

Luck - 2008.Feb.03

Opening Words

We are here
at the beginning of the week
to celebrate the wonder that we live
with song and word and silence.
Claiming with gratitude the fortune of this day,
we begin our time together by saying:

Mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we have kindled this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.

Sequence

The horizon in the East was invisible on Friday night, eclipsed by bungalows and a blur of bare tree branches, and large snowflakes doing high-wire acts under the dark tent of the sky.

The golden light from the South fell slant through the windows of my office this week, turning my library into an ark of the covenant, gilding the edges of each book until they resembled scripture scrolls, but some of them with words in them written long before Jesus wept.

The sun in the West was red this week in anticipation of Chinese New Year.
The Milky Way will soon turn into a dragon
as the stars parade down the lanes of heaven,
and the moon will turn into a bowl full of fish.

The sky in the North was thick with stars
at midnight, their slow light reaching us
often more than a thousand years after it left them, their radiance leaping forth back when the wisdom teacher Rabi'a was making her wisecracks about God here on earth.
This room too is filled with stardust and light
and the past and sorrow and joy. And linking
them all together: this breathing, this silence.

silence

East, South, West, North: those we love
are around us in every direction.
Mind, heart, memory and hope,
those we love are within us at every moment.
Here let the human spirit, gathered in this room, restore themselves with
remembrance and thanksgiving,
naming aloud or inside those we find ourselves turning to the most this week.

naming

What good fortune that we are here, now,
in this place, in this minute, blessed with
breath, blessed with community, blessed with the possibility of joy and blessed with music!

***The First Reading** this morning is a folk tale that existed orally for several centuries until a folktale collector named Attar wrote down one version, namely this one. The woman, about whom this story and so many were written, remains probably the single most cherished woman in the Islamic Sufi tradition. She lived in the 700s, not really a very long time after Islam's initial development.*

One day Rabi'a and her serving-girl were getting ready to break a fast of several days. The serving-girl needed an onion and was about to go next door and borrow one, but Rabi'a said: "Forty years ago I vowed never to ask for anything from anyone but God—we can do without onions in our meal today."

Just then a bird flew over the courtyard kitchen, and dropped an onion into Rabi'a's frying pan, already peeled, sliced and ready to fry.

"Interesting, but not convincing," she said. "Am I supposed to believe that God is an onion-vender? I mean, really." So that day they fried their bread without onions.

***The Second Reading** is a beautiful piece by Edward Hirsch, a beloved American poet, from the 2003 edition of his work. It's called In Spite of Everything, the Stars*

Like a stunned piano, like a bucket
of fresh milk flung into the air
or a dozen fists of confetti
thrown hard at a bride
stepping down from the altar,
the stars surprise the sky.
Think of dazed stones
floating overhead, or an ocean
of starfish hung up to dry. Yes,
like a conductor's expectant arm
about to lift toward the chorus,
or a juggler's plates defying gravity,
or a hundred fastballs fired at once
and freezing in midair, the stars
startle the sky over the city.

And that's why drunks leaning up
against abandoned buildings, women
hurrying home on deserted side streets,
policemen turning blind corners, and
even thieves stepping from alleys
all stare up at once. Why else do

sleepwalkers move toward the windows,
or old men drag flimsy lawn chairs
onto fire escapes, or hardened criminals
press sad foreheads to steel bars?
Because the night is alive with lamps!
That's why in dark houses all over the city
dreams stir in the pillows, a million
plumes of breath rise into the sky.

Sermon

Friends who have known me a long time often remind me that I've developed the habit of repeating certain phrases over and over, almost like mantras. Personal proverbs, you might call them. I weave these phrases into rituals I conduct. I spike many of my conversations with a sample or two. I pepper my emails with them.

The first of them is usually some version of "Thanks for being exactly who you are and no one else."

The second one is a version or another of this prayer: "I'm not asking for anyone to come and whisk away my troubles, only that Love thrives in me while I face them."

But the third phrase often surprises even me when I say it. "I'm the luckiest person I know."

Usually when I say it, I'm expressing the still completely hard-to-believe fact that I have been lucky enough to travel to over twelve countries in this world, and all of the trips but one were gifts or grants of some sort. I can still reel when I think of it. Why? Because I grew up never thinking I would travel anywhere. Working class family. Plane flights were out of the question. When I began my ministry in 1979, my salary was ten grand a year. You just don't imagine flying on Air France over to Paris with those limited resources.

