

Do I Want To Live Forever?

Easter, March 31, 2013

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Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening

We are here,

as the first crocuses break through the earth

to celebrate the spirit of Easter

with an abundance and diversity of flowers,

which sign the golden dream of love and justice

soon to be blooming in our very hands.

Grounded in gratitude for the cosmos that is our home, claiming deepening wisdom as our authority, and daring to engage joy, burdens, loss and insight in a deliberate community of many ways and ages, the flame summons us to *awaken*: to listen with our whole lives, to open, to serve.

Affirming: The Easter Exultet of 2013

A Great Litany with Song: #201

Words: The Kingdom Has Already Come

Iris DeMent (2012--Album: Sing the Delta)

I stopped in the church to pray,

It was the middle of the day

And I don't even know if I believe in God

But I laid my soul on the table

and left that place believing I was able

to pull back the curtain my fears had drawn

v. 1 Glory, Glory, Hallelujah

I was out on the fourth of July

when I saw those kids, and just had to cry

The whole town was blazing in the summer's heat

But out in front of a row of rundown shacks

they had that fire hydrant untapped

baptizing their bodies right there in the street

v. 2. Feel Like Shouting Hallelujah

There's a tree outside my window

It sings when wind blows

I've got water and fire

I know sorrow, I feel desire

And could it be
that the kingdom has already come

v. 4. Feel Like Dancing, Hallelujah

We all see good or bad in everything that we have
But life is waiting just behind that veil
If this will be loved and that will be hated
the soul is left to struggle segregated
Trapped in the harbor too weighed down.
But it could be the kingdom has already come.

v.5. Love is Shining, All Around Me

Communing

Daffodils are beautiful, but silent.
Crocuses are beautiful, but silent.
Roses are beautiful, but silent.
Vases make no noise. The act of budding is silent.
The process of blossoming is silent.
The ink on a gold-edged page describing scripture stories of resurrection is silent.
Lyrics of a song stay still until lifted off a page and sung.
Eggs are silent on their lawns or on plates.
Chocolate in a silver wrapping makes no sound.
Children who get them rejoice in their baskets, people may sing beautifully, cooks clang pots as they cook a special dinner, but still, more than any other season, Eastertide is filled with silence.
Comforting is the silence of the season.
Blest is the quiet opening of the spring.

silence

Our lives can be noisy on the outside,
but our inner hearts are filled with silent memories and quiet faces that make us who we are.
Remembering those we love, who love us, whom we struggle with, whom we miss, we
gather their names as we gather the flowers,
in the vase of our heart we place them, quietly
naming them, or simply bowing to them in quiet gratitude.

naming

Our lives, touched by daffodils and love and color in this season of spring and new life, make a
kind of music that is a form of heaven on earth. The choirs of our community now open the
golden gates of that vision.

In Time of Daffodilse. e. cummings

The First Reading is from the Letter of Peter in the New Testament, dated, because of internal evidence, to the reign of the Emperor Domitian, c. 81. So it couldn't have been written by Peter, who died in the early sixties. It may, according to some critical scholars, however, embody a few actual teachings from Simeon Bar Yona, called Kepha, or Peter in the New Testament. I myself think the following sentence is one of them:

For the Messiah suffered and died, to address our tragic flaw, a just person amid the unjust. He was put to death in the flesh, and raised up in spirit.

The Second Reading is another set of lyrics for a song by Iris DeMent. It's called *There's a Whole Lot of Heaven Shining In This River of Tears*, composed just last year. From her album *Sing the Delta*

There's a lot of people talkin'
'bout getting in the gloryland way
Walkin' straight and narrow,
trying to get to heaven someday
But I've been saved
by the love of the people livin' right here
And there's a whole lotta heaven
shinin' in this river of tears

We don't have a prophet to tell us
what our future holds
We've only got each other
and the love we carry in our souls
Though this world's full of trouble
and the path we walk is never clear
There's still this whole lotta heaven
shinin' in a river of tears

There's a whole lotta heaven
shinin' in this river of tears
You pull back the curtain little diamonds will appear
You can take your streets of gold if you want 'em
and your mansion so dear
But I'll take the whole lotta heaven shinin' in this river of tears

This life that I'm livin' is like a ship
that don't want to be steered
Sometimes I wake up in the mornin' thinkin'
I could buckle beneath the weight of my own fears
It's some pain, some strain and some struggle
but I persevere

I got a whole lotta heaven shinin' in my river of tears

There's a whole lotta heaven
shinin' in this river of tears
You pull back the curtain
little diamonds will appear
You can take your streets of gold
if you want 'em and your mansion so dear
But I'll take the whole lotta heaven shinin'
I want a whole lotta heaven shinin'
I love a whole lotta heaven shinin'
in this river of tears

Preaching

Whatever else they may be, the Easter and Passover seasons are jam packed with symbols that are rich and various. This is especially true when these two holidays fall this early, and during unseasonably cold weather. Indeed, spring itself...with its own rife glories worthy of celebration ...seems a bit paltry this year. The daffodil outside my office window looks as if it's bending over to take cover under the soil warmed by the sun all day, so it won't shiver come night.

Among the rich symbolism of the holidays, you'll find many images that address the mystery of life and death. Certainly, one of the conversations I often hear going around, especially at Eastertime in particular, has to do with the whole notion of what "life" might look like when seen within the context of our mortality. Is there some sort of life after death? Resurrection for you and me as well as for an ancient Jewish prophet?

Resurrection? Most secular and religiously progressive people that I've talked with in my ministry are pretty sure that *all* the various churches of Christendom celebrate a literal resurrection of the physical body of Jesus of Galilee on Easter Sunday.

But I am here to say that such an understanding is a caricature, at best. While many of the more conservative churches do indeed