

February 17-23, 2019

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Sunday, February 17, 2019

Streams

Text: Isaiah 43:19 (NIV)

“See, I am doing a new thing!

Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

I am making a way in the wilderness

and streams in the wasteland.”

Here at the Rocky Mountain Synod, my teenage students and I were attending the 2018 synod youth gathering where the theme centered on our identity as children of God, from all different backgrounds, stories, and ethnicities. We specifically addressed the sin of racism: the idea that not all people are created or treated equally because of hierarchy being attributed to a person’s physical features like their skin color, and we named that this prejudice shows up in individual actions (such as using derogatory names) and institutional bias (such as red-lining and gentrification). At one of the group discussions at this gathering, an Indonesian student was called a racial slur by a white student. Several youth directors, including myself, found out about this incident. This was our wilderness: the harsh reality that borders exist in words and actions, the struggle to hold our synod accountable, and our isolation in facing a complicated and deeply-seated issue. It felt like there was no water.

But the Holy Spirit moved in us.

Jesus is our example of using words and actions to identify that we, as humans, carry invaluable worth because we’re made in God’s image. Because we are worthy of dignity, my friends and I did two things: we asked our bishop to condemn this behavior and we gathered with the students of color who were present at the incident, asking to work through what happened. These discussions led to said young people asking this question to myself and fellow colleagues: is there safe space to talk about our experience as young people of color and children of immigrants? The formal answer was “No, the Rocky Mountain Synod does not have that space...yet.” We heard a stream in the distance.

Five of us youth advocates decided to create this safe space that students craved. The Holy Spirit whipped up a rainstorm: we gathered students to ask what they needed to create this safe space, we found opportunities to equip our students of color, and one of us started creating a grassroots taskforce with our synod’s bishop to educate ministry leaders about racism (Awake, Confront, Transform 4 Rocky Mountain Synod – ACT 4 RMS). We noticed that there was no Lutheran campus ministry at a diverse, well-attended, and undergraduate campus in Denver called Auraria Campus that held three schools: Metro State University, University of Colorado – Denver, and Community College of Denver. Because the students we worked with graduated from high school, we came up with a name for our group: Auraria Campus Ministry. We applied for grants.

We took students to campus ministry retreats. We had no idea we'd make it this far. God was doing a new thing and we didn't just go along for the ride - we were the individual and institutional embodiments of radically inclusive grace. God's water was flowing and transcending borders.

In December 2018, Auraria Campus Ministry became a recipient of the Youth and Young Adult Ministry Campaign Grant, a grant we applied for in order to hire a campus minister to continue this important work. When the five of us on the leadership team found out that we received the grant, we hugged and cheered and were absolutely incredulous with joy. Our cups were overflowing.

God's faithfulness makes streams in wastelands. Sometimes those streams are not everything we asked for, especially when we don't see how we can benefit from them. But God's streams are always abundant and teeming with promises whose fulfillment come in the future. God's imagination is always bigger than humans, and five millennial ministry professionals got caught up in this story of loving and advocating for our neighbor.

May God's water find you in the wilderness: where there is water, there is life, and our God is the God of the living, so know that fulfilling life awaits you (Mark 12:27).



Monday, February 18, 2019

Landscape

Text: Deuteronomy 8: 15 & 16 (NIV)

“He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, something your ancestors had never known, to humble and test you so that in the end it might go well with you.”

“Tell me the landscape in which you live, and I will tell you who you are.” – José Ortega y Gasset

I grew up among the lush rain forests of Cameroon. As a kid, I'd use my slingshot to snap the stems of mangoes blushing with patches of red and pink. The grass was itchy. The dirt was red and its dust hung on to the corners of houses painted in white. I loved the landscape I saw, and my wild spirit was that deep shade of green.

Then I went to college in South Dakota. I did not marvel at the extensive prairie. When I learned how to drive, I would move through the landscape, bored. The winter's cold stung. The never-ending white blinded my eyes. The flatness of certain parts of the land made me beg for anything to look at. I didn't know this landscape. Its austerity was foreign to me, and I didn't understand its strength or the strength of the people it bore.