But nevertheless, I am so lucky, I've been many places, and had extraordinary experiences in every country I've visited.

But I also say I'm lucky because I feel that, throughout my life, I have always chanced to stumble upon, discover, or engage with the most amazing people, outside of congregations like this one, and within it too, artists, poets, athletes, scholars, lovers, singers, parents, children, families. I am talking about people who elicit my wonder and my awe even more than my beloved stars at night, and some of you know how much I love the stars and am blown away by them.

Now when I say this, I am also aware that in the 1980s and 1990s, I conducted dozens and dozens of funerals each year for many years in a row, funerals of people I loved or at least admired deeply. Lots of reasons: HIV, sure, but other illness too, and accidents and

even suicide. I embraced their wailing parents or spouses, I scattered their ashes over the hills, I wept on the floor for hours in a fetal position, and wrestled with deep depression entirely suitable to the cause of it. And despite all that, I still feel lucky.

It's been an interesting week, looking at luck. Looking at chance. Looking at how the colloquial concepts of good luck and bad luck seem to get caught up with self-worth and self-loathing, with self-evaluation. Looking at how some folks are addicted to luck-based rituals, like gambling or Lotto. Looking at how some folks really believe in the grace, mercy and clemency of Luck, capital L, in the exact same way that some people believe in the grace, the mercy, the clemency of an all-powerful God, capital G.

And I have also encountered people who cast a critical eye at the whole issue. Who say luck is just an illusion, a ridiculous concept. Like Joyce Carol Oates, who thinks that people who believe in luck are just plain cynical. I also found a nifty sentence attributed to Franklin Delano Roosevelt (but nowhere could I find the actual source, nor, in fact, I discovered, can any one else, so I don't know if he really said this; and frankly, it sounds more like Mark Twain to me!). It's this: *I think we consider too much the good luck of the early bird and not enough the bad luck of the early worm.*

I laughed when I read that quip, especially since, as a night person, I haven't literally seen either an early bird or an early worm in thirty years.

But this anonymous anti-proverb is not just funny, it's insightful. "The early bird catches the worm," goes the proverb that echoes in most of our heads, I'd wager. It's an invitation to get up early, work hard so you can *make* your own fate, your own life, your own luck. Stop waiting around for good luck to descend, the proverb preaches. You are your own luck.

But, some folks can get up as early as they want and they still don't have work, let alone a worm. In a society where, as I said two weeks ago, there are structures in place that keep some people from the table, it's pretty arrogant to quote proverbs about birds and worms when there are children crying in hunger who did not choose their luck. Sure, good hard work is important. But I have plenty of friends who are out of work right now, and have been for some time, try as they might to find work. They get up early to look for work and make good presentations of themselves, but no worm and no work.

So the idea of luck is not just something personal, but it has social dimensions. I wonder. If you are black or Asian or Latino in a decidedly white culture, do you feel *lucky* to be a person of color? If you are gay in a heterosexual culture, do you feel fortunate to have been born gay? If you are a Jew or a Muslim or a Unitarian Universalist in an Evangelical, Protestant and Catholic culture, do you feel lucky to be a Jew or a Muslim or Unitarian Universalist? Fortunate? Blessed, some would say?

Actually, I myself do fall into a couple of those categories, and I *do* feel lucky. My various identities feel like gifts to me, sort of like my unexpected travels.

I didn't always feel that way, of course...the larger world can really do a number on us, and often does. It certainly did a number on me. But over time, when I started to push away the larger world's expectations for me and develop some expectations for myself, I began to realize that who I am is who I am, and if some folks don't like that, that doesn't make me terrible. Or them terrible, for that matter.

I've heard the word luck used this week like it's the most useful word in English. "I'm lucky in the genetics department," voiced my friend out West. "I'm just lucky in love," voiced another and happily long married, friend out East. "You bet I'm lucky. I didn't get killed in Vietnam," voiced a third friend down South. Note that the word "lucky" all by itself usually refers only to good luck, not bad luck. Or as one pundit would have it: "Your lucky rabbit's foot may work well for you, but it sure wasn't a lucky day for that rabbit, now was it?"

