

2008-5-11 Goddess

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Opening Words

We are here

after a week of silver rain

and green, green grass,

to worship, to approach the sublime

with simplicity, and thanksgiving.

The womb of the universe opens now,

and the new day is born in peace. Thus,

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

Peace. One syllable. Easy to say in English.

Easy to pronounce. Old word. Rooted. Latin.

From “*pacisci*” to *covenant*. But so hard to describe. But let me try at least. No harm in trying. Maybe peace doesn’t look like a world without problems, with skipping lambs and rainbows. Maybe it doesn’t look like a planet without conflict, a humanity without anger or hurt. Maybe it looks a lot like this world, with broken hearts and loving hearts all braided together. Maybe it looks like a community where people work hard to face their conflicts. Maybe it means people who grapple with truth, but who have the patience not to want answers right now. Maybe it looks like people being fair in their conflicts, courteous, humble, willing as it is said, to not be right in the end. Maybe it means grieving instead of drugging ourselves against it. Maybe it means confessing instead of denial. Maybe it means honesty instead of security. Maybe it means people, who believe rather different things, sitting side by side in silence, people who covenant to be kind to each other no matter what....

silence

Maybe peace in the heart precedes peace in the world. Maybe peace is living without answers, but with plenty of honest memory, met with open hearts. Playing the cards we are dealt, not wishing for other hands. Maybe peace is naming that we are not alone, even when we are silent, that our loves and losses crowd our hearts, that our hopes and disappointments are part of us. Let us remember now the names and faces attached to these loves, loses, hopes and disappointments, so that we might go forward with fewer burdens toward the peace.

naming

Peace. Not pure silence by any means, but music too, high note and low, rhythm and syncopation, lyric and emotion, beauty and a glory equal to the spirit that breathes life into what is alive.

The First Reading *this morning is from Lesley Hazelton's magnificent biography called Mary, A Flesh and Blood Biography of the Virgin Mother, namely Maryam the mother of the teacher Yeshu, whom we know as Jesus. This is one of the most realistic portrayals of an ancient woman I have ever read, and, despite the fact that the textual evidence is slim, Hazelton's eye is sharp, her attentiveness remarkable.*

She is thirteen. Short and wiry, with dark olive skin. The muscles are hard knots in her arms, solid lines in her calves. Her hair is almost black, and has been folded into a single braid down her back for as long as she can remember. The weight of it raises her chin and makes her walk tall, as she has learned to do when carrying jars of water or bundles of kindling on her head. You don't bend under the burden. You root into the ground and grow out of it, reaching up and becoming taller. The greater the weight, the taller you become: the peasant woman's secret of making the burden light.

Her thin linen shift is torn from snagging on rocks and thorns. Even the patches are torn, and the original black has long since faded into gray. When there's a village feast – a wedding or a circumcision – she begs a few threads of brightly colored wool from the old women, the ones too infirm to do anything but sit and weave, passing stories and shuttles back and forth in the sun-baked courtyards. Then she and her girl cousins huddle together, giggling as they work the threads into each other's braids. They have two colors: red from madder juice, yellow from kaolin clay. They've never seen blue wool. Only the rich can afford indigo, and in this village, as in all the Galilee villages, everyone is poor.

The shift hides the gentle bulge in her belly. She is unmarried, and pregnant. Sometimes, when she's sure nobody else is around, she'll fold her hands just below the curve, feeling how much it has grown. Her grandmother once told her you could know a child's sex before it is born by where you put your hands: above the belly means a girl, below the belly, a boy. Or is it the other way around? She can't remember, and it doesn't really matter. Like every pregnant woman, she hopes for ten fingers, ten toes, a hungry mouth, and a lusty yell – a healthy baby, despite the odds.

The Second Reading *is a brief poem by the great Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa, 1933*

To be great, be whole; exclude
 Nothing, exaggerate nothing that is you.
Be whole in everything. Put all you are
 Into the smallest thing you do.
The whole moon gleams in every pool,
 It rides so high.

Sermon

Just under two decades ago, I was preaching an ordination sermon in Nashville, Tennessee. The folks who offered me home hospitality asked me if I had ever seen the Parthenon. I said, "No, sorry, I've not yet been to Greece." They said, "No, we mean the Parthenon here in Nashville." I said, "You mean, there is a model of it in your museum?" "No," they said. "We have a *life-size* replica of it built in one of our parks. After all, with Vanderbilt and so many other fine schools in the city, Nashville is the Athens of the South. So naturally, the city decided to build a Parthenon to commemorate that distinction." "Hey, that's cool!" I said, "Let's go see it." Well, as we were driving up to this classic building, I all of a sudden remembered that buildings have insides as well as outsides. So I said to my hosts, "You're not

going to tell me that this temple also has an image of the Goddess Athena on the inside, are you? I mean, wouldn't local conservative churches have put up a fuss about the city of Nashville building a temple housing a pagan deity in all her glory?" "Yes, some churches did put up a fuss," they said. "But the city council prevailed in the end."