I lived on Rosebud Reservation for a summer. I watched the landscape grow from bleak to meager as run-down homes dotted the horizon. The earth seemed dead in places. There were so many graves by the road, marking where accidents happened and someone lost their life.

But it was there that God taught me to listen, because the Lakota and Dakota people listen with their eyes. They spot an outsider quickly. They pause and let silence fill places. They take cues from the sun and follow the shadow of ancestors long before them. And it was in laughing and joking with my new family that I began to understand the landscape in which we lived: I never realized the diversity of the different grasses and plants in the prairie, I never looked up to get swallowed by the stars, I never took in the life still growing beneath winter's blanket.

As I finished visiting my relatives on the reservation, I drove towards Colorado. And the earth greeted me this time. I knew now that I could listen to the land tell stories of when it used to be covered by water, that what I saw as barrenness and simplicity was a cover for all sorts of living things, and that the plains stood before me like a beautiful Lakota woman, her eyes cautious of newcomers and her mouth silent.

May your landscape teach you about yourself; may your landscape teach you about patience as you grow; may you see God in unexpected landscapes.



Tuesday, February 19, 2019

The Last and the First

Text: Matthew 18: 1-4 (NIV)

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

“Upside Down Kingdom” by Ihoby Rakotomalala

if you are the first
and I am the last
you go to bed on a full stomach
as I barter for crumbs that
fall beneath the children’s table

if you are the first
and I am the last

you have the means and the force
to overtake me even when I say no

if you are the first
and I am the last
you are the adult child
busy at work and play
while I sit forgotten and forgetting in a nursing home

if you are the first
and I am the last
you get to divvy up my parts
as I watch, hung from a tree.

if you are the first
and I am the last
I live firsthand our abuses
I get to be the last to close my kingdom's door
until all our children are inside
friends and enemies looking each other in the eye

In American culture, being last can sometimes be taken as being the person who waits the longest, being the person who suffers the most inconvenience, or being the closest to being forgotten or unseen. But God's kingdom is different from human kingdoms. You, child of God, are not last in God's kingdom. God remembers you. God honors you not because of what you have done or not done, but because you belong to God.

May you see your life through cross-shaped lens; may you hear God's good news; may you speak about the One who loved you first.



Wednesday, February 20, 2019

Breathe In, Breathe Out

Text: Genesis 2:7 (The Voice, Thomas Nelson; 2012; Ecclesia Bible Society)

“One day the Eternal God scooped dirt out of the ground, sculpted it into the shape we call human, breathed the breath that gives life into the nostrils of the human, and the human became a living soul.”

Trust and breathing are one and the same: they fall and rise as our lives wax and wane. When God breathed life into the first human, God was breathing trust into us: that we trust that God would provide all things. Trust is quiet, ordinary, yet so critical- we must trust that the sun will rise, trust that we will make it through with God's help, trust that it's ok to not have answers. Sometimes trusting and breathing mean stillness, waiting.

Take a deep breath in. Now breathe out.

Remember the God who formed you and sustains life in you. Know that you are accounted for, that God knows your name, that God is shaping your community. Breathe and trust that God is here, and draw from the well of peace that comes with accepting that you are loved. Release your anxiety, unclench your fears, and be still before the God who sees you for who you are.

Breathe in again. Now breathe out.

Remember your breath when you cried out. Acknowledge your grief, anger, or pain. Hold in silence the holiness of the things you brought with you: your story, your hope in trying again, your self. Breathe and trust that God believes what you have to say. Christ's body was broken for you. Christ's blood was shed for you. Release your grudges, let Jesus lift the weight off your shoulders, and sit by the One who prepared a table for you.

Fill your lungs with air. Now let all that air come out.

May you inhale freedom as you fall back on God's strength; may you exhale the things inside that are keeping you voiceless; may your breathing rise and recede like the tide, falling in rhythm with trusting God's compassion.



Thursday, February 21, 2019

Hands

Text: Mark 10:16 (NIV)

“And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.”

Look at your hands. Flip them over and look again at your hands. What jewelry are you wearing on your wrist or fingers? Remember the simple reason why you're wearing said items. Did you get it for simple function? Is it attached to a memorable story? Notice the details of the flesh on your hand. Trace your scars. Think about the things you like or don't like about your hands. What do they say about you?

