

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
First Sunday after Epiphany – January 11, 2015 – Baptism Sunday

Psalm 29

FOR REFLECTION

“We know that in September, we will wander through the warm winds of summer's wreckage. We will welcome summer's ghost.”

— Henry Rollins, Musician, b.1961

Poets and Prophets

There is something we look for all our lives. We knew of it before we came “out of the mists” of childhood, and we carry it with us into the unquiet freedom of adulthood. It is the promise that we are uniquely made for this awesome place, made to increase its light, to further its creation, to rise like Elijah into the whirlwind and join the Dance of All Things.

So begins a Christmas letter from a woman I had not heard from in four years. It is part of an essay called “Simple Gifts” attributed to Anonymous. Anonymous and my lost friend continued:

Simple gifts are the experiences of participating in and observing the creation as it unfolds around us, to stand in front of a window and watch the shadows and lights appear and disappear as the sun and clouds dapple the landscape, to enter into the irreplaceable miracle of every day, to feel one's hand move through the air in front of one's face, and to become aware of the mysterious and beautiful presence in another person. It is the experience that the unfathomable mystery within one absorbs all fear, grief, and joy, and that its depth matches the curve beyond the stars.

“To enter into the irreplaceable miracle of every day” has less to do with luck and privilege, and more to do with attitude and a growing openness to sudden flashes of insight or the gentle overtaking of awe. It is impossible to be awestruck every moment of the day. Contrast and variety, boredom and excitement, the common and unusual are all necessary before one can be awestruck, before one can realize suddenly the presence of G-d in the details of one's life, before the sparkle of divinity in each living being can be recognized.

For me such insight and awe come over me most often when I am tired and have stopped looking for meaning in what I am doing. It is like a door slamming open and a memory whooshing in with scattered, dry leaves in its wake. It catches me off guard when I am driving – just trying to get home; when I look up from my work and glance out the window by chance; when I am just doing the laundry.

Robert Fulghum in his book All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten describes his experience with doing the laundry:

I like sorting the clothes – lights, darks, in-betweens. I like setting the dials – hot, cold, rinse, time, heat. These are choices I can understand, and make with decisive skill. I still haven't figured out the new stereo, but washers and dryers I can handle. The bell dings – you pull out the warm, fluffy clothes, take them to the dining-room table, sort and fold them into neat piles. I especially like it when there's lots of static electricity, and you can hang socks all over your body and they will stick there (My wife caught me doing this once and gave me THAT LOOK. You can't always explain everything you do to everybody, you know.)

When I'm finished, I have a sense of accomplishment. A sense of competence. I am good at doing the laundry. At least that. And it's a religious experience, you know. Water, earth, fire – polarities of wet and dry, hot and cold, dirty and clean. The great cycles – round and round – beginning and end – Alpha and Omega, amen. I am in touch with the GREAT SOME-THING-OR-OTHER. For a moment, at least, life is tidy and has meaning.

It is interesting to me that his list of elements – water, earth, fire – omitted one element – air. Yet it is the warm air of the dryer that dominates his experience – the static in the air that allows the socks to stick to his clothes. Reading his essay, it was the puff of warm air in my face as I opened the dryer that carried me back to my own laundry and my own insights gained in Laundromats.

Such insights do not always come so subtly and softly. There is much to be said for bombast and gale force winds, as well.

One evening in December, 1988, I drove the 210 and 118 freeways from Pasadena to Northridge for an interview with my first search committee. There was a wind storm brewing. Palm trees swayed yards in each direction, tree branches whipped so hard I could hardly believe the leaves could cling so tightly. My hair clung to my face just as tightly with static in the air. I was coming down with a cold, just trying to get to Northridge in one piece, and drove out from between the hills by Sunland. The Valley opened up below. Glittering lights were scattered like jewels between the darkness of where I was and the dark red-black hint on the horizon where the sun had disappeared. It took my breath away.

Suddenly I was a newcomer to the land centuries ago, arriving finally in the Valley of a Thousand Smokes – on what was yet to be named a Night of Santa Ana Winds. The distant flames of Native American settlement fires glittered and wavered in the darkness. I knew I would settle there in this wind-swept, spirit-filled paradise. Basically, I was awestruck...

...Much like someone several thousand years ago who stood with their hair whipping in the wind and sang praises to G-d's power and glory. It is perhaps 700 to a thousand years before the Common Era. This person stands, arms raised as lightning followed by thunder crashes across the sky illuminating the mountains and the upturned face of this poet. The feelings generated by that thunder storm (a rare occurrence in Palestine) resulted in our Psalm 29 – a Pre-Exilic Hymn to the G-d of the Storm. The psalmist, filled with awe and excitement, begins to call upon the angels to declare and worship the power and name of Yahweh: *[spoken like Bernardo]*

*Ascribe to Yahweh, O heavenly beings,
Ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength...*

Then, in suspenseful poetic form, the psalmist repeatedly describes the Voice of Yahweh in its many manifestations: *[spoken like Bernardo]*

*The voice of G-d is upon the waters
The voice of G-d is powerful
The voice of G-d is full of majesty...*

Seven times in seven verses the voice of G-d is heard. It comes in over the waters from the West – the Mediterranean (much like our ocean storms). “The voice of G-d breaks the cedars.” Cedars known for their extreme integrity and strength are broken and shattered by this power. The mountains, Lebanon and Sirion, are moved like young animals, quaking and fleeing with fear. Sirion is a Sidonian name for Mount Hermon (Deut.3:9) derived from a root meaning “to glitter.”

The glittering peaks shake with the sound of G-d's voice. This voice "flashes forth flames of fire" and "shakes the wilderness of Kadesh," far south of the quivering mountains. And here the oaks whirl and the forests are stripped bare. The leaves are unable to cling to their branches in the path of the storm.

In the midst of this seeming bedlam, the poet sees Yahweh enthroned – triumphant over the forces of chaos. From such strength and order comes the assurance that an equally powerful peace will be forthcoming for G-d's people.

It is curious to note that not once in Psalm 29 does the poet mention the wind. Yet it is the wind that dominates the entire experience. The wind is seen and felt through its effects – and attributed to the voice of Yahweh. It is the wind that moves the storm, strips and breaks the trees, thunders across the sky, and carries the sand of the wilderness into the passionate face of our psalmist – causing a new voice of praise and song to be lifted above the tempest – and wind-carried across time...

...To another day, by a river, in the wilderness of Jordan where a man cries out: *[spoken like Bernardo]*

...One who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; that one will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Passionate John has been touched by that same spiritual wind-storm. He shares with the expectant crowd his vision of the coming Messiah – one who will bring order to chaos, "clear the threshing floor...gather the wheat...and burn the chaff."

John takes each person into the water and baptizes them, cleanses their souls, creates pure hearts for the acceptance of G-d's messenger when he or she should arrive. As the crowd of individuals is immersed and transformed into a waiting community of hope, one among them is named "beloved of G-d."

A soft breeze off the river ruffles their hair and touches their wet clothing. In spite of its warmth, they shiver at the contrast of wet and dry. Looking up they all see the sky open – and a tiny bird, a dove, descend upon the currents of air to alight and become part of the man, Jesus.

There is a murmur of awe and wonder, and a voice that sounds like the desert wind circles them, surrounding Jesus with the words, “You are my beloved Child; with you I am well please.” The words end with a sigh, an exhalation of breath from the waiting community exuding relief and joy at finding the Christ among them – one of them – a Child of G-d.

The desert breezes are never mentioned, yet it is the touch of Ruah, the Holy spirit, the Breath of G-d, the Wind that carries the word of Yahweh two thousand years through time to become the “irreplaceable miracle of every day” and “the unfathomable mystery within” us...to become the principle of life within all living beings in our time.

Dennis Banks of the American Indian Movement once said, “The Church should make the world its Temple.” The Holy Spirit, that sparkling, divine, ancient, Santa Ana Wind, blows wide and far to touch and transform where we least expect it. There is a wideness and a wildness in G-d’s breath.

Thirty-eight years ago I was studying in London. On a rough, windy day I took a bus across town to Primrose Hill just to get away from books and loneliness and people who made it worse. As I was trudging up the path, with a cold wind throwing clouds across the sky, I saw a prophet at the top of the hill. He seemed middle-aged, frayed clothes, uneven hair and beard – and he had his arms in the air as he paced back and forth. He was raging at the sky:

*“Winds of the Summer, blow – Winds of the Summer –
Come now, Winds of the summer.”*

He chased a woman with a baby carriage and shouted at them until they were gone and he was alone on the hill with autumn winds freezing his fingers.

I watched this passionate man for a while and when I turned to leave, he called out to me, “*Do you believe in Jesus?*” Being agnostic at the time, I called back with conviction, “In a way I do!” and he answered, “*Come here and talk to me.*” We sat on the bench while Bernardo told me that he was a poet from Ireland (with intoxicated breath to uphold the stereotype). He quoted some of his poetry for me:

*Females, females, wonderful females.
Without them men’s faces would be sad.
With them men’s faces are glad.*

I knew the man was a genius.

His bloodshot eyes got very angry as he began telling me about his mother, the place he lived, and how he beat up his girlfriend four years ago putting her in the hospital with broken ribs.

He began crying – and held my hand – and cried. I was afraid he would get up and start raging again. So, realizing that Jesus must be very important to him, I asked, “Did you talk to Jesus about it?”

He nodded.

“And what did he say?”

“He forgave me.”

And I said, “Then you have to forgive yourself.”

After a minute or two Bernardo stopped crying and his eyes – even redder than before – looked up at me. At that moment the wind blew some of my hair out to the side – and the clouds let a shaft of sunlight through and into my hair. Bernardo reached out to touch it saying, “You must be an angel.”

I assured him twice that I was most certainly mortal, but he repeated, “You must be an angel...You must be an angel.”

He invited me to have a cup of coffee with him – I couldn’t and we said good-bye. I ran to the bottom of the hill – and looked back – and the top of the hill was empty...

except...

for the Wind...

Children’s Time xx

Psalm 29

- ¹Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
- ²Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name;
worship the LORD in holy splendor.
- ³The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over mighty waters.
- ⁴The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.
- ⁵The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
- ⁶He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.
- ⁷The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.
- ⁸The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- ⁹The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, 'Glory!'
- ¹⁰The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king for ever.
- ¹¹May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with peace!

Friends,

In exactly one month we need you to march in Oakland for real climate leadership — because when we come together in massive numbers, we accomplish incredible things.

Following New York's historic ban on fracking last month, we must show that our movement is stronger than ever here in California — that we know the health and safety of California's communities is more important than oil company profits and we expect leaders like Governor Jerry Brown to act.

In Governor Brown's inaugural speech on Monday, he took a huge step in the right direction by setting a goal for California to be powered by 50% renewable energy within 15 years.

Unfortunately, he ignored the reality that California can't be a leader in the fight against climate change while we unabashedly push extreme extraction methods like fracking that worsen climate change and seriously endanger the health of our communities. Because even if we don't burn the oil in California, as long as it's being extracted here, it's still poisoning our water and endangering our communities.

Join us in one month at the March for Real Climate Leadership to tell Governor Brown that real climate leaders don't frack.

Here are the details:

WHAT: The March for Real Climate Leadership: Our Water, Our Health, Our California

WHEN: 11:30 am, February 7th, 2015

WHERE: Frank Ogawa / Oscar Grant Plaza, 14th & Broadway, Oakland, CA

[Click here to RSVP for the March for Real Climate Leadership](#)

When it comes to confronting climate change, it doesn't help to aim low. When people come together in massive numbers, we accomplish incredible things — we saw it last month in New York, we saw it yesterday when Obama promised to veto Keystone XL, and it's time for us to do the same thing here in California to ban fracking.

A 50% renewable energy standard is a good start, but not if it comes packaged with more fracking in our state. Join us at the March for Real Climate Leadership and make it clear that our movement won't settle for anything less than real climate leadership and a ban on fracking in 2015.

[Click here to RSVP for the March for Real Climate Leadership](#)

If you don't live near Oakland, don't worry — buses and rideshares are being organized across the state -- you can see the buses available [here](#), or sign up to organize one from your community [here](#).

See you in a month!

Linda

P.S. Next week we're launching the March for Real Climate Leadership organizing tour with stops across the state to help build momentum in the last few weeks before the march. [Check out all the stops here](#), and RSVP for the one near you.

350.org is building a global climate movement. **[Become a sustaining donor to keep this movement strong and growing.](#)**