So we came to the steps of the Parthenon in Nashville. I climbed the steps, entered the door, and WHAM! there She was. Almost 45 feet high. With helmet and shield. A huge serpent hissing by her side. Gigantic. Improbable. Overwhelming. The Virgin. Athena. *Athene Parthenos*. The Great Mother of Wisdom. I was immediately able to viscerally understand why ancient people dropped to their knees in awe before such a mighty image. I walked up to the altar on which She stood. My head barely came up to the top of it. I looked up. The Goddess towered over me, gazing out at the world. And in a flash I understood something of the power represented by the word Goddess, even though the only folks who use this word in our present culture are a relatively few neo-pagans.

But my experience that day of the Goddess and Mother in Nashville still makes me tingle on the inside. She left me breathless.

Mother. Goddess. Great English words, those. I'd like to unpack them a bit. But before I do so, I want to make very clear a few things I passionately and personally feel, or this sermon may seem more complicated than it really is.

1. The idea of mother or mothering is itself an abstraction. In reality, there are only flesh-and-blood individual human beings who are mothers of some sort: biological, adoptive, etc. Each of them has a unique approach to motherhood. Phrases like "All mothers feel this way" simply make no sense to me. There cannot *be* any universal understanding of motherhood, as far as I am concerned. Period.

2. When talking about Goddess, or God, when talking about traditional symbolic words for Ultimacy, for that which underlies the wholeness of things, we are also talking about an abstraction, that is, nothing that can be named once and for all. Even calling it the Universe itself is just a metaphor. Some of our Hebrew ancestors wisely called anyone who thought they knew what Ultimacy is, or says, *idolaters*...that is, people who mistake the finger pointing to the moon *for* the moon. Our Chinese ancestors said something quite similar, in the collection of poems called the Dao Dejing: *A way can be a guide, but not a fixed path. Names can be given, but not permanent labels. Those who know do not say. Those who say they know, do not know.*

So please don't ask me afterward if I really think there IS a Goddess, or if I really think there is a God in heaven... these questions make little sense to me personally, since they confuse metaphor with reality, guides for a fixed path. For me, the world is what it is. The ground of all being can't be something somewhere. But you and I, as far as I can tell, *are* here right now. And that's enough for me.

Historically, many Unitarian Universalists will tell you that this day was originally founded as the Mother's Day for Peace, by the Unitarian suffragist, pacifist, social activist and poet, Julia Ward Howe. Most people don't know about her pacifism, but instead know her by her most famous lyric, written in 1862: "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Atlantic Monthly paid her just 5 bucks to write it, but it made her famous.

Using her fame to good advantage, Howe proclaimed this day to invite the mothers of America to stand up for peace. Well, not this day actually, but the Sunday nearest June 2nd. And, in fairness, she did not really invent Mother's Day out of whole cloth. She reinterpreted it, and made it later in the year. It existed before her for centuries, and it was called Mothering Day. It was always held on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, that is, in late Winter or early Spring, and it was originally a way of celebrating Mary, the mother of Jesus. The English and Irish eventually set this day aside so that servants and working class children who had to work far from home could visit their moms, at least one day a year.

And the idea of a holiday in Spring to honor St. Mary the Virgin was also not a new invention. In earlier times, the Goddess Cybele was celebrated near this day or earlier, and before her, the Goddess Rhea the Titan, who was called "the mother of the gods," certainly a source of Mary being called the Mother of God by the later Church.

The present holiday, however, rose out of another reinterpretation of events. Julia Ward Howe's day was celebrated by women in only 18 cities across the country, and then only for a decade. Finally Julia, who underwrote these celebrations financially, just couldn't do it anymore, and the Mother's Day for Peace faded from every city save Boston, and a decade later, from Boston too.

Yet a certain Appalachian woman from West Virginia, Anna Jarvis, whose mother had fought for better sanitation during the Civil War, and for reconciliation between the North and South, and who knew about Howe's failed Mother's Day for Peace, petitioned the president of the United States over and over to get him to recognize the work of her mother, especially her conciliatory work. Finally, in 1914, President Wilson agreed, and the Mother's Day we know today was formally created as a national holiday.

But still, some of Julia Ward Howe's original spirit has survived to this present day. At 1 PM today, for example, many women and girls, as well as supportive boys and men, will stand silently for a while, sometimes ringing bells into the silence. This will be done in many places, including this church.