Your hands are part of who you are. Honor the blessings of giving and receiving with these hands. Let's thank God for how we can touch this world by digging our hands into the earth, holding a loved one close, and writing or texting. Our hands do so much.

May your hands be the bringers of good love; may your hands have the courage to reach; may your hands extend to others like God extends God's grace.



Friday, February 22, 2019

The Life Giver

Text: John 6: 54-56 (New King James Version)

“Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.”

In this text, we see a pattern: Jesus keeps mentioning his “flesh and blood” but always in the context of giving life. For example, Jesus says, “whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life” and “whoever eats me will live because of me.” Wherever he mentions “flesh and blood”, the word “life” quickly follows, and Jesus is always the one who gives life to the fullest. This is so carnal because we’re talking about an incarnational God.

Jesus said that those who eat his body and drink his blood abide with him, and he in them. “Abide” can mean “to be held or kept continually”. Jesus is using “body and blood” language to get a point across: that he wants to be close to us. Jesus asks that we eat of him and drink of him so that we’re that enmeshed together- so that we’re part of Jesus and Jesus is part of us. This closeness reminds me of a pregnant mom who feeds her child through an umbilical cord- mother and child are that connected.

If this is how we’re connected to our life source- God- it means that it isn’t by our strength that we hold on to God, but that God always held on to us first. Jesus is our life-giver, the very nourishment we need to live.

“Take this bread, life will be messy.” “Take this bread, I see you, I’m the one who gives you life.” “Take this bread, I will give you what you need, even if it isn’t what you expect.” Jesus’ offer to give life goes way beyond the confines of our needs, or, honestly, our comfort. When God gives life, God gives without limits. God gives life out of abundance, out of closeness with us- that’s why it’s offensive: because it flies in the face of what we think we need or understand.

This loop of life, closeness, and feeding goes on and on- maybe *that’s* what Jesus meant by eternal life in him. We are loved by a God whose bounty and source of life is bottomless. Take this bread. It’s Jesus. He’ll give you life. Amen.



Saturday, February 23, 2019

Just Mercy

Text: Hebrews 13: 1-4

“Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”

In this passage, the author of the book of Hebrews advocates for radical empathy. The context is that earlier in this book, the author spoke of “a great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1) and listed our faith ancestors in Hebrews 11. Henceforth, this encouragement to love one another as if we were the other person comes out of the desire to build faith and community.

In his book “Just Mercy”, author and attorney Bryan Stevenson says the following about the U.S. criminal justice system: “I thought of the many ways we’ve legalized vengeful and cruel punishments, how we’ve allowed our victimization to justify the victimization of others. We’ve submitted to the harsh instinct to crush those among us whose brokenness is most visible. But simply punishing the broken - walking away from them or hiding them from sight – only ensures that they remain broken and we do, too. There is no wholeness outside of our reciprocal humanity” (p. 129, published in 2015 by Spiegel & Grau). Mr. Stevenson founded the Equal Justice Initiative, an organization that champions the rights of America’s most vulnerable, including those serving time in prison. The stories in “Just Mercy” reflect how mercy does not need to be seen as a soft, weak thing- but that instead, mercy is the backbone for human dignity. God calls us to know our neighbor and those we deem different from us. Separate is never equal. When we distance ourselves from our neighbor, we are distancing ourselves from Christ, because Christ is reflected in all people. We can do better than this, beloveds. We can take a step closer.

Mercy can be just. Justice does not need to be harsh. Justice is intertwined with how we see, and therefore how we love, our neighbor. If we acknowledge our own pain and fear, especially when we face people or ideas that make us uncomfortable or that are unfamiliar to us, having compassion lights the way for us. Pray for those you do not like. Acknowledge trauma at the hands of folks who hurt you or others and keep said folks accountable among community. Remember that restitution is God’s alone, and with that knowledge, trust God to help you love your neighbor.

May God show us the small steps to loving others so that God’s heavenly kingdom continues to reveal itself on earth; may you be kind to yourself as you face your prejudices toward your neighbor; may your feet walk towards God’s reconciliation and not away from it.

