

Devotions – April 17-23, 2016

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Sunday, April 17, 2016

Text: Exodus 1:15-21 (NRSV)

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

As English speaking and reading and writing people we can often lose out on the depth of a particular word choice when we hear our holy words translated for our ears. They automatically take on our familiars in that process. The word "fear" is one of those words and we hear it a lot in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The Hebrew word translated as "fear" in this story of the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah is yare' (yah-ray) and it can be used to denote fear, like when Moses saw the burning bush, realized it was God and then hid his face because "he was afraid to look at God." But in many cases, like with the midwives, the word is used to convey a reverence for God. The midwives heard what the king of Egypt commanded them, but because they revered God, they knew that it was God's word, God's law that served as the framework for how they pursued their vocation. When the word of the king opposed God's law, they acted differently. How courageous these women were. It is not easy to stand up to the kings and the powerful of our world.

Let us pray: *God, you are my King and I am blessed to "fear" you. Help me to be like the midwives Shiphrah and Puah and when those who hold earthly power and might make demands that oppose my reverence of you and your way for this creation, fill me with courage to abide by your commands. I pray this with the confidence of one who rejoices in the Risen Christ. Amen.*



Monday, April 18, 2016

Text: Psalm 133 (The Message)

**How wonderful, how beautiful,
when brothers and sisters get along!
It's like costly anointing oil
flowing down the head and beard,
Flowing down Aaron's beard,
flowing down the collar of his priestly robes.
It's like the dew on Mount Hermon
flowing down the slopes of Zion.
Yes, that's where God commands the blessing,
ordains eternal life.**

Settle into the imagery of this Psalm. God claims the whole world with the blessing – poured like anointing oil over the worship places of the world and flowing out from there until the whole world is embraced, like a mother or father embracing a child. That is the picture imagined by a friend and composer I saw while in Chicago recently. Keith Hampton wrote a song called Unity based on this Psalm. “Behold how good and pleasant it is when people live in Unity,” the song begins. When we talked about it he said, “For the Lord has commanded life forevermore ... not the Lord has said this could happen, but the Lord *commands* it.” The song builds into a dialogue that calls God's people to respond to that command: “Stand up ... look around ... speak out ... lift your voice... We have the victory!”

Let us pray: Anointing God, you command life forevermore for your whole creation and sent your Son as the perfect embodiment of that command. Forgive me for the ways I divide your children. Strengthen me to love others as you have loved me in sure protection of your loving arms and drenched in the oils of your abundant love. I pray this in your most holy name. Amen.



Tuesday, April 19, 2016

Text: Genesis 2:18-20a, (Inclusive Hebrew Torah)

Then Our God said, 'It is not good for the earth creature to be alone. I will make a fitting companion for it.' So from the soil, Our God formed all the various wild beasts and all the birds of the air, and brought them to the earth creature to be named. Whatever the earth creature called each one, that became its name. The earth creature gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of the air, and all the wild animals.

We often think of ourselves as co-creators and embrace an understanding that God's act of creation is an on-going one. Another part of the creation story is our talent for naming what shapes this creation. It started with naming the other creatures that God made. It moved on to fishes and plants and flowers and trees. Eventually it also included naming the techniques of how the earth is worked to provide food and shelter, like burrowing, tilling, terracing and constructing. It grew to include naming techniques and strategies for all manners of things. In cooking, for instance, we see a covered pot of vegetables and herbs and some liquid in a slow oven and we call it roasting. In education we structure our lesson plans according to styles of

learning we've named, like “visual,” “auditory” and “tactile.” In warfare we employ strategies we've named things like “ambush,” “trench raiding” and “peaceful penetration.” We name how we are feeling, our joys and our laments, our thankfulness, remorse and forgiveness. We name the manifestation of evil in the world, like murder, oppression and rape. We name things ... our creations, our triumphs, our failures and God works through them all.

Let us pray: God, when I was knit together in the womb of your universe, you called me to be a creature that named what is around me. I thank you for that gift and pray that you work through that divine task of mine to help me name all for which I am thankful and so abundantly blessed by you. I ask you also be with me as I use this God-given talent to name all manner of brokenness in this world and to seek repentance where I must and seek what heals the ills and evil we usher into your world. Amen.



Wednesday, April 20, 2016

Text: Proverbs 27:23-27 (NRSV)

**Know well the condition of your flocks,
and give attention to your herds;
for riches do not last forever,
nor a crown for all generations.
When the grass is gone, and new growth appears,
and the herbage of the mountains is gathered,
the lambs will provide your clothing,
and the goats the price of a field;
there will be enough goats' milk for your food,
for the food of your household
and nourishment for your servant-girls.**

In the spring when the snows start to melt and reveal the fields of the farm lands again, my mind invariably draws upon memories of times I've spent with people who make their living working the land. It's a complex life, to say the least, in our day. This year I also recalled a prayer I wrote after spending time getting to know some of the children of the Lutherans who tend to the land in the southeast corner of Nebraska.

