

Looking to the Hills in Frightening Times
 First Congregational Church, Hendersonville NC
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 Psalm 121 Micah 6:8 Luke 4:17-19
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I invite you to join me in looking a bit more deeply into the Spirit we encounter in the life and ongoing presence of Jesus our brother, in whom we are touched by christic – healing, liberating – power. Let’s see what we might discern about what Jesus would do, here and now, if he were in our shoes, if he were teaching and preaching and walking alongside us in America at this time. Can we imagine it? I had a beloved friend and spiritual companion, an Australian Anglican nun and priest, Sister Angela, with whom I spent a great deal of time in the ten years before she died of a stroke in 2002. Once, as we discussed what God is doing among us, I said, Oh Angela, sometimes my “imagination gets the best of me,” to which she replied, “But dahling, what is imagination if not a window into God?” So climb through a window of imagination with me for awhile today.

We can assume or imagine that Jesus had been brought up by simple folks, relatively poor people, like most people in Nazareth, a small town in central Palestine. He’d been raised by his dad, a carpenter, and his mom Mary, who had brought him up as a good Jewish boy. His parents and community trained him in the faith, Judaism. Luke tells us that, in this context, Jesus “grew strong and was filled with wisdom.”

As a young middle aged man, by now in his early 30s, Jesus had become a preacher and teacher who travelled around Palestine with a group of friends and followers. I’d guess that most if not all of them were a bit unusual, like Jesus himself, men and women willing to live with few possessions in no one place, on the move, traveling from one home to another. A band of humans, following an itinerant Jewish preacher-man committed to preaching and teaching in cryptic parables and to doing the will of the One he called Abba, “daddy.” His father. In a less patriarchal world, this same God would surely have been his, “mama” – a Spirit no doubt much in the image of his mother Mary and other strong women in his life.

I chose Psalm 121 as one of today’s scriptures because I am confident Jesus knew what to do at any given time not simply because he was a good Jew who knew the traditions of neighbor-love and the law at the heart of Judaism but also because we know Jesus actively connected with his Father-Mother God, his Abba, the Spirit on whom he relied. This, after all, is the heart of everything we do know about Jesus.

We know that Jesus connected through prayer with this Spirit. We can almost see this young man lifting up his eyes to the Galilean hills, where he spent his adult life... and casting his eyes out over the sea of Galilee, a usually calm and beautiful sea. We can imagine him praying, praying – by that I mean, listening. asking. listening. seeking. listening. Perhaps arguing. Listening. Coming to some mutual understanding with his Abba about what to do here and now.

And what did Jesus see when he lifted up his eyes? What did he hear when he listened? We can imagine because we know what **we** see when we lift our eyes to the hills or cast them out over the sea? We see **Vastness**. In the space that surrounds us, and cradles us, that calls us and challenges us if we are listening, we are met by something much larger than Jesus, or you, or me, or us. In such a space, so vast and so deep, if we are seeing and hearing that which is holding us and whispering through wind and waves, we become aware that we truly are not alone.

Belonging

Oh yes, we are tiny, like the pine needles or the grains of sand, and we surely feel insignificant relative to the vastness – and yet, if we are tuned into the Sacred, listening, we detect sounds and sensibilities that secure our small selves, telling us that we **belong**. We hear, we become aware deep in our souls, that we are somehow involved with the lives of all saints and sinners and stars, with rocks and rivers, with our people and other people, all of us belonging – which is why we are here -- together in this Vast network of Energy, which many call “God” or Spirit and which modern scientists have figured out is the real shape of our natural reality: We are connected, all of us and everything, related so much more organically, so much more truthfully, than we can see or know or even imagine. This, my friends, is the best science can teach us and it is what God taught Jesus. We **belong** together, forever and eternally. We and the wind and waves and all creatures and all people. We are not alone. Our lives are co-inherent, an ancient Christian concept of interdependence in which we are all wrapped up in one another. Buddhists call it co-dependence arising. Jesus called it love and named our faithfulness to it the Greatest Commandment, the only one that really matters at the end: our love of one another, our neighbors, who belong together in the Great Spirit we acknowledge as God, or Spirit, or Life, or Higher Power, or Energy of connection.

Belonging together, nonetheless many of us wrestle with deep feelings of isolation, loneliness, perhaps even a sense of being disconnected, of not belonging. Or perhaps sometimes the realization that we belong – that we are coinherent – is itself a root of dismay; perhaps we imagine that we all belong to a wad of meaninglessness. Indeed many of the wisest and most compelling public figures we have known in our own history, earlier and today, have wrestled with what modern medical science has named as Depression: Abraham Lincoln, David Thoreau, Rachel Carson, Mary Oliver, Bruce Springsteen, to name a few who have shared their experiences with us, say that the natural world, the trees, the animals, the hills, the water, save them from despair, from spiraling down and down and further down. This is an ancient wisdom, as much for today as ever.

