

“Webs of Wonder”

Rev. Shawn Newton

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

27 April 2014, Earth Day Sunday

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Reading from *Women's Uncommon Prayers*

“Testimony” – Rebecca Baggett

(for my daughters)

I want to tell you that the world
is still beautiful.
I tell you that despite
children raped on city streets,
shot down in school rooms,
despite the slow poisons seeping
from old and hidden sins
into our air, soil, water,
despite the thinning film
that encloses our aching world.
Despite my own terror and despair.

I want you to know that spring
is no small thing, that
the tender grasses curling
like a baby's fine hairs around
your fingers are a recurring
miracle. I want to tell you
that the river rocks shine
like God, that the crisp
voices of the orange and gold
October leaves are laughing at death,

I want to remind you to look
beneath the grass, to note
the fragile hieroglyphs

of ant, snail, beetle. I want
you to understand that you
are no more and no less necessary
than the brown recluse, the ruby-
throated hummingbird, the humpback
whale, the profligate mimosa.
I want to say, like Neruda,
that I am waiting for
"a great and common tenderness",
that I still believe
we are capable of attention,
that anyone who notices the world
must want to save it.

Reading "St. Kevin and the Blackbird" - Seamus Heaney

And then there was St Kevin and the blackbird.
The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside
His cell, but the cell is narrow, so
One turned-up palm is out the window, stiff
As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands
And lays in it and settles down to nest.
Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked
Neat head and claws and, finding himself linked
Into the network of eternal life,
Is moved to pity: now he must hold his hand
Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks
Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown.

And since the whole thing's imagined anyhow,
Imagine being Kevin. Which is he?
Self-forgetful or in agony all the time
From the neck on out down through his hurting forearms?
Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?
Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth
Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head?
Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,
'To labour and not to seek reward,' he prays,

A prayer his body makes entirely
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name.

Sermon: "Webs of Wonder"

The scene is a strange one.

The ancient Irish monk known as St. Kevin—
kneeling down in his tiny hermit's cell,
with his arms outstretched in prayer.

His little cell is so small, so narrow,
that one of his arms pokes out the window.

St. Kevin lived close to nature
and was a lover of animals, a bit like St. Francis.

For years, living in solitude, he wore only animal skins, which, apparently,
weren't even fashionable in rural Ireland in the sixth century.

But, even so, even with his love of animals,
the sudden arrival of a bird in the hand must have surely given him pause.

Fortunately, he was already praying, already still,
quiet and steady enough
that a mother bird could make her nest in his palm,
lay her eggs, and wait.

"Kevin feels the warm eggs," the poet tells us, "the small breast, the tucked,
Neat head and claws and, finding himself linked
Into the network of eternal life,
Is moved to pity...."

And to the realization that, "now he must hold his hand
Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks
Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown."

Seamus Heaney, the Nobel Prize winning author of this poem,

after outlining the plot puts to us the question of just what's going on—
and how we would manage if we were in the place of the monk.

“And since the whole thing's imagined anyhow,” he writes,
“Imagine being Kevin. Which is he?
Self-forgetful or in agony all the time
From the neck on out down through his hurting forearms?
Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?
Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth
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A prayer his body makes entirely
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In the weeks that I've sat with this poem,
and the legend behind it—a version of which those of you here last Sunday
hopefully recognized in the story Harriet told during the Time for All Ages—
I've wondered where St. Kevin's legendary patience and commitment came
from.

I've wondered whether anyone has the fortitude
to withstand the agony that the poet imagines
stretched from the monk's neck to his fingertips—
all to provide shelter to a delicate blackbird and her babies waiting to hatch.

Wherever the monk's strength came from to keep his arm aloft,
Heaney says it caused him to find “himself linked
Into the network of eternal life.”

The scene conjures those marvelous words from William Blake:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.¹

As I sit with these images, I wonder whether we know

¹ From William Blake's “Auguries of Innocence.”

we hold something of eternity in our own hands, even now,
whether we see the fragile beating pulse of life
that has been placed for a time upon our palms.

