

Wholly Belonging

*"Teach me thy ways, O Lord' is, like all prayers, a rash one, and one I cannot but recommend." *Annie Dillard, in Holy the Firm*

Novelist and naturalist Annie Dillard, raised a Presbyterian in Pittsburgh, wrote these words between a rock and a hard place, when she was living alone in a one room cabin in the Puget Sound, having set herself the task of writing about suffering and the silence of God. Apart from human community and feeling bereft of divine comfort and order, she was a stranger and an alien, rather than a citizen and saint. She said: *I came here to study hard things-rock mountain and salt sea-and to temper myself on their edges. "Teach me thy ways, O Lord" is, like all prayers, a rash one, and one I cannot but recommend.*

In the text we have just read, this is also Moses' prayer, given at a moment when the weary Israelites are at last poised to end their generation of wandering as strangers and aliens to enter the Promised Land and inherit their future as citizens and saints, the future for which their parents dreamed and died. *Show me thy ways, O Lord*, Moses prays...and it turns out to be a prayer whose answer was simple....but not easy. Let me begin with a story.

My father, a widower of 86 years, called me a few days ago with some news. He belongs to a bridge group of older men from his church. *While I was in Colorado last month, Jim's wife died of cancer. She had been sick since last year. So, he wasn't at bridge club and when I asked how he was doing the other guys said he had quit the church. He just quit! God didn't answer his prayers, and so he told John that he doesn't see the point of praying or of church and he doesn't believe in God anymore.* He stopped speaking abruptly. I was quiet, thinking about the death of my brother, my mother's long trial with Alzheimer's disease and cancer, and my dad's brave and honest struggle with the faith of his fathers, which didn't work at all like he thought it was supposed to. *I wonder*, I said quietly, *whether you might reach out to Jim yourself? I know you share many of his questions.* There was another long silence. *I don't think so*, he said flatly. *I don't have anything to offer him.* My dad, father of my faith, has become a stranger to his own, and to his God.

The text we have just read from the book of Exodus frames this very human experience of estrangement in another way. In this story, the voice of God opens this next chapter in Israel's life; a voice at once both weary and resolved: *Go! Leave this place, you and your people, and go to the land that I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying "to your descendants I will give it." I will send an angel before you, so go up, to a land flowing with milk and honey: but I will not go among you.*

To arrive at the shattering conclusion that God is no longer walking with us -- whether it is a decision we reach ourselves, as Jim did, or a choice God made because God was fed with humanity as the story in Exodus insists-- to come to such a conclusion is no small matter: it changes our lives. Whether the future for us is filled with hope or empty of promise, the sense that God no longer goes with us makes all the difference between being a saint or a stranger, belonging or being bereft.

How did we get there? And how do we go on from that place?

In the book of Exodus, before this moment of divine abandonment in the story of the people of Israel and Moses that we have read this morning, there are some stories so dark and ugly that the lectionary that guides our public reading of scripture barely dares to go there. In those stories, there is enough pain and suffering, enough bad behavior and betrayal to cause anyone to question whether God is with them, or hears their prayers. While Moses visited God on the mountain, the people below abandoned their principles and their commitments, giving themselves up to the worship of gold and possessions....then civil war, a failure of leadership, the breakdown of family connection, and a plague that killed until blood ran in the street.

These stories can all be found in the thirty-second chapter of Exodus....no, wait: they were in the New York Times this morning, and on the news last night: stories about Syria, ISIS and Iraq, coverage of the most hateful and divisive electoral season in modern history, children and families crowded at processing centers in Greece or crowded in detention at our nation's southern borders; and rampant viral epidemics like Ebola and Zika, threatening life and health for millions.

All of us know how fragile life is....how stunningly easily a phone call in the middle of the night, a wrong turn, or a conversation can change our lives forever and put God on the other side of an impenetrable wall. When the life we thought we had evaporates, when the person we thought we were becomes a stranger in the mirror, when people we trusted fail us or circumstances spiral beyond our imagination or control, we leave the green pastures and the still waters of blessing behind and go into the valley of the shadow, wondering *is God going with us, or are we on our own?*

This summer, at a conference I co-taught in Beirut with pastors from Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria, I met Pastor Haitham from Kirkuk, Iraq, whose congregation is struggling with threats from ISIL, reduced resources and the demands of strangers from other communities displaced by the war. He wrote in a letter: *About 10:30 last night, someone knocked on our door. Being that it was so late, and because of the tenuous situation in my city, my wife and I wondered who would be knocking on our door at this hour. We were not expecting anyone. So, I was afraid to open the door, and wondered if I should? I thought it might be a criminal or a militant with a gun. I didn't know what to expect. I hesitated....*

Of course he did, and so would we. Do we want to see who is on the other side of that door? On the other side of that prayer? Can we trust God still? Trust ourselves? Be in between a rock and a hard place, and still find the courage to go on?