But more surprising than anything else, I discovered that luck seems to be a theological issue. An issue that has to do with questions of ultimacy, questions of control, power and identity.

And people have been wrestling with this theological issue for five thousand years, it seems to me, when I look at the literature, culture and art of the world. The Kethuvim, or Wisdom books in the Hebrew Scriptures, are a case in point. The famous book of Job is about fortune being granted, and then fortune being yanked away, as a test to Job's identity as a good person. "I'm a good guy," he protests to his friends. "No, you can't be," they sneer. "You've lost everything. You are too unlucky to be good. Someone's out to get you good." You may try and remind me, if you know the book, that it's God, not luck, who is throwing Job a curve. But remember what I affirmed earlier. It seems to me that people who talk about luck use the exact same language about luck as others do about God. Luck, like God, is sovereign. Controls this world. Is omnipotent, since you cannot get out of the way of bad luck if it's coming to get you.

The 2400-year-old book of Qoheleth, also in the Kethuvim, suggests that even if you get up as early as you can, you don't always get the worm. *"Once more I observed under the sun that the race does not always belong to the swift, nor the battle to the powerful; nor is there bread for the smart, nor wealth for the clever, but time and chance carry us all along."*

But what is a good example of bad luck? An illness? On the Fourth of July in 1939, Lou Gehrig spoke to a filled Yankee Stadium after being diagnosed with a painful and frightening disease, now named after him. And what did he say that day? "I am the luckiest man alive right now!" Does a lot of illnesses in a row equal bad luck then? An accident? How about this. On November 30, 1954, a woman named Elizabeth Ann Hodges was in her home in a small town in Alabama, when she was hit by a shooting star, meteorite. Weighing over 8 lbs, it crashed through (and was apparently slowed by) her roof, bounced off some furniture and hit her hand and hip, bruising her enough for her to spend time in a hospital. It's the only well-authenticated example of a meteorite hitting anyone. But does such an utterly unique and painful event mean that poor Mrs. Hodges

must be the unluckiest person who ever lived? Or is she, in fact, the luckiest, because she lived to tell about it?

How about good luck? What does that look like? In the terribly clever story of Rabi'a, a bird drops an already peeled and sliced onion into her frying pan when she needed one. "Interesting but not convincing," is her response. "Am I supposed to believe that God is an onion-vender? I mean, really." And she refuses to keep the onion of her good luck, dropping from a bird, and goes ahead and eats her lunch without the onions. Why? Because she clearly does not want to think of ultimacy as some sort of fickle gift-giver, who graces some folks with amazing luck and damns others. She doesn't want God to be Luck, or Luck to be God. She doesn't want chance to determine her character, or luck to create her ethical life.

This is a wise understanding, I think. Let me move this wise idea from legend to real life. I am thinking about my friend David. He was once a student I was teaching at my old seminary in Berkeley. I was teaching the gospels. David came to me one day after class with an amazing announcement of good luck. Somehow (and I really don't remember the exact mechanism for this...sorry), he was suddenly possessed of about 25 good tickets to a *Grateful Dead Concert* which was going to be taking place at a way-too-small venue in Oakland, the city right next to Berkeley. He rightly calculated that he could easily have sold each of these tickets for what? three, five, ten times their worth, which, you can figure out, would be a LOT of good money for a poor seminary student. Good luck indeed!

But, David had been reading the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, about sharing the wealth, and spreading good luck and scattering your fortune like seed in the furrows. And he was moved by the teachings of Jesus as he understood them. And so, after giving it a lot of thought, he shared his luck, and gave every single one of his lucky tickets away to those who wanted them. Gratis. Gift. Free.

The most popular, and thus, *questionable* way of looking at luck, at circumstance, at fate, at chance, call it what you will, is that it appears random, yes, but that it's meaningful. It means something if you have good luck all the time. You either bring it on yourself, or you are loved by God. And it means something if you have bad luck all the time. You are too lazy to get lucky (as in our story this morning), or your Karma must be bad...i.e. you were a Nazi in your last life. Your spiritual character is in question. Worse, people start trotting out my *least* favorite word in English, to wit "deserve." And as soon as folks start hurling the word "deserve" around, the story in the Book of Job is acted out over and over again by people who are disturbed by the reality that no one controls anything, really, and that it's spiritual bankruptcy to affirm that good luck means blessing and bad luck means curse. "You *must* have done something!"