A Sending Prayer

Child of Nebraska: Do you know how deeply you are loved?

*God called your people out to the plains to prepare a way of life for you –
prepared in each and every row of corn
and wheat grass and bean that has been planted,
tended and harvested for more than a century.
built into the cornerstones, pews, bell towers and altars of the little country churches*

*that dot the rolling hills all around you.
worked into the quaint town squares where community is made,
tradition is honored and innovation is invited.
stitched into quilts and bed covers with memories of what your grandparents,
great-grandparents and even great-great grandparents
wore to church on Sundays.
steeped in the books and walls and wisdom that surround you at school,
and the people who cheer you on at basketball, football,
volleyball and softball games.
softened by tears, blood and sweat that fell and soaked back into the soil
in times of grief, tragedy and long, difficult days on the farm and in the field.*

*You are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses
as you grow, pray, learn and dream through the seasons
of your young Nebraskan life.*

*Go in peace, go in love, and serve the Lord, Child of Nebraska. You are a blessing to us all.
Amen.*



Thursday, April 21, 2016

Text: Mark 5: 25-30 (NRSV)

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?”

In Mark's gospel, crowds seem to present obstacles. This is most certainly the case in the story of the hemorrhaging woman. Not only is she faced with the nearly impossible task of reaching Jesus from behind through what is described as a throng of people pressing in on him, but Jesus is faced with searching that sea of people for the one who touched him. When they are brought together in the story, the crowd seems to fall away. When I read this story, I am reminded of *The Dead* by James Joyce. Joyce uses the literary technique of starting with a mass of people at a dinner party and through the story whittling it down to one person and her transcendent questions of life and death and love. Like Gretta, the main character of *The Dead*, the hemorrhaging woman at the end of her short story becomes the solo focus. When she comes forward to confess it was her who touched Jesus, the audience is focused only on her and Jesus, who is the response to her transcendent questions about life and death and love. “Go in peace, your faith has healed you,” Jesus says to her. It is in the midst of this challenging and often chaotic crowd of common, everyday people where the Kingdom of God unfolds through the teachings and actions of Jesus.

Let us pray: *God of blessed chaos, out of the impossibly complex chatter and activity of this world, you make a way, every time and I praise you for that. Tune my ears and eyes and heart to you when I find myself challenged by the chaos and complexity of the world so that I may find you, reach out to you, and be made whole by you time and time again. Amen.*



Friday, April 22, 2016

Text: Ezekiel 1:13-14 (as translated by the author)

In the midst of the living things was something that looked like burning fire, like torches moving to and fro among the living things. The burning coal was like daylight and lightening went out from it. The living things ran and turned like a flash of lightening.

Ezekiel's visions of God are grand, frightening, and glorious and they dominate the narrative of this prophetic book in the Old Testament. I am drawn to the prophet's description of God. It captures what it is like to dream something that is incredibly vivid, makes sense and speaks in a secret language to our unconscious minds and yet can be surprisingly unattainable to our conscious minds. The unsettling but somehow familiar depiction of God at the center of the winged creatures in great bursts of light and activity and other-worldliness functions excellently as a way to portray the glory of God, which is an important theme in Ezekiel and, as it turns out, for us, too, all these thousands of years later. Like Ezekiel, we experience days when the world around us seems lost in madness and we must trust that God is at work in that madness.

Let us pray: *Be near me, magnificent creator. I am thankful for this place you have created for me to live and work and love, but lust for power and control so often leads me down paths of madness. Your activity in this world and among the diverse lot you call your people is more powerful, more grand and even more frightening than I can possible know. I praise you for all the ways you are at work in the midst of the world's madness, ways known and unknown to me, ways imaginable in my wildest dreams and ways that even my Ezekiel-laden dreams cannot conjure up. I trust in you and only you, O God of our realities and God of our dreams. Amen.*



Saturday, April 23, 2016

Text: Luke 1: 72, 78-79

**Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant, ...
... By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.**

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

In this Easter season our time of remembering Jesus' resurrection began with the women who went to the tomb and were told by the divine messengers to "Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day, rise again." (Luke 24: 6-7) This idea of remembering takes us all the way back to the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, when Zechariah regains his ability to speak. He begins to prophesy what is to come in the birth of the child Mary is carrying. God remembers us, Zechariah assures us and in the news of an empty tomb that simultaneously breaks and fills our hearts on Easter morning, the prophecy is fulfilled. God has remembered us and by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high has broken upon us, it gives light to those who sit in darkness and leads us through the shadows of death, it guides our feet in the Way of Peace.

Let us pray: God of the empty tomb, you remember your people always. We offer up our prayers and you hear. We cry out from beneath the weight of our sin and you lift our burden. We looked with fear to the time when we draw our last breath in this place and you gave us Jesus to point the way to our eternal life in the safety and perfection of your presence. Help me be the light of Jesus in this world so that others may also live in the confidence of this freedom so graciously bestowed on us only because you remember your people. Amen.