Like these people, Jesus seemed often to need solitude. Maybe depressed, maybe not. Maybe simply sad sometimes, we imagine that Jesus spent a lot of time outside, near trees and bushes and water. We can be sure that Jesus found the quiet places he needed, sometimes alone, sometimes with friends. Perhaps, like many of us, he had dogs or other animals, not only other humans, as friends. Tell me Jesus would have been as effective as a teacher, preacher, and source

of sacred wisdom if he had not gazed out upon the Sea of Galilee or walked in the neighboring hills. I believe this is where and how Jesus touched his strength -- and had some sense that his strength, his real strength, was sacred.

I imagine Jesus might have agreed with poet Mary Oliver who wrote, “Mostly, I just stand in the dark field, in the middle of the world, breathing/ in and out. Life so far doesn’t have any other name but breath and light, wind and rain./ If there’s a temple, I haven’t found it yet. I simply go on drifting, in the heaven of the grass and the weeds.”¹

Fear and courage

I also imagine that it was “in the heaven of the grass and the weeds” that our brother Jesus touched both the depths of his fear – and his courage. Like all of us, rich or poor, young or old, captive or free, Jesus had to decide every day what to do in the context of social, political, and spiritual forces that surely must have frightened him. It doesn’t require much imagination to imagine that Fear was a spiritual challenge to Jesus, whose political enemies were constantly threatening him -- and who finally killed him. “Please, if it be thy will, take this cup away.”

Let’s think for a few minutes about those who were threatening to destroy Jesus while he walked on this earth, the principalities and powers whom Jesus must certainly have feared. Let us imagine that they were afraid of him too. We can rather easily imagine what Jesus feared personally – suffering and death at the hands of angry people who were had rejected his teachings, preaching, and intimate proximate to the love of God. But what did these angry people fear about Jesus?

Word reached me not long ago that a newly formed Christian group has had it with Jesus and has decided to dwell instead on the teachings of Paul and, selectively, on certain of the Hebrew scriptures (no doubt those focusing on the wrath of an angry deity rather than on the spirited calls of the Prophets or the healing balms of the Psalms). What does it mean that a Christian church has had it with Jesus and has decided to move on without him? This may sound to you, as it does to me, a bit like driving a car without an engine, a bike without wheels, a boat without either a navigator or an anchor?

Let me ask again: what do these angry people fear about Jesus? Here’s what I imagine:

I believe that there are many Christians who have indeed decided to move on without Jesus because they fear him. I believe that white Christian nationalists, the Christians who have hijacked one of our two major political parties, do indeed fear Jesus. And I believe that whether or not they admit it, much less proclaim that they are moving on without Jesus, that is exactly what they are doing; they have indeed had it with Jesus’ MO: his reflecting the kindness, mercy, and humility of the One he called Abba, much as the prophet Micah has commended to us all as a way of life. A good Jewish life. A good Christian life. A good human life.

Using whatever bits and pieces of the Bible their religious teachers can find to bolster their political aims – because they are driven by partisan political demands -- these brother and sister Christians settle spiritually for their **fear** of a Jesus who practices kindness, **fear of** a Jesus who shows mercy, **fear of** a humble Jesus. These Christians who are driven by the Emperor, the Casesar, of our age, are told the **fear** strangers, those who are not like them, those dangerous others. Not long ago, for example, our Lt Gov Robinson, in a tirade against LGBTQ people, drew laughter among Christians in Brevard when he scorned transwomen as “ugly” and all gay and lesbian people as reprehensible, dirty deviants. Sounding much like the German Nazis who demonized the Jews of Europe and exterminated 6 million of them, the Christian nationalists of today’s America promise to turn back brown immigrants from the South, control women’s bodies, re-segregate and degrade Black Americans, subdue and marginalize Jewish Americans, Muslim Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans.

In such religious crusades, **fear based Christian nationalists turn the life and teachings of Jesus upside down. In their fear**, they practice hate, not love. In their fear, they lift up a contemptuous deity of death and devastation, rather than celebrating our belonging together in a Spirit of Love. The Ken Burns, Lynn Novick, and Sarah Botstein documentary on “The U.S. and the Holocaust” of several weeks ago offered a sobering reminder of the terror that would be waged against Black people, refugees, immigrants, Jews, Muslims, women, LGBTQ, and all “others,” if fear-based white Christian nationalists take over our nation and shape the government in the image of a deity of fear and hatred.

We do not have to imagine it. These fear-based white Christian nationalists tell us everyday how much they despise the rest of us and what their agenda is. As Maya Angelou warned, “whenever people show you who they are, believe them.”

