

St Mary's Episcopal Church, Anchorage, AK
15th Sunday after Pentecost
Message by Rev. Catherine Amy Kropp
Scripture: Exodus 14:19-31, Matthew 18:21-35

Sunday, September 13, 2020

Ultimacy



Clouds Gathered above the Ocean by Ivan Konstantinovich Aivazovskii¹

We hear this morning one of the most famous scenes in the Hebrew scripture: the parting of the Red Sea and the saving of the Israelites by God in their most desperate moment.

This is a massive story about massive change; a pivot of transformation and becoming, within a miraculous escape along the narrow path of dry land.²

We can *feel* the moment of ultimacy.

When we settle into that *feeling*, that movement of the human soul and across time, we find ourselves swept up, not just into story, but *into where we are*, our own moment, our own sense of what is ultimate today.

As if we are standing between a wall of rising water and an advancing army of fear.

And there *is* advancing fear, confusion, anger, hurt, and *fierce and desperate hope* in our world. It feels like our human family is up against an impossible situation, unable to go back, *with no other way* to go than forward into the sea.

As if we are approaching a kind of tipping point, or perhaps we are past the tipping point and we are falling in.

As Terry Tempest Williams asks, “How do we find the strength *to not look away* at all that is breaking our hearts?”³

- The fires that are burning on the west coast devastating communities and the land.
- The global pandemic that is drawing ever closer into our personal lives.
- The psychological stress of our prolonged separation from one another and the loss of the boundaries that once marked work, home, school and rest.
- The economic devastation and instability.
- The entangled roots of white supremacy and systemic injustice and the urgency to expose and protest and dismantle them.
- The deep division and polarization of our nation as we approach a political election.

Yet, as Williams describes, “We need not lose hope, we just need to locate where it dwells. To *dwell* is to see things as they are...”⁴

To see things as they are...

The story of the parting of the Red Sea is one of ultimacy but it is also one of *grace*.

It is a story about grace

- that is *about* to happen,
- that it is happening right now, perhaps in ways we don't yet see or can't imagine,
- and that is unfolding into the future.

And then there is the little self, the little you and little me, the story of one's individual life, standing on the same Earth, carried along in the same cosmos, feeling the same movement of human consciousness and earthly being

Perhaps we are going through something as big as the parting of the red sea, a great transition. Because we carry the *ultimate* story of God's *grace* within us: *Jesus*, the Christ, the Messiah, through whom we enter into the unfolding story of God's love.

For we have been created in love,
 by love,
 for love.

Whether it takes a lifetime or a moment to realize it, we are part of the story of God's saving love which can both ancient and subtle, sudden and immediate.

As Jim Wallis reminds us, "... every part of our lives belongs to the God who created us and intends to redeem us. No part of us stands apart from God's boundless love, no aspect of our life remains untouched by the conversion that is God's call and God's gift to us."⁵

This is the deep interconnectedness into which we are called.

And so we have in the Gospel of Matthew today Jesus teaching about forgiveness. And we hear Peter's *little* question, how often, Lord, should I forgive? Is seven times enough? And Jesus' *really big* answer, seventy-seven times, revealing in this mysterious answer a world filled with God's grace.

Because "seventy-seven times" represents a kind of infinite love and a kind of forgiveness that is immeasurable and unending. The kind of forgiveness given freely and forever. The kind that God offers us.

One small act of forgiveness, and being forgiven, illuminates then this web of deep connections in which God's grace flows through and among us, if we would let it.⁶

Forgiveness is tied both to mystery of grace and to receiving the fullness of it. And the fullness of this grace is revealed in all creation.

Creation perhaps can be the lens through which we discover and fulfill God's story of love and salvation.

As we cannot ignore the deep pain of those who need our forgiveness.⁷

"In sermons on forgiveness, preachers cannot ignore the deep pain of those who have been sinned against, and we cannot minimize the difficulties of forgiveness."

The forgiveness Jesus calls for in today's Gospel is inseparable from difficult and necessary work of truth telling and accountability.⁸ As Rev. Dawn spoke last week:

“The process of truth-telling and accountability is set within a call to paying careful attention to protect the disempowered and vulnerable ones.”⁹

How we see of this radiant, grace-filled creation, and how much we take in, really matters. As Raquel St. Clair Lettsome writes, “It seems that one’s perspective greatly affects one’s willingness to forgive.”¹⁰

Have you ever realized, in a little moment of awe, wonder or connection, how the heart open and expand into greater love and compassion?

And maybe, if we name things, like *where we are*, including the sources of loss and deep yearning for reconciliation, and we do this together, we can discover more of the new story waiting for us, as Christine Valters Paintner writes in her poem, *Earth as the Divine Icon*, “... where we can all turn toward a vision of wholeness once again.”¹¹

In the way that Jesus teaches us, forgiveness opens our minds and hearts to the channel of grace that flows through us.¹² It activates the voice of protest in a world of fear, in a loving way. And it releases the fire of God’s love.