Me, I get accused of being irreligious all the time, because I talk about how the idea of chance comforts me instead of upsets me. Oh, it used to upset me. But now, instead of saying, "Why is this happening to me?" when what is normally called bad luck happens" to me, I ask instead, "Why not me?" All of my friends who died of HIV-related illness

fifteen years ago eventually came to this position, and I sit at their feet still, holding their wise hands and learning from their remarkable freedom that the only gift is the present moment, the only real good luck to take the next breath, the only real bad luck to *refuse* that grace and wisdom because you are cynical enough to wait for a special favor from Fate to descend just for you...because you “deserve” it.

Which brings me to Hirsch’s poem about the stars. *In spite of everything, the stars!* he writes. In spite of what? In spite of the fact that some of us are behind bars, some of us are about to commit a crime, some of us are hard workers and wealthy, some of us are hard workers and poor, we are all living, as it were, surrounded by the infinite stars. No matter what our fortune or misfortune, says the poet, we all look up, we are all astounded that they are there, like drops of milk splashed into the sky. And the stars themselves are there because of good luck that is for all that live on earth. For as cosmologists have slowly begun to understand, the fabric of the universe is fragile, peculiarly balanced and just right for life. The way the atoms and molecules work together happens only because of the luck that the universe unfolded from its beginning 13.7 billion years ago in precisely this way and none other. There were many possible ways it *could* have unfolded after the so-called Big Bang, but it unfolded this way. (It’s the delicate precision of the forces in this, our universe, which has some cosmologists arguing for something called “a multiverse”...implying that for this universe to teem with life, there must be others which can have no life. These ideas about precision are also what gets some other folks cramming themselves into that Trojan Horse of Creationism, the Intelligent Design theory, saying that they simply cannot believe in chance or luck and that there must have been a Designer to establish things just so. To which the atheist Dawkins replies, “Then who designed the designer?”)

Me, I’m perfectly satisfied to leave all the theological fisticuffs aside, even if I do have to decry some of the sheer passive aggressive deceitfulness on the part of some of the Designer proponents. I am comforted and blest and happy to simply affirm that we’re all lucky, mighty fortunate to be alive on this thin skin of the planet earth. I am blest that we didn’t get up early in the morning to make it happen, we just opened our eyes, and there it was, with some of the night’s gorgeous stars still shining overhead, “like a hundred fastballs fired at once and freezing in midair.” I’m blest that you and I can then get up, come here, be looking at each other in this amazing room.

Yes, my observant friends are right. I *do* often affirm that “I’m the luckiest person I know.” And it’s true.

Except, of course, for each one of you.

Offering

Our strength is a common strength.
Our joy is a shared joy.
Our responsibilities are joined together.
We give of our hours to the common endeavor.

We give of our hearts to the common endeavor.
We give of our livelihoods to the common endeavor.
We give because our strength is a common strength,
our joy is a shared joy,
our responsibilities are real,
and we are joined together in promise and peace.

Preface to Peace: A Prayer

Not just rusting tanks, O Love,
not just bayonets bent back on themselves,
but real kisses.
Not just orders ripped to confetti,
O Love, not just men and women sleeping
in their own beds at home, but men and women sleeping soundly, without exploding
dreams
and echoing cries for help.
Not just peace conferences, but peace suppers.
Not just truces, but holding hands
under the sky, and counting the shooting stars together.
Not just bandages and casts, O Love,
but health of mind, heart and body
cherished and developed.
Not just poems about peace,
or songs about peace
but whole libraries and concert halls of peace, multiplying.
Not just beginning today, Love,
but tomorrow too,
and even on the very day when our children
look in their mirror and say, "My God, I'm old."
Not just with an Amen, but with this song
woven into our heartbeats, absorbed into
our bones, taming our every breath.
Now, Love. Let peace begin with me,
with these people,
with strangers on the street,
with children, with seniors,
with everyone.
I mean it.
Now.

Blessing

Who is going to be lucky tonight: The Patriots or the Giants? Are you going to be lucky?
Is the world going to be lucky?
No matter. Go in peace, and live in peace.