And so here we are in 2022. “Help us!” we pray, we plead, we cry, if we are in touch with reality. Most of us in this church today are white American Christians. If we are not afraid, we are fools, because we are in the midst of a deadly serious assault on our well-being and that of our spouses, our children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, our friends and neighbors. Help! we plead if we are paying attention. Our opponents ridicule us as “woke.” In truth, we are simply alive in the Spirit that calls us to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

So how do we navigate our fear of the white Christian nationalism, or christofascism, that is pounding at the door of our lives? What indeed would **Jesus** do in this situation? What indeed is Jesus doing – that is, what is the living spirit of our christic brother doing among us? What do we do?

First, we admit that we need one another, and we ask each other for help. That is why I wrote my book. I need you, and I believe you need each other. We cannot bear to be isolated and alone in our fear. If we are wise, we don’t deny either that we are in trouble or that we are afraid. Turning to the hills, walking by the rivers, praying, meditating, talking, listening, we soak in the wisdom we find through many sources – trees, animals, human friends and

mentors, music, books, stories and other sources of wisdom, including sometimes – if we are lucky – the traditions and teachings of our churches, synagogues, and other spiritual communities. We also turn to each other.

Second: With each other’s help, we begin to realize that our fear is rooted in our senses of powerlessness, which begin to shrink when we realize that we belong together --- I can tell you I feel most powerless whenever I am out of synch with the sweet and vibrant Spirit that connects me to you -- my sisters, brothers, siblings, Jesus. It’s a fact: I feel most powerless whenever I feel most alone, and I **am** most powerless when I linger in such an illusion.

Third: We admit that we need to find and keep our courage to move out of our fear-based senses of powerlessness. Robert L. DeWitt of Philadelphia was the bishop who organized the Philadelphia Ordination of women priests back in 1974 – the first ordination of American women to the Episcopal priesthood, prior to the church’s authorization of women priests. Bp DeWitt used to sign his letters to us, the newly ordained women: “Keep your courage.” What did he mean by that?

Bob DeWitt knew that courage is a spiritual gift that is absolutely vital to anyone’s staying power, our sustained efforts to help create a more justice-loving world, or church. Courage is a psychospiritual gift that empowers us to transcend, not negate or deny, our fear. Transcending our fear is not to deny that we are afraid, but rather to leap into the fear, as if it were a deep pool and begin moving through it, slowly perhaps, treading water or floating or dog paddling, gaining confidence as we realize that we are not alone. We are buoyed by the presence not only of each other here and now but by the staying power of our ancestors and teachers of wisdom who have gone before us, also leaping in faith. The courage of taking such a leap automatically stretches our hearts, sharpens our vision, and expands our awareness of being connected, of belonging to each other. More and more, our courage energizes us through the wisdom of the One whose power continues to shape us, evoking our better angels.

Be not afraid, come the still, small voice. Be not afraid, Consider the lilies of the field... do they worry? Jesus asks us. Seriously, consider the lilies, and fear not, for we belong. Strange and improbable as it may sound to every one of us, the more deeply we realize that we belong together, the more truly we begin to move through our fear – literally en-couraging one another.

Together, we grow spiritually. We are spiritually larger than we are when we imagine ourselves alone. The mysterious and mystical energy of Belonging connects us to one another and to people of all time and places, including our own ancestors, including prophets and sages and saints, including Jesus himself and countless others, all of these characters working in us, between and among and through us, encouraging us to do whatever we can, the next right thing, knowing that we belong, together. In that Spirit, which is Holy, there is nothing that can hold us back.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us

Leaping in faith and encouraged by one another and by those who walk with us and who've gone before us on the journey of life, we can say to those friends and loved ones who may worry about us, "Don't try to hold us back." We are walking with each other and with all lovers of justice-love, including Jesus – whom we can recognize by his relentless passion for justice-love. Some of us know him as our Lord or Christ, some of us call him our brother or friend, some of us may call her Sister or Sibling. For some of us They are the Spirit of Life, for some she is Liberator, for some he is Healer, for some They are Higher Power. For others, Jesus may be simply a good idea, his story a good story. So many names, so many images, in one Spirit of Courage.

"We are walking in the sight of God," sang liberators in South Africa with gusto as they marched against apartheid. "Ain't gonna let nobody turn us around" sang freedom fighters in the American South. "Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour" sing justice-loving Christians throughout this nation every Sunday. Because we know this is where we belong. So when we're asked, what would Jesus do -- and what we are here to do -- the answer rings through time and space, clear as a bell:

The Spirit is upon us
 Because she has anointed us to preach good news to the poor
 He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovering sight to the blind
 They have called us to set at liberty those who are oppressed --
 and to proclaim a time, a Jubilee, a Holy Day, in which we will see, and we will know, that all
 shall be celebrated as One family in God.
 The Spirit encourages us to proclaim that now is time.
 And She assures us that nothing, neither our fears nor the tides of christofascism rising around
 us, will hold us back.
 Never. Ever.
 Because we Belong.
 Together.

Mary Oliver, "What is There Beyond Knowing," *New and Selected Poems, Vol Two*, Boston: Beacon, 2005, pp.20-21.