

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
June 5, 2011

COMING AND GOING

While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up....Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting.

There is much to suggest that the rhythms at this time of year, especially for those of us in the academic world, characterize the nature of beginning and ending, coming and going. Graduates anticipating their leave from Stanford next weekend, a place that has become home for a length of time, anywhere between 4 and 7 years, maybe more. A shelter, a safe place so to speak from the real world beyond these corridors, buildings and arches. For other students, a structure of daily routine ending that softens perhaps an otherwise sense of chaos and brings, real or imagined, some order, even certainty to life.

Here in Memorial Church, the choir comes and goes, taking its leave for the summer after this morning's service. Mary Greene, our beloved and earnest seminarian has completed her year of Field Education with us and this is officially her last Sunday in that capacity. Your clergy - the three deans - the God squad - commence with a summer schedule after today - me disappearing at least from Sunday mornings until August. And our organist and choir director- well - Robert - he is so reliable - he will mostly be here rocking the place with his reverberations until he takes his break God bless him.

For others, here and elsewhere, it might signal the beckoning of summer, where the hopes for a break in the otherwise chaos of responsibility and obligation may be softened by longer lazy summer days of shimmering sunlight and bright blue skies.... though apparently not today. Perhaps less on the to do or must do lists. Your coming or going might include visits from or to family and friends, exotic places or "staycations," a respite from routine, as you know it. Or, it could just be the simple pleasures of life, like watching the final episode of Glee, Top Chef, American Idol or Grey's Anatomy. Gone, tragically, until next season.

Still for others, it may be the coming and going of good health, peppered with trips to radiation and chemo treatments. It could take its form in the waxing and waning of reliable wages and work or the emotional roller coaster of grief and loss. Or, in recent months, by virtue of the coming and going of tempest storms and winds that flatten small towns and take with them not only lives

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
June 5, 2011

and homes but also the stability of safety and shelter assumed and vanished in a matter of minutes.

This morning we sit in a glorious space called Memorial Church and what comes to us through sacred texts spoken and heard is a story woven in their strands and what the Christian tradition calls The Ascension, precisely 40 days after Easter, celebrated this past Thursday, June 2. Artists of all genres have captured it as an astonishing image of Jesus blessing faithful friends, disciples, followers, and seekers as he is carried up into the skies. This stained glass window left and up from this pulpit depicts such imaginative scripting. There they are, gazing upward with their eyes straining and their mouths open, maybe thinking about grabbing those feet dangling, clinging, perhaps saying to their leader, trusted confidant, healer, teacher, best friend, proverbial safety and shelter - NO! Don't go! Please stay! Or at least take us where you're going.

The other part of this picture is what the psalmist illuminates today and John read for us. That is, the image of God sitting on a throne, robed in majesty, girded with strength, while Jesus takes his rightful place. For many people down through the ages a literal interpretation of this picture is a source of comfort. For this preacher at least it is the source of many questions. Where, exactly, is this throne? The conventional tone of the word "throne" as I have been reminded, implies that God rules with power from a distant place. From this throne, God moves things around in the world.

I'm thinking, for example, about a story that was published several days after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast. It featured Edward and Bettina Larsen and their three children, who had sailed their boat to the Florida Keys. As hurricane warnings became imminent, their friends became concerned that they had not returned to home port and notified the Coast Guard. The Guard started a search, but high winds and seas forced them to call it off. A day after Katrina passed, the search was resumed and the Coast Guard miraculously spotted the family of five, stranded near their beached boat on an island 16 miles out to sea. One by one, they were hoisted into a Coast Guard helicopter and then taken safely home. Commenting on the rescue, a family member said: "Sometimes there is a thing called divine intervention."

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
June 5, 2011

More often than not, God is equated with a God who intervenes on behalf of the faithful. And so, I'm wondering – is this how God rules? What about all those people in Alabama, Missouri, and Western Massachusetts most recently who failed to experience divine intervention? Or the hundreds of others during Katrina or Japan's tsunami that were not rescued? The literalists will point to concrete events in the world as evidence of a God who rules from a distance. To be sure, the external world, indeed, does get our attention. I, like others, am quite familiar with the argument that if it happens in the world, it is the will of God.