In the church of my childhood, we used to sing,
“He’s got the whole world, in his hands.”

It’s clear enough now that the words of that gospel hymn
could stand to be updated.

Whether you believe in an all-powerful God or not,
it’s now dauntingly evident that it is largely we
who hold the world in our hands—at least the world as we know it,
and the life it sustains.

So often in news reports about how much damage we humans are doing
to the planet, it’s said that we are destroying the earth.

That’s not exactly true. We’re not quite that powerful, just yet.

What we are destroying, of course,
are the delicate conditions that make life possible for animals of every kind,
including ourselves and the generations we hope will follow us.

That’s something for us to wrestle with in a deep way,
given that each week, as part of our covenant,
we affirm that, “we serve life.”

But do we?

Do we really live with our arms outstretched,
nurturing the living, breathing bit of life entrusted to our care?

In the past couple of years, I’ve noticed a shift in the conversation
amongst at least some environmentalists.

In the debate over climate change,
their perspective has moved from a question of “not if, but when”
to a reluctant resignation that the when is now
and that it’s highly unlikely we will ever
reverse the damage we’ve done and are doing
by radically changing our behaviour
or finding, with technology, some long-hoped-for silver bullet.

Those holding this view have been accused of giving up, though they would be the first to say that they're not in any way abandoning the cause, just looking squarely at the facts of our situation, at the intransigence of human nature, and realizing that "reduce, reuse, recycle" will never be enough to stave off the worst of what is likely to come.

The recent United Nations report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says as much.

The report that came out earlier this month makes clear the extent of human involvement in climate change.

It predicts a steady and destructive rise in temperatures and sea levels that would destabilize weather patterns and result in widespread famine, global conflicts over access to food and water, and spark the migration of millions of climate refugees around the planet.

There are, of course, arguments to be made that this show is already well underway.

The report of the IPCC makes the case that there is still time to avert complete disaster, but that that window of opportunity is rapidly closing and that it will be only the determined will of governments to enact sweeping reforms that will make the critical difference.

For those who argue that we can't afford such changes, that the cost of doing this will cost too much, the report makes clear the cost of doing nothing will cost us everything.

While we can continue, individually, to do what we can in our own lives, our efforts need to become intensely focused on our political leaders to help them and compel them to summon the will and courage to change course.

While watching a report on all of this a few days ago, rather ironically, a commercial aired during the segment, promoting the new film called "Noah"—you know, as in *The Great Flood*.

Many of the reviews of the film have noted that it's too heavy-handed in playing up the environmental themes of the biblical destruction of the Earth, though I'm not quite sure how you're supposed to make a film that plays down the fact that only one family on the whole earth is reported to have survived the ordeal.

It seems safe enough to say that it was nearly a complete washout.

But that commercial prompted me to revisit this strange story found in the early chapters of the *Book of Genesis*.

While I understand the film takes some liberties, it doesn't really require much of a leap to hear a word of warning in this ancient text about our present predicament.

Though you may think you already know the story well, let me take you through it again—highlighting some of the key passages.

I promise, it'll sound different in light of the Intergovernmental Panel's report on climate change!

Before we start, it's important to know that the *Genesis* account of the flood isn't the only one in ancient literature.

Ancient texts from around the Middle East tell similar stories, most notably the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

So, the story, this legend, begins with God having simply had it with creation. The whole thing has gone off the rails. And the God of the Hebrew Bible is known for having a bit of a temper...

The text says God was sorry to have made humankind, and ready, "to blot out from the earth the human beings I have created," along with everything else.

Fortunately, at least for Noah, who was already 600 years old, God considered him to be righteous above all others.

So God hatched a plan for Noah and his family

and a few animals of the earth to survive.

God was hoping for a do-over, a mulligan on an epic scale.

So, God tells Noah to build an enormous boat to ride out the massive storm that is to come.

In this ark, Noah is told to bring his family and **seven** pairs of all clean animals. And you always thought it was only one pair!

But there are contradictions in the text. At a couple of points, it's clear in *Genesis* that Noah is supposed to take 14 of each animal.

The story continues with God saying:
[Chapter 7:] ⁴ “For in seven days,” God says, “I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights [because any time of trial in the Bible usually lasts for forty days and forty nights]; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.” ⁵

So Noah did what he was told.

Which is a good thing, because, as promised, all hell was about to break loose.

Seven days later (though in the movie it's ten years...),
¹¹ “all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened.”

Noah and his family entered the ark with every wild and creeping thing and slammed the door shut.

[And I'm reading from the text directly here:]
¹⁷ “The flood continued forty days on the earth; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. . . .

¹⁹ The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered;
²⁰ the waters swelled above the mountains,

covering them fifteen cubits deep. ²¹

And all flesh died that moved on the earth,
birds, domestic animals, wild animals,
all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth,
and all human beings;

²² everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died.

²³ God blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground,
human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air;
they were blotted out from the earth.

Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark. ²⁴
And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days.”

Eventually, God remembered Noah and the animals
and caused a wind to blow over the earth and the rains to slowly subside.

The great spigot was at last turned off.

The ark finally came to rest, as the text tells us on the mountain peaks
of Ararat, which you'll recall is in Turkey and is where
someone, every few years or so, it seems,
is certain that they've found evidence of the one true ark.

But it takes a very long time for the water level to finally fall.
And for weeks, Noah and crew wonder whether it really ever will.

After forty days, Noah opens the window of the ark
and sends out a raven, a blackbird, if you will,
in hopes that it would find dry land.

The text says it “went to and fro
until the waters were dried up from the earth.”

Which, if you take the text at its word, was a very long time for that bird
to be just flying back and forth,
for there would be several more months before the ground was dry.

Anyway, Noah grew impatient with the raven,
so, he sent out a dove.

But the dove returned to Noah's hand,
finding no place to land, because there was still water everywhere.

Seven days later, Noah tried again, and this time,
the dove returned at evening with a fresh olive leaf in her beak.
Terra firma, at last!

A week later, Noah sent forth the dove once more and, this time,
probably having all it could stand of that smelly ark,
the dove never returned.

It still took months for all the mud to dry,
but God finally told Noah that they were good to go.

[Chapter 8:] ¹⁶“Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your
sons' wives with you. ¹⁷Bring out with you every living thing that is with you
of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing
that creeps on the earth—so that they may abound on the earth,
and be fruitful and multiply...” ¹⁸

Then Noah built a big altar to God and sacrificed one of every animal—
which, again, argues that there had to be more than two of each...

In response God made the following promise, or covenant, with Noah:

“I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, ...
nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.
²²As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”

God went on to promise that never again would all life be cut off
by flood waters and never again would a flood destroy the earth.

God sealed the deal with a rainbow in the sky and promised
that it would forever be a sign of this covenant.

We need not believe this story to be literally true
to see that if anyone has failed to keep the covenant, it is we.

We live in a time when people are building their boats,
and suggesting we might well want to build our own,
to ride out the epic storm that is brewing.

It's tempting to dismiss it as alarmist, apocalyptic thinking.
That seems to be what Noah's neighbours thought.
You have to wonder how differently the people of that time
would have responded if they knew
they had the power to turn back the flood
by putting immense pressure on the politicians of their day.

You have to wonder how differently we, in our time, will respond,
given what we know.

Will we stand, like St. Kevin, with arms outstretched
to nurture and nourish and protect the life placed on our palms?

Or will we—or our descendents—
stand on the prow of some enormous lifeboat like Noah,
desperately hoping that a dove will return with some shred of evidence
that the great dance of life will, indeed, go on?

As our children reminded us this morning:
“We are Unitarian Universalists,
with minds that think, hearts that love, and hands that serve.
We take care of the earth and each other.”

It's in our hands, as it always has been.

May we, like Kevin, stand strong,
and take our place in the sacred network of eternal life.

Amen.

Benediction

Spirit and force of life,
take our sunken eyes, that we might learn to see.

Take our broken wings, that we might learn fly.

Into a future held in covenant with all of Life.

Blessed Be.