

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Third Sunday of Easter– April 19, 2015 – Earth Day Sunday
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

John 20:36b-48

FOR REFLECTION

Horatio:

O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!

Hamlet:

And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,

Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

Hamlet Act 1, scene 5

Ghost Stories

Shakespeare's Hamlet opens with Marcellus and Bernardo trying to convince Horatio that they've seen a ghost. They are hoping the ghost appears again so Horatio can see and talk to him. As they are relating their ghost story, the ghost appears to them all – proof of truth.

The ghost, now known to be King Hamlet, returns in scene 5 to speak with his son, Prince Hamlet. He confesses his own sinfulness and his punishment in the fires of hell – which is necessary for ultimate divine forgiveness. He then describes his own murder by his brother's hand – and commands his son seek revenge. As the sun rises, the ghost says, "*Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me.*"

The prince replies:

Remember thee!

Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat

In this distracted globe. Remember thee!

Yea, from the **table** of my memory

I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,

All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past

That youth and observation copied there,

And **thy commandment** all alone shall live

Within the **book** and volume of my brain,

Unmixed with baser matter. Yes, by heaven!

And off he goes to catch the conscience of the murderer and wreak havoc upon the family.

Our text this morning is an earlier ghost story – clearly source material for Shakespeare’s Danish tale which, in fine Shakespearean form, turns it upside down. The Gospel of Luke ends with this story – which is the cliff hanger leading to the Book of Acts. Jesus appears in the midst of his disciples bearing the wounds of his murder by Roman crucifixion. He proves his own truth by having them touch his “flesh and blood” body – and then asks for something to eat.

But instead of harping on his own murder and asking for revenge, he continues his role as Rabbi/teacher – he explains scripture to them – which then explains why he’s still with them. And he commands them – or charges them to fulfill his mission – a mission not of revenge – but of offering divine forgiveness here on earth – to all nations – in return for repentance. They are to catch the conscience of humankind. But instead of vengeful children, they are to be witnesses to good news. New life is possible – just turn your life toward G-d.

The commandment underlying this story is to “love one another as I have loved you.” The table of memory is not a place to poison one’s enemies – but a place to feed the hungry and welcome all those who have been excluded. The book is the “Book of Life” where we measure our compassion by acts of kindness and make restitution for our mistakes. We are urged to remember – remember the LIFE of Jesus and the way that divine community miraculously appeared around him because of what he did and said and was – not because of how he died. We are to embody that community – occupy public places with that community – not wreak havoc on those who seek to destroy it.

Our story is actually cut short by the lectionary. Verse 49 continues, “And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised...” A new ghost is coming – the Holy Ghost – the “Paraclete” – “para” meaning beside, “clete” meaning helper or comforter or advocate. This is the ghost that walks among us today – a presence of the divine that supports and comforts us in our suffering – publicly advocates for changes in personal and social policy – turning all of us around to face our Maker.

Ghost stories like these may be unbelievable – but that doesn’t mean they aren’t true – in some way or another. Our G-d is essentially a Ghost who is “immortal, invisible”, “in light hid from our eyes” – evidenced only in the aftermath of what has been accomplished or destroyed. There may be something to Shakespeare’s version of the ghost story – something humans captured in ancient tales of a vengeful G-d – ensuring that there would be dire consequences for broken covenants and misbehavior.

The consequences for Hamlet's court, however, went far beyond the original crime of his uncle – because humans – especially young humans – have a tendency toward overkill. The frontal lobe of the brain – responsible for reasoning – isn't fully formed until our mid-20's. This makes Hamlet's age group a prime target for recruitment by terrorist groups – exacting revenge for perceived wrongs – as if they were engaging in extreme sports – consequences be damned.

But if our brains actually have a chance to mature, it becomes clear that our ghost G-d created a universe where consequences are in proportion to the misbehavior – and repentance and restitution can save us from the most dire. If we look at the planet as the book and volume that G-d actually wrote, the laws of nature fully expressed for every living creature to read no matter what language they speak – we can clearly see that climate change is the appropriate consequence to our violations of the covenant our Maker cut with us. It is not vengeful – it is a warning system. It is the behavior of our legendary Holy Ghost advocating for change before it is too late.

And since the bullies tend to take charge of public policy in a complacent society, it is up to those among us with fully formed frontal lobes to step up and witness, catch the conscience of the corporations, infiltrate the environmental departments of big oil and the halls of government, Occupy whatever we need to Occupy until there is a change of heart and policy. Be like Jean and Leslie and Fred and clean up our poor, abused L.A. River. Be like my dad and get arrested in front of the White House to stop the Tar Sands Oil Pipeline. Be involved, vote for Christ's sake and get reasonable people in position to save us from ourselves through climate restoration and restrictions on the hoarding and destruction of natural resources.

You may have heard recent stories about

... a report out of the Florida Center for Investigative Reporting, which suggests ... that the administration of Florida Gov. Rick Scott had an aversion to the terms "climate change" and "global warming." And it appears that the message about not using these words filtered down to state agency employees and officials at the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

...Scott administration officials [denied] the story's accuracy...Still, it seems clear from the original report that, at minimum, a number of agency employees *perceived* that they weren't supposed to talk about climate change or global warming.

...Another researcher, Elizabeth Radke... told a similar story about running into problems with the phrase "climate change" in review of a scientific paper by ...the Florida Department of Health.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2015/03/10/floridas-ban-of-the-term-climate-change-is-straight-out-of-the-bush-playbook/>

The headline to all of this was “Florida officials’ ‘ban’ the term *climate change*” – which apparently stems from similar actions by the G.W. Bush administration. Much like my grandmother used to say, “If it’s important, we don’t talk about it.”

But Climate Change is no ghost story. It has proven itself with flesh and blood, hurricanes and snow-namis, drought and glacier meltdown. We have witnesses. And G-d is still speaking...

We are the future ghosts of our own story – murdered by habits very close to the bone.

G-d does not seek martyrs here – but Earth evangelists – willing to set up a table and gather the beloved community wherever they may be. We owe it to our own ghosts to occupy the planet with respect and awareness of the consequences of our behavior.

We can position ourselves to be the spirits that will haunt future generations – warning them not to do as we have done – to seek not revenge but resurrection – a new earth, if not a new heaven on earth, in which our children’s children might flourish.

There is good news – this can be a redemption story after all.

And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.
There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

Hamlet Act 1, scene 5

John 20:36b-48

36b ... Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." 37 They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. 38 He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39 Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." 40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

41 While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate in their presence. 44 Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you--that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46 and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things."