The psalmist today makes a deeper claim we might want to consider and ponder. The strength of God is “mightier than the breakers of the sea.”

As one preacher put it: What could be mightier than the power of the external world than the power that animates the external world? What if God rules, not by manipulating external events, but as the very power of life that gives life? What could be mightier than the power of the external world than the power that gives life?

16th century Christian mystic Teresa of Avila does not see the throne of God as some remote place where God rules. Rather, she was convinced that God rules from the very soul of life. Many mystics like her say the real throne, the real strength, the real ruling power of God is located not in the external world but in the very heart of life. So, what if this throne on which God sits is the throne of the heart? What if God is not met in temples, churches or synagogues?

Poet Emily Dickinson put it this way:

*Tell the truth but tell it slant
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanations kind
The truth must dazzle gradually
Or everyone be blind.*

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
June 5, 2011

When it comes to where we find the throne of God and how God rules, the interpretations of poets like Dickinson and mystics like Avila can be profound and persuasive. We are awakened to the presence of God, the presence of the Sacred everywhere when we see that the life that lives in us is the same life that lives in every other living being.

So we might consider and ponder the fact that Psalm 93, for example, is not a prescriptive answer but a provocative question. Is the throne of God somewhere else? If so, it will inevitably divide the world into “us and them.” But if it lives in the very heart of life, it is not something that separates but the very power that connects all of life. The deeper questions here may well challenge us to consider that God is not some distant power that coerces, but rather sits in the throne of every heart. What does this change about the way we see ourselves and relate to the world?

I realize that this is a conversation I’ve been having with these texts, other sources and myself this week as I’ve prepared for this sermon today. It is why I think I began with the illustrations I did in reference to coming and going – that is the very nature of all that constitutes our lives. I recognize that have been stuck in the pews and have been patient to become a part of this conversation with me and I thank you.

I think, in essence, the ascent of Jesus was yet another way to illustrate to those left behind an example of a loving God who upends the ordinary understanding of power. The urgent work and embodiment of God can now begin. These friends of Jesus and now we are being implored to see that the throne of God resides in every facet of our coming and going on earth. What if, while we live our many lives, there is but one life living through us?

Let me offer a final illustration from one of my favorite writers, priests, theologians and preachers, Barbara Brown Taylor, whose contributions have influenced the theme and companion readings for my summer sermon series in August. I heard Barbara preach and speak at a conference I attended two weeks ago in Minneapolis, where she challenged us to be cautious about separating the idea of the church, religion, the sacred and how we talk about “the world” as preachers and teachers. In other words, it is not religion or God or Church vs. the world. Maybe her words here will help.

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
June 5, 2011

Many years ago, a wise old priest invited me to come speak at his church in Alabama. "What do you want me to talk about?" I asked him.

"Come tell us what is saving your life right now," he answered. It was as if he had swept his arm across a dusty table and brushed all the formal china to the ground. I did not have to try to say correct things that were true for everyone. I did not have to use theological language that conformed to the historical teachings of the church. All I had to do was figure out what my life depended on. All I had to do was figure out how I stayed as close to that reality as I could, and then find some way to talk about it that helped my listeners figure out those same things for themselves. What is saving my life now is the conviction that there is no spiritual treasure to be found apart from the bodily experiences of human life on earth. My life depends on engaging the most ordinary physical activities with the most exquisite attention I can give them. My life depends on ignoring all touted distinctions between the secular and the sacred, the physical and the spiritual, the body and the soul. What is saving my life now is becoming more fully human, trusting that there is no way to God apart from real life in the real world.

The tempest storms and winds of life are real, but they are not ultimate. The darkness and chaos cannot drown out the throne of God that exists in hearts everywhere. We do not experience God in the sphere of theoretical thought, and the domicile of divine presence is not billions of light years away, somewhere out there. The throne of God is a place where the holy, the sacred communally acts and communally is with us, here in the very heart of life, in all of its coming and going.

And so, what is saving your life right now?