And the tip of the iceberg that you see above the water in no way represents the enormous size of the submerged mass of ice that anchors the part you can see. Think of the ocean. Stand at the shore and see the horizon. And your eye can in no way fathom the depth and the breadth of the ocean size beyond the horizon. Look at the Big Dipper constellation in the sky. And your eye in no way can comprehend the magnitude of the universe, and the universes that exist outside of it. There is so much that we cannot comprehend.

The sea took one look and fled. The mountains skipped like a ram. God’s presence is so much bigger and deeper and present than I give credit for in my limited view. This psalm tells me that my sense of the divine needs to be recalibrated and released from the shackles that my limited comprehension puts on it. Maybe I need to leave the door to ‘wonder’ open a little more

often and invite mystery into my life. Maybe I need to sit with mystery for a while rather than banish it because it can't be understood.

So, I have a choice. Will I go down the path of discovery that is strewn with mystery, *or* will I stay to the path I know, one I can comprehend, explain, and control? How long can I stay suspended in this difficult place that I can't understand? How long can I live into this mystery that is God?

On Good Friday, we sing, "When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of glory died ... love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." The mystery that we call the Resurrection is at the very epicenter of our Christian faith. If my heart opens up to the mystery of the resurrection, does it have room for a sea that flees, for a mountain that skips? Can I rearrange my heart so that there is a place set aside for wonder and mystery?

Thanks be to God. Amen.