Let us hold that hard question close to our hearts and return for a moment to our reading from Exodus. In a very real way, this story honors our fear, our hesitation, our anguished yearning for a clear word from God or at least enough light on the path to take the next step forward. With us and Pastor Haitham, the text itself seems to hesitate here: faltering in the face of Israel's anguished loss and God's despairing refusal to be moved, searching for comfort, for a way forward—listen:

Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp...and everyone who sought the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting...and when Moses would go out, they would rise and stand, and watch him...and the pillar of cloud would come down, and all the people would bow down...and the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.

If it is true that the past is prologue, Moses knows how to find his way back from stranger to saint, though it may seem he has forgotten. Looking back through the lens of sacred memory, he recalls how hope was found off the beaten path, not in the safety of numbers. He understands that the prayers and the reverent attention of friends and neighbors can be the ground on which we stand when we must go out alone to seek God in the darkness. He remembers that darkness is not the absence of God, but merely a place to seek God with senses other than sight. He knows that once God has been a Friend, face to face, no one can have real rest until the relationship is found and restored. *Thou hast made us for Thyself, prayed Saint Augustine, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee. (Conf. 1.1.1)*

Moses has no neat theological system to protect him here. He doesn't know what God's will is, nor how to find it, he only knows one thing: he knows he cannot go on without God at his side. What he does in the end is simple....though it isn't easy. Moses remembers what was before, then acts *as if* God is with him now. He acts for himself and for others, and when he looks back, it turns out that God was, and that Moses and his people have always wholly belonged to the Holy One.

Let me illustrate how it is with a letter from a young woman who wrote to thank Presbyterians like you who gave through One Great Hour of Sharing and to Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, gifts which made possible a series of camps she attended after a mass shooting in her middle school.

Hi, my name is Sara, and although we have never met, you all have changed my life. On March 24th, 1998 there was a shooting at my school similar to the one recently at Sandy Hook. At the time I was 11. I lost my dear friend of 4 years that day. I can tell you now that if it had not been for the wonderful support we received in that aftermath, many young lives would have also been lost to the fallout. When you witness such cruelty in the world at such a young age it is very easy to believe pain and violence are the only things that exist. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for showing our community that love truly is stronger than hate. The memories I have from my years at Ferncliff are priceless to me. They help me to see that something

positive can come from something so horrific. It also shows me that God has a plan, even if we cannot see it sometimes through the chaos.

Friends, when Sara became a stranger to the God she could no longer see in the chaos, you were the saints that offered your prayers and gifts and presence, holding her fast within the arms of the Holy One until she could once again wholly belong.

You knew God was at work, and you made it so for her and countless others you will never meet, like the Christians in Iraq who are helping their neighbors with funds that Presbyterians are giving to PDA's special appeal right now. The truth is, mostly in this world, when we become strangers and aliens like Sara, like my dad and his friend Jim and Moses were, like Pastor Haitham in Kirkuk, we don't see God face to face...but we are held secure in the communion of saints by others until we can find our way home again. People walk with us if we let them. They pray and they send money and they show up until finally, when we are able a little to see through the tears, we lift up our heads and take a step forward and there! it was God's back ahead of us all along: beloved and bent with our sorrow, curved to carry our burden with us, never going so far ahead that we can't be found and restored, citizens with all the saints. Listen to the rest of Pastor Haitham's letter:

So, I was afraid to open the door, and wondered if I should? I thought it might be a criminal or a militant with a gun. I didn't know what to expect. I hesitated, but finally decided to open just a crack and ask who is out there. The person answered me, "I am a Christian from the Mosul area; I am a refugee. I didn't know if I should believe him, so I asked him, "How can I be sure you're telling the truth?" He said, "Here is my ID card; see for yourself." My wife was very frightened. She whispered to me to keep a distance from the stranger. I inched toward him warily. I saw his ID card. He was a refugee. He had three daughters; the oldest was not more than 5 years old. We talked for a long while. I promised him that our church would not leave him alone. Please pray that we will be able to support him. The Lord has enabled us to help many displaced Iraqis, regardless of their religion or affiliation. Christ's commandment to us is not to support and help only our own; rather, his commandment that we serve everyone. Once again, we find ourselves faced with a new challenge. Let us join hands and help those who have come our way.

Amen.

Let us pray: *it's in every one of us, to be wise....*