

REFLECTIONS FOR THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME ~ 18 June 2023

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

In this “ordinary time,” we find extraordinarily profound readings in today’s Liturgy of the Word. Let us explore three themes that are threaded throughout these readings: “I bore you on eagles’ wings” (Ex 19:4), “Make a joyful noise to the Lord all the earth” (Ps 100:1), and “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them” (Matt 9:36).

“I bore you on eagles’ wings” – these words in the book of Exodus come to the people soon after they have left the oppression of Egypt and now find themselves, uncertain and anxious, in the wilderness. The reading is crystal clear about the time (the third month after they left Egypt) and the place (the wilderness of Sinai, just after they left Rephidim, camped in front of the mountain).



As we become more conscious of ecological reading of scripture, time and place matter. The Jewish Midrash tells us that the wilderness is “ownerless.” It is a place to start over. Deanne Stillman says of desert living, “Who hasn’t just wanted to get away and start over? In the desert, you can do that every day. . . The desert does not care who you are or what you do. . . You get down to what counts very fast; in the land of mirage, the desert is a very honest place.” The wilderness or desert is a place of new opportunity, equality and starting afresh. But where do we find the courage, the energy, the trust to start afresh?

God calls Moses to the mountain (again note the place and its meaning) and carefully gives the answer to this question. We can have courage, energy, and trust because, “You have seen . . . how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself” (Ex 19:4). God then presents the covenant which God wishes to make with the people who will become “my treasured possession out of all the peoples” (Ex 19:5). God is choosing this people not to dominate them but to value them, to hold them as precious, to guard them as the mother eagle guards her young. Is it not interesting that God looks to an other-than-human being, an eagle, to find one who images God best!

God brings all humans and all other-than-humans to Godself, “I brought you to myself. . . Indeed, all the Earth is mine” (Ex 19:5). God gives us the respect and the freedom to make our own choice in accepting or refusing this invitation. To choose to accept means obeying God’s voice and keeping God’s covenant. Obeying God’s voice means listening deeply to the whispers in which God speaks. Hildegard of Bingen integrates the image of God as eagle with the whispers of God in this beautiful prayer:

You soar, sustain, and stir,
climb, dive, and sing
Your way through this world,
giving life to every beating heart.
You never end. You keep circling,
crossing over us on three wings—
one speeds through heaven,
one holds the earth together with a kiss as light as dew,
and one whispers over, under, and through our lives.
We praise You, Wisdom.



Being carried on eagles' wings has special meaning today as we celebrate Father's Day. For most of us, although sadly not all of us, our fathers carried or carry us gently yet firmly through our lives. We delight in knowing that Jesus came to understand what it means to call God "Father" from his life with his earthly father Joseph. Pope Francis said in his apostolic letter, *Patris Corde*, when he proclaimed Joseph as patron of the Universal Church, "I like to think that it was from Saint Joseph that Jesus drew inspiration for the parable of the prodigal son and the merciful father" (PC #4). This poem by an anonymous writer describes simply the gifts of a good father:

God took the strength of a mountain,
The majesty of a tree,
The warmth of a summer sun,
The calm of a quiet sea,
The generous soul of nature,
The comforting arm of night,
The wisdom of the ages,
The power of the eagle's flight,
The joy of a morning in spring,
The faith of a mustard seed,
The patience of eternity,
The depth of a family need,
Then God combined these qualities,
When there was nothing more to add,
God knew the masterpiece was complete,
And so, God called it ... Dad!



Love's Bond, Timothy Schmalz

As you bring to mind your father today in a special way, remember how he lived or lives each one of these qualities. May your father and all our fathers be blessed with God's abundant love.

"Make a joyful noise to the Lord all the earth" (Ps 100:1) – the psalmist's response to God's whispers is to make a joyful noise to the One described in these words, "Know that the Lord is God. It is God who made us, and we are God's; we are God's people, and the sheep of God's pasture" (Ps 100:3). The psalmist finds the image of God in the shepherd, the one human being closest to Earth, the one who smells of sheep! And all Earth is called to make joyful noise in praise of this God who creates and sustains us. Psalm 96 echoes this same theme, "O sing to the Lord, a new song! Sing to the Lord, all the Earth. . . Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy" (Ps 96:1, 11-12).

The pastor poet, Roddy Hamilton, describes that "joyful noise" in these words:

In the cracking of dawn,
And the stirring of light;
In the sparkling of dew,
And the rising of the sun;
In the singing of birds,
And the dancing of trees;
We join the chorus
Of arrival, of promise, of belief:
A resurrection chorus.



What are the joyful noises that you hear every day, rejoicing and exulting in God's presence: a little baby laughing, a kitten meowing, the wind blowing through the trees, the rain gently dancing on the windowpane, the father reading a book to his little daughter, the waves curling over as they reach the land, the waterfall dashing over the rocks, the northern lights crackling, the mother alpaca humming to her baby *cria*, the robin whistling a merry tune, the young boy strumming his guitar, the elderly woman saying her rosary. In this past week alone, in what joyfully noisy ways did you rejoice and exult in God's presence? In what joyfully noisy ways did you hear others (human and other-than-human) rejoice and exult in God's presence?



“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them” (Matt 9:36) – Elaine Wainwright rsm says, “The poignancy and urgency of Jesus’ recognition of the need for healing among the people is captured in the phrase in Mt 9:36: he had compassion for them. The Greek verb used, *splangnizomai*, means “to be moved in the depths of one’s being, one’s gut, one’s entrails”. It is a powerful expression which captures the urgency of the need for transformation. Jesus sees with a loving eye that the people are ‘harassed and helpless’” (Mt 9:36). Veronica Lawson rsm continues this same thought, “It [compassion] implies a physical reaction in the face of suffering. It translates the Hebrew *rah̄am*, to have ‘womb compassion’. Like the Greek, its Hebrew antecedent has elements of deeply experienced emotion expressed in action to alleviate suffering. Compassion, womb love, gut love, parental love and pity all communicate something of the meaning of this concept.”

Matthew not only shows Jesus’ compassion in response to those who are “harassed and helpless.” He shows Jesus connecting healing to discipleship, “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest” (Matt 9:37-38). At the beginning, Jesus summons twelve male disciples and gives them “authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness” (Matt 10:1).



He says that they are to go only to the house of Israel, not to the Gentiles or even the Samaritans. We know that later in his ministry, Jesus broadens his own vision and commissioning as he includes women among the disciples and personally brings the good news to Samaritans (remember the Samaritan woman of John 4:4-42, the first disciple to other than Jewish people) and to the Gentiles (remember the Canaanite and, therefore, Gentile woman of Matt 15:21-28 whom Jesus praises for her great faith).

Elaine Wainwright rsm shows that this vision extends beyond humans when Jesus speaks of the “kingdom of heaven” (Matt 10:7). The signs of the coming of that kingdom of heaven are curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers, and casting out demons. She says:

The Matthean phraseology, *hē basileia tōn ouranōn*/the kingdom of the heavens or sky, is unique in the New Testament and intertextually. It brings together the material and spatial term, the *ouranōn*/the heavens or sky with *hē basileia*, the socio-political designator evoking power or empire. Contemporary readers understand the *ouranōn*/the heavens or sky, as the night sky filled with stars, planets and galaxies, what we know now of the universe in all its complexities and beauty. What did it mean for Jesus to infuse the

multiple aspects of the oppressive empire with the image of the *ouranōn*, the other-than-human heavens? It offered the oppressed people of Galilee the potential for a new imagination at the time of the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. They were being invited to imagine anew, to bring together images, metaphors and experiences that would enable them to dream of and also to enact an alternative to the *basileia* of Rome. Similarly today, we are invited to allow the imagery of this central proclamation of Matthew's Gospel to evoke new ways of listening. We are called to be attentive to our *ouranōn*, our heavens (and our Earth). The heavens cannot be just metaphors functioning in a human world. We must befriend, engage with, care for and love the heavens, the Earth, and all the materiality that constitutes them in the new universe that is emerging and to which this gospel calls us.



Having hearts filled with compassion means reaching out to all those in need. It means hearing and living the words from Jesus later in Matthew's Gospel: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matt 25:35-36). And today we add, "I was Earth broken and abused and you cared for me."

When I was a student in Scripture at the University of Notre Dame in the late 1970s, we had a gathering to celebrate July 4. One of the former students came to the party, and he sang a new hymn that he had just written, his way of proclaiming a joyful noise in the presence of God. That former student's name was Michael Joncas. This is the hymn he sang for us that evening:

You who dwell in the shelter of the Lord
 Who abide in His shadow for life
 Say to the Lord, "My refuge, my rock in whom I trust!"
Refrain: And He will raise you up on eagles' wings
 Bear you on the breath of dawn
 Make you to shine like the sun
 And hold you in the palm of His hand
 The snare of the fowler will never capture you
 And famine will bring you no fear
 Under His wings your refuge, His faithfulness your shield



Always listen deeply to the joyful noises around you. You will be constantly amazed at how special and how lovely and how blessed these joyful noises will be!

