

Last Sunday, Dean Shaw announced a summer sermon series on “Poetry and the Mystery of Faith.” In place of a Gospel reading, I have chosen to read one of the many poems from the Bible’s Psalter, that is, the Psalms of David, 95, verses 1-7.

1. Come let us sing to the Lord
 Let us shout for joy to the rock of our salvation
2. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving
 and raise a loud shout to him with psalms.
3. For the Lord is a great God,
 and a great king above all gods.
4. In his hand are the caverns of the earth,
 and the heights of the hills are his also.
5. The sea is his, for he made it,
 and his hands have molded the dry land.
6. Come, let us bow down and bend the knee,
 and kneel before the Lord our Maker,
7. For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of
 his hand: O that today you would hearken to his voice.

I am delighted to return to Memorial Church, and to this pulpit, from which I first preached 40 years ago when I was the new Assistant Dean. 38 years ago, I was ordained to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church in this sanctuary. Five years ago, I participated in the Summer School of Theology at Oxford, whose Director at the time, was Jane Shaw. It had just been announced in California, that she had been called to be the new Dean of Grace Cathedral . . . so when I met her at the registration table in Oxford, I said, “welcome to San Francisco”. At that Summer School, which was attended by clergy and theologians from around the world, I participated in Dean Shaw’s seminar on “Mysticism and Modernity” in the mornings, and went to another seminar in the afternoons on “The Natural Theology of the Sea”. What I have to say today, is largely influenced by those two seminars. In particular, I found this poem, “The Other” by the Welsh poet R. S. Thomas, while I was reading the background material for those seminars. It is printed in the bulletin.

"The Other"

There are nights that are so still
that I can hear the small owl calling
far off, and a fox barking
miles away. It is then that I lie
in the lean hours, awake listening
to the swell born somewhere in the Atlantic
rising and falling, rising and falling
wave on wave on the long shore
by the village, that is without light
and companionless. And the thought comes

of the other being who is awake too,
letting our prayers break on him,
not like this for a few hours,
but for days, years, for eternity."

-- R. S. Thomas

The poem begins with visual images: the dark night, the small owl, and a fox. But then the poet goes on to describe what he **hears**: the calling of the owl, the barking of the fox, and especially the sound of the waves breaking on the shore. The poet is describing an experience of immensity: he is overwhelmed by the size of the sea, by the constancy of the waves, by 'the swell born . . . in the Atlantic'.

Most of us have stood on an ocean beach . . . I remember standing on beaches in Half Moon Bay, in Oregon and Hawaii, in Wales, and in Sicily, looking out to sea and thinking how far away the next island, or the next continent is. And every time, I have been astounded at how large the sea is, and how far it extends, beyond my ability to see or imagine. I suspect that most of us here today, have at some time stood on a cliff or beach, living as close to the Pacific as we do.

So I was fascinated to learn, at that seminar in England, about some research done by a Religious Institute, in which 100 reports of experiences of the sea, were analyzed. The majority were from people **walking** near the sea, who felt a strong sense of union with the creation, and an awareness of the Creator. That awareness, and/or the feeling of awe, is similar to the feeling many of us have when we go hiking in the Sierra, or drive through the Rocky Mountains in Wyoming, as I did recently. Both oceans and mountains are beautiful, and along with the sky at night, give us an experience of immensity . . . but they also make us aware of how small and frail we are. Living near the ocean, we hear occasionally about a person who misjudged the tides, and was swept out to sea and drowned. Living near hills and mountains, we also hear about people who are crushed by a falling rock or lose their footing and tumble off a ledge. And we are sad to hear of forest fires in the mountains, which destroy homes, and lives. We know that those oceans and mountains, can be dangerous as well as beautiful.

I asked myself, is this awareness of immensity, of the vast size of oceans and mountains, and sky, of any value to us, or is it merely amazing, or frightening? I give a qualified Yes, there **is** value to that awareness . . . because much of the time I give all my attention and energy to what I must do today and tomorrow. I do not stand back from the present moment, and my present responsibilities often enough, to look at the big picture of my life, of human life, and what it all means. But there is something in us which insists that we **do look** at the big picture . . . and if we are not willing to consider that big picture in the daytime, then those questions about the meaning of life, will present themselves when we are trying to sleep.

The fact that the poet R. S. Thomas was awake in the night, suggests to me that he was disturbed by some problem or decision which prevented him from sleeping. He wrote in his poem, that the constant rising and falling of the waves on the shore, are like prayers, coming from people all over the world . . . bringing their worries, their hurts, their cries for help, and their questions to "the other being, who is awake too . . ." That

“the other being, who is awake” is God, the Creator of the world, who neither slumbers nor sleeps, as the Psalmist says (Ps 121:4).

Years ago, in that classroom at Oxford, I learned that people in crisis, often feel like they are being buffeted by a storm at sea, over which they have no control, and sometimes feel like they are drowning. Many have felt that they were saved from drowning, both literally, and figuratively, only by God’s help. The Book of Hebrews describes our hope in Christ as “a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (6:19). Some years ago, I discovered that by the end of the first century, the anchor as a symbol of safety, and the cross as a symbol of salvation, were combined into one symbol in the catacombs of Rome. St. John Chrysostom compared our awe at God’s greatness, to the vastness and depth of the sea. He said, “I always remember the Universal Pilot . . . he does not stop dangers straightaway . . . but at the last minute uses his powers”. St. Augustine of Hippo said that Christ is our north star, by whom we set our bearings. The early fathers of the church, and later the medieval theologians, wrote about sea travel as a physical journey which was a mirror of our **inner spiritual journey** toward the mystery of God.

And so gradually the experience of travel by boat over rough seas, to unknown places, facing major storms, and the experience of being stranded, becalmed, or shipwrecked, became extended metaphors for the Christian life. Many hymns that we sing, make reference to our lives as a journey by sea, in which we face storms and shipwrecks: for example, “Jesus Lover of My Soul” and “Eternal Father Strong to Save”. Perhaps the best known among such hymns is “How Great Thou Art”, which you may have sung last Sunday. It was written toward the end of the 19th century, by a Swedish man, Carl Boberg, who was caught in a storm. When he finally arrived home safely, he wrote the poem, “How Great Thou Art” making reference to the “rolling thunder” and God’s “power throughout the universe displayed”.

We believe that God, “the other being” in the poem by R. S. Thomas, knows what dangers and trials each of us are facing, but we may not recognize God’s guidance, if we only speak with, and listen to God occasionally. And even if we recognize God’s guidance, we may not have the faith or the strength to follow that guidance. Allow me to say it like this: God has a history of *asking* people to do very difficult things, which would seem to be beyond their strength and resources. Remember how Jesus asked Peter, to get out of the boat and walk on the water. Remember how the Risen Christ appeared to Saul, asking why he was persecuting the Christians in Damascus (Acts 9).

These reflections remind us that from time to time, God calls us to do some particular work, or task . . . it might be a simple word of encouragement to a neighbor or a colleague, it might be taking up a new responsibility in the home or at work. God could be asking us to make a big change or take a new direction in our lives, or, God may confirm our intention to hold steady on the course in which we are headed. These thoughts remind us that as you heard in the first reading, “the Lord makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters for our journeys” . . . that He goes ahead of us to prepare the way, and is with us all along.

“Oh that today, you would hearken to his voice!”