Apparently folks from 75 different countries are all doing this at around the same hour, and it's being done as a call for peace on earth. What does peace on earth look like? In the beautiful words of the organizers:

We will be standing for the world's children and grandchildren, and for the seven generations beyond them. We dream of a world where all of our children have safe drinking water, clean air to breathe, and enough food to eat. A world where they have access to a basic education to develop their minds and healthcare to nurture their growing bodies. A world where they have a warm, safe and loving place to call home. A world where they don't live in fear of violence...in their home, in their neighborhood, in their school or in their world. This is the world of which we dream, the cause for which we stand.

And so Julia Howe's vision is reborn anew...in a different time and place.

Just like the Goddesses Rhea, Cybele and Athena were born anew in the celebration of the Mother of Jesus, Mary, or in her own language, Maryam.

She too was to become the Mother of Wisdom, the Mother of God. She too was to be celebrated in the spring with ribbons and rites and flowers.

She too, like Athena the Virgin, was lifted up in marble and wooden images, and called *ho Parthenos*, the Virgin. Even though she, like Athena, actually had a child.

But the image of the Virgin eventually lost a lot of the greatness ascribed to some of the Goddesses of old. Cybele was celebrated sexually, Mary was not. Athena was celebrated as a warrior and protector of cities, Mary was not. Her whole role was to be a mother, a great mother of a great man to be sure. But of the other attributes of ancient Goddesses whose titles she bore...very few.

Of course, to be fair, that was true of many of the Goddesses too. It's not fair to romanticize the ancient world as many do, and make it seem as if the Goddess religions were terrific and whole and perfect, and that everything that followed them were sexist distortions. In fact, the earliest Goddess figures we've found *only* celebrate motherhood. Not wisdom. Not strength. Not power. Not standing up for peace. But motherhood alone. Not even adoptive motherhood, but biological motherhood only.

The reading you heard from Lesley Hazelton's incredible biography describes a real peasant woman from a poor village in the ancient Galilee. She is tough, wiry, strong. And pregnant. But you know the story. She loses her grown up son one day to state terrorism. Yet Hazelton insists that Maryam's life is not over when she loses her son. Her greatness as a mother is found in her fullness, not just one single aspect of her life, however important.

Hazelton portrays the older Maryam as a woman who establishes a community of mothers who have lost sons. She sees her like those mothers in Argentina and Chile, during the days of their troubles, marching around the squares solemnly, and demanding justice, justice, justice. Mother Mary, in other words, ended up saying more than *Let it be*. She is saying as well *Let it NOT be*. No injustice! She is something of a warrior for justice, as well as a wisdom figure. Almost like Athena the Virgin in the Parthenon.

And please don't get caught up in trying to wed biological concepts to virginity. Such things are not the point of Athena being called a Virgin any more than the peasant mother of Galilee being called a Virgin. That was simply a way of saying that their motherhood consisted in more than their relationship with a man. Their greatness was in their fullness, their wholeness as human persons, their interdependence, not their socialized dependence.

This is what our poet Fernando Pessoa says so simply: To be great, be whole; exclude nothing, exaggerate nothing that is you. Be whole in everything. Put all you are into the smallest thing you do.

This is why, even though biology clearly creates certain differences (of course! I am not denying that!), mothering is part of the wholeness of *every* human being who moves toward greatness. So is fathering. Men can mother their children as well as father them, and many do these days. Mothers in their wholeness can father their children too, since there are no final definitions for either of these abstract words, any more than there are final definitions for Ultimacy. And people with no children of their own, biological or adopted, can also parent, for it does indeed take a whole community to raise our children unto wholeness, unto great-ness, unto the best human beings they can be.

Yes, I was indeed awestruck by walking into the Parthenon and gazing up at the overwhelming image of the Virgin Mother Athena. Some people, I know, will not share my admiration for images. Some will clearly prefer their religion without 40 ft Goddesses, or Virgin Mothers. They'd rather a room without images, without divinity, or even talk of Ultimacy, just a great big beautiful room like this, full of human beings. Fine. I have no problem with that. There is a spirituality of relinquishment as well as a spirituality of imagery. But they both move toward the same goal, it seems to me. The place where, when we human beings come into each other's presence, we see each other not just as what we are in all of our brokenness. But that we learn to see each other for our struggle to be whole and unbroken in our love, like the Inuit mother in the story this morning; or to be whole and unbroken in our demand for peace, like Mother Julia Howe; or to be whole and unbroken in our demand for justice, like Mother Maryam of Galilee, or to be whole and unbroken in support of wisdom, like the Goddess radiating before me in the Parthenon. Greatness, after all, is not a call for the few, but rather, for the many.

Offertory

Knowing for sure that the responsibility for this place resides with no one else but us, let us gladly pay our pledges, offer our gifts, and bless the grace and work of our principled and rooted community of love and peace.

Prayer of the Generations

Yesterday, today, and tomorrow, let us be midwives of peace's true birth. Tomorrow, yesterday and today, let all of our labors be for healing our earth. Today, tomorrow and yesterday. Let us never forget we do not earn our worth. It's ours just by being born.