It is difficult to imagine being present at the dramatic parting of the sea... with the pillar of cloud lighting up the night, the angel of God moving before and behind us. And the wind blowing against the sea through the night and turning it into land....¹³

Yet maybe we can imagine standing between a wall of rising water and the army of advancing fears, and discover, when we look down, that we are *already* standing on solid ground, on a narrow path of dry land, a bridge between the rising waters; and when we look within, we see that we are, each one of us, *already* shining with God’s promise.

Amen.

[video reflection: Christine Valters Paintner “Earth as the Original Sacrament”]

READINGS

Earth as the Original Icon

by Christine Valters Paintner

Gaze upon Creation with your eyes soft,
 a holy icon revealing the face of Love.
 See the beauty of green Earth arising,
 make space for the ache of our neglect,
 exploits, ravages, see the scars
 across field and mountain,
 allow the river of tears at all
 that suffers to flow freely through you,
 do not resist this grief,
 the otter choked with oil
 the sky darkened with grime,
 the seas heavy with plastic,
 the koalas fleeing the great fire.
 Make room for a world of sorrow,
 let anguish be your song
 and grief bloom and grow.
 Ask the Source of Love who created our tears and tender hearts, and with them
 the promise of reconciliation,
 to create a new place within,
 where a different story can arise,
 where we can all turn toward a vision
 of wholeness once again.

Earth as the Original Sacrament

by Christine Valters Paintner

May Christ who shimmers in all creation surprise you each day with glittering
 moments, when you can see again how
 Light lives in everything,
 how it partners
 with dark soil to bring forth
 aster and lavender,

rosemary and daffodils,
 a hundred kinds of squash,
 kale and cabbage, apple and berry,
 grapes sweetened by the sun.
 How the dough you knead in your hands
 is an alchemy of touch and time,
 how everything is
 a call to communion –
 the wafer of moon,
 a chalice of stars.
 Let the Mystery of it all
 dance in your heart,
 always widening your horizons,
 inhabiting new landscapes.
 May you know each moment as sacred
 and everything around you a call
 to remember this one true thing.

Exodus 14:19-31

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea

returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

Matthew 18:21-35

Peter came and said to Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

¹ Aivazovskii, Ivan Konstantinovich, 1817-1900. *Clouds Gathered above the Ocean*, from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-image/act-image-link.pl?RC=48996> [retrieved September 13, 2020]. Original source: www.yorckproject.de.

² “Exodus 14:19–31 narrates perhaps the most famous scene from the Old Testament in the modern world. Some scholars call the exodus the most important event in the Old Testament. The passage echoes through other Old Testament passages as it becomes a type that later passages reuse. The literary trope echoes throughout the New Testament as well.” John W. Wright, in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship* (Kindle Locations 9495-9497). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

³ Terry Tempest Williams, “Erosion and Evolution: Our Undoing Is Our Becoming,” *Bioneers*, April 2, 2020, <https://bioneers.org/erosion-evolution-undoing-becoming/>.

⁴ “We need not lose hope, we just need to locate where it dwells. To dwell is to see things as they are, and then you stay and fight for the things you love in your own community.” Terry Tempest Williams, “Erosion and Evolution: Our Undoing Is Our Becoming,” *Bioneers*, April 2, 2020, <https://bioneers.org/erosion-evolution-undoing-becoming/>.

⁵ Jim Wallis. *The Call to Conversion* (Kindle Locations 326-328). HarperOne. Kindle Edition; also cited in William Frey, *The Dance of Hope*, p. 74.

⁶ “The foundation of Matthew’s understanding is that we are all connected. These connections can be positive or negative, life-giving and affirming, or toxic and oppressive. In order to create and maintain communal bonds that are positive, individuals and communities must be able to deal with sin or, to put it in terms of the movie, they must be able to handle being fouled. Why? Because relationships, and therefore community, are impacted by our ability or inability to forgive.” Raquel St. Clair Lettsome, in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship* (Kindle Locations 9978-9981). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

⁷ Charles Campbell in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4 - Matthew 18:21–35*. Kindle Location 2522.

⁸ “The forgiveness Jesus calls for is inseparable from truth telling and accountability within the church. As a word to the church, Jesus’ parable comes to life. It is intentionally extreme; it relies on hyperbole. It is addressed to people who should know the source and reality of forgiveness. It is as if Jesus is saying to Peter — to the church — “How could you ask such a stupid question?” So Jesus tells an extreme parable to startle Peter into recognizing the absurdity of his assumptions and to call him to a new way of seeing and living. The parable should be preached as a shocking story in all of its hyperbolic absurdity.” Charles Campbell in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4 - Matthew 18:21–35*. Kindle Location 2522.

⁹ Rev. Dawn Allen-Herron, September 6, 2020, St Mary’s Episcopal Church

¹⁰ Raquel St. Clair Lettsome, in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship* (Kindle Location 10008). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

¹¹ Christine Valters Paintner, *The Earth as the Divine Icon* (from abbeyofthearts.com and workofthepeople.com). Used with permission.

¹² “Thus conversion is far more than an emotional release and much more than an intellectual adherence to correct doctrine. It is a basic change in life direction.” Jim Wallis. *The Call to Conversion* (Kindle Locations 281-284). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.

¹³ Exodus 14:19-31