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Sermon: Centering Down and Looking Up
July 7, 2024
Exodus 20:8-11

On my summer reading pile this season was an historical novel called, *West with Giraffes*. It is an epic read by author Lyn Rutledge. It takes place in 1938, a time similar to our own, when many hurricanes were swirling at once.

Our country was still reeling from the brutal impact of the Great Depression. Along with that was the devastation of the Dust Bowl that spanned 17 states across the Great Plains plunging tens of thousands into poverty and displacement. In his book from that time, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, wrote "... the dispossessed were drawn west-families, tribes, dusted out, tracted out. Car-loads, caravans, homeless and hungry..."

Also, in 1938, beyond our borders, Hitler was gaining power in Europe and the rise of authoritarian rule was spreading. Hitler was named *Time Magazine's* "Man of the Year" because he was "the greatest threatening force that the democratic, freedom-loving world faces today."

Add to those tremors, and in September of '38, a once in a century hurricane destroyed much of New England and took over 700 lives. In the midst of this Category 5 hurricane, two giraffes washed up on shore in Brooklyn. Alive! They'd traveled over 3,000 miles on the S.S.

Robin Goodfellow (a steam merchant vessel that was later destroyed by Hitler in '44). They were bound for the San Diego Zoo! It's at this point that the historical novel I read begins...*West with Giraffes* covers the legendary journey of transporting these magnificent creatures across the country to the San Diego Zoo.

You have to read the story yourself to experience the beautiful writing and wild ride; however, the primary characters of the book were these two beloved giraffes. They were driven across the country via caravan stopping in local towns and campgrounds. Wherever their caretakers stopped, folks were mesmerized. News clippings across the country detailed the surprise and joy of a beleaguered nation at the sight of these mammals. Wonder softened every heart as the giraffes lifted up their long necks to take in the view and munch on leafy trees overhead.

The "Peace of wild things" as the poet says, reigned for the moment as neighbors stood in awe. And their wild gentleness created impromptu communities wherever they went. They were a gospel of inspiration. (I just learned of how a church member, Julie Martel as a little girl, remembers her mother recounting the story of reading about the giraffes' progress each day in the newspaper and how sad she was when they reached their destination in San Diego and the articles stopped!)

Over the past month, those giraffes and their remarkable story have stayed with me. Given the earth shattering Supreme Court decision of last week on top of ongoing threats to our democracy, many of us are shaken to the core. As people of faith in pursuit of a just world for all, these court decisions are disheartening and alarming.

It feels like we're in another season like the one of 1938 of unrelenting hurricanes. This is hard, really hard. How do we ground ourselves with all of these competing anxieties grabbing for our energy and attention? Where might we find our "giraffes", those experiences of wonder and peace that can ground us through these storms?

How can we rest a while so our souls can catch up with us?

This practice is an essential one for us...to love the world beyond its exhausting and depressing dramas. The great mystic and theologian Howard Thurman counseled many on the need for contemplative grounding, what he called "Centering Down". He wrote at the time in the 50's that "we had made a fetish of fevered

action.” This contemplative practice has many names, whether you know it as vacation time, sabbath rest, or as the psalmist wrote, letting “deep call to deep”. Thurman described the art of making time for quiet in his essay,

“How good it is to center down! (printed below)
To sit quietly and see one’s self pass by!
The streets of our minds seethe with endless traffic;
Our spirits resound with clashings, with noisy silences,
While something deep within hungers and thirsts for the still
moment and the resting lull....
As we listen, floating up through all the jangling echoes
of our turbulence, there is a sound of another kind—
A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart
makes clear...
It moves directly to the core of our being... Our spirits refreshed,
and we move back into the traffic of our daily round
With the peace of the Eternal in our step.
How good it is to center down!

Like all great wisdom figures, Thurman knew that cultivating inner stillness allows us to experience deep rest and divine Presence. Touching into that “deeper note”, the peace of the Eternal, is ... From the book of Exodus, in our scripture today, we hear the call- actually the command- to create a regular practice of sabbath rest.

Two things are needed in the art of centering down: Making it a regular habit of the heart, And leaving the din of the world for a while. Something Jesus modeled often as he sought a quiet lonely place from the crowds. I have a dear friend who practices contemplative quiet or centering prayer, for 20 minutes in the morning and twenty minutes at night.

Maybe for you, “centering down” can be found taking in the expansive beauty of walking on the beach at sunset

Or time alone each day watering the geraniums and hydrangeas in the garden. Or sharing in a regular practice on Sunday nights meditating in a circle for 30 minutes.

Or time for quiet prayer and writing practice every morning. Or a long jog through the woods. Or kneading dough and baking a loaf for dinner.

Whatever the activity or ritual is...may it be one of solitude and stillness in it
And may the regularity center your spirit and mine
In God
In wonder
In beauty.
In quiet.

In Whatever words you use,
In this way, the “good soil” of our hearts is fertilized and watered so that new life may grow....
And we can resume our life in the world again in the “traffic of our daily round”.

Writing from the farmlands of Kentucky, Wendell Berry wrote,

“On summer evenings we sat in the yard, the house dark, the stars bright overhead. The lap and arms of the old held the young. As we talked we knew by the dark distances of Heaven’s lights our smallness, and the greatness of our love.”

Summer stillness can reveal many quiet gifts and keep the world at bay. I wish for that centering down time for each of you this summer. Perhaps a chance to build a regular practice of stillness and quiet a sacred space for those giraffes to lighten your heart and mine as they pass by...

While our souls catch up with us and “heavens lights” can remind us of the greatness of our love within and all around us.

How Good to Center Down!

How good it is to center down!

To sit quietly and see one’s self pass by!

The streets of our minds seethe with endless traffic;

Our spirits resound with clashing, with noisy silences,

While something deep within hungers and thirsts for the still moment and the resting lull.

With full intensity we seek, ere the quiet passes, a fresh sense of order in our living;

A direction, a strong sure purpose that will structure our confusion and bring meaning in our chaos.

We look at ourselves in this waiting moment – the kinds of people we are.

The questions persist: what are we doing with our lives? –

what are the motives that order our days?

What is the end of our doings?

Where are we trying to go?

Where do we put the emphasis and where are our values focused?

For what end do we make sacrifices?

Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?

What do I hate most in life and to what am I true?

Over and over the questions beat in upon the waiting moment.

As we listen, floating up through all the jangling echoes of our turbulence,
there is a sound of another kind –

A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.

It moves directly to the core of our being.

Our questions are answered,

Our spirits refreshed, and we move back into the traffic of our daily round

With the peace of the Eternal in our step.

How good it is to center down!

From *Meditations of the Heart* by Howard Thurman (1953)