

What if Beauty is What's Left?

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Numbers 11:4-6, 10-15, 16-18a
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“What if beauty is what’s left when all the illusions are stripped away?” -Mark Nepo

In my mind, the Book of Exodus could easily be called by another name, one that Maurice Sendak made famous with his children’s book, “Where the Wild Things Are”. As anyone who is wading through Bible Study Exodus with us, the journey the Israelites take to freedom is a wild and wandering one. It’s filled with all kinds of mishaps and mayhem, crazy signs of GOD’s presence and plenty of challenges and complaints.

One of my favorite stories from our reading from the Book of Exodus has a parallel passage today found in the book of Numbers (which we just heard).

Poor Moses- at this point, he is weary! He’s had enough of the Israelites’ wailing and gnashing of teeth. Moses is up to HERE with the people’s complaints and God’s lack of attention. Now, all they can say is, “We always had meat in Egypt???”

Sometimes it's the little niggly things that put you over the edge.

Where the heck are you, God, Moses wails.
How can I possibly carry this all?
You got me into this mess and then you have the gall to disappear?

You gave birth to them , not me- so why am I stuck with their whining????
I love how Moses does not hold back. He’s pissed!
Have you ever had one of those days?

No one picks up after themselves, no one thinks to empty the dishwasher so there might be a clean dish to set the table with...
Do you all think the food is just going to magically appear on your plates? Underwear in your drawer? Clean socks for your feet.

“DO I have to do EVERYTHING?????”

“Is anybody LISTENING?????”

Some days are like that, aren't they? At least at my house.

As Moses discovered, God **was** listening after all and sends 70 Elders who are meant to help him bear the burden of leadership (v.18) He need not shoulder the weight of the whole community alone. Leadership is meant to be shared.

Given the havoc going on in our country, it feels as if we, too, are living in a version of Where the Wild Things Are. Every day there's another chunk of democracy being dismantled. The monsters are prevailing, "roaring their terrible roars and gnashing their terrible teeth..." "they rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws..."

We are living in a time of wilderness:

The tearing down of our revered institutions

The mockery being made of the Constitution

The destruction of international relations, international students being targeted. food grants eliminated

Science and education on the chopping block.

It's beyond depressing.

And easy to feel paralyzed by each onslaught. What can water our weary souls?

A wonderful story from Toni Morrison came to mind:

She was despairing of the world herself one day and felt unable to write. and She complains to a writer friend who admonishes her...

"No! No, no, no! This is precisely the time when artists go to work... not when everything is fine, but in times of dread. That's our job... There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal."

Ah, that is how we heal and shore up together and keep at it.

We have each other.

We can seek out beauty.

I recently finished the charming memoir called, *All the Beauty in the World* by Patrick Bringley. In it, the author chronicles his decade working as a security guard at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Bringley is grieving the death of his beloved older brother, Tom, from cancer and just wants to stand still and be surrounded by beauty. He becomes a watchman of humanity and the world's ART.

It's an incredible journey he tells

As one of 500 guards that work there, Bringley writes, "On a typical day, it is easy to glance at strangers and forget the most fundamental things about them: that they're just as real as you are; that they've triumphed and suffered; that like you they're engaged in something that is hard and rich and brief."

His companions become the Old Masters and from Bruegel to Michelangelo. Getting to know them, and his fellow co-workers, he learns to live again.

Standing for hours and looking at a painting of the Pieta, Bringley wrote, "A graceful, broken body, it reminds us again of the obvious: that we're mortal, that we suffer, that bravery in suffering is beautiful, that loss inspires love and lamentation. This part of the painting performs the work of sacred art, putting us in direct touch with something we know intimately yet remains beyond our comprehension."

Bringley seems to have discovered the key to grieving and healing. That one need not do it alone. And the beauty of a Van Gogh Iris is made for any broken heart (see bulletin cover)

All the beauty in the world can help us to go back out through the doors and face the world's wilderness again.

Next Friday, May 30th is the 5th and final Installation of the Witness Stones in our town. As most of you know, 5 years ago, following the murder of George Floyd and nationwide protests supporting Black Lives Matter, a group of community partners joined together to bear witness to the hard history of enslavement right here in historic Old Lyme. ... We modeled the project after the work of a retired teacher in Guilford, Dennis Culliton, and now the Witness Stones, Old Lyme will honor 12 more individuals this year for a total of 60 plaques having been laid throughout our community over these years.

Thanks to collaboration with our founding partners including our church, the Phoebe Griffin Noyes Library, the Florence Griswold Museum and the Lyme Old Lyme Schools.

Our co-chair and historian, Carolyn Wakeman, has done extraordinary research helping us all to excavate the facts of our history so that we might honor and dignify those whose lives had been

erased. Thanks to Carolyn, we know that between 1670 and 1826 at least 300 enslaved and indentured African Americans and Native Americans labored in the historic town of Lyme.

We now know the names of 60 of these individuals and remembering them, reckoning with our town's painful "hidden" history, helps us to move forward in truth and with dignity for those we honor. We hope you will join us!

The work of re-membering and excavating the truth of history is a work of labor and art, memory and freedom. As James Baldwin said, "The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do." (James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction*, 1948-1985)

As Moses discovered, God was listening after all. After Moses had railed against God, God heard his pleas and sent him plenty of people to "bear the burden". A whole congregation in fact! On the edge of burnout, Moses received a blessing; reminders of the many who would join him in sharing leadership "so that you will not bear it all by yourself."

I applaud Moses for speaking up. Clearly, the way he had been leading wasn't working. He needed to be reminded that he wasn't alone and that the ministry of leadership is meant to be shared. God says, "Gather" yourselves together and "consecrate" yourselves for tomorrow. (v.18a)

In that spirit, as we remember this Memorial Day weekend and those who have served in the military and sacrificed their lives, I ask anyone who has been in the service or is remembering a loved one who has...to please stand now (and remain standing) .

Thank you.

And those who serve or have served in education (at any levels, schools through universities) as teachers, teacher assistants, administrators, volunteers, PTO boards to please stand and remain standing.

Thank you.

And those who serve or have served in the law and in medicine, as lawyers, doctors , nurses and first responders , caregivers judges advocates, legal aides, office workers, court officers...

Or served in the business community or owned a small business and have given back to your community in countless ways...please stand and remain standing.

Thank you.

And those who serve as artists, musicians, singers, writers, poets and potters, builders, architects please stand and remain standing.

Thank you,

And those who serve here at our church as volunteers at the Food Pantry yesterday and serve on boards or are active in the many ministries and partnerships of our church, please stand and remain standing.

Now, I invite anyone else who is here today in worship today, supporting FCCOL to stand and now, as we can see we all serve in some very vital ways so let us take a look around at all of these beloved faces and strong shoulders with whom we shared the load.

Turn to someone near you and say “thank you” and “I bless you.”
“Thank you” and “I bless you.”

In so doing, we consecrate ourselves for tomorrow’s journeys. We bless one another and remember that we do it in good company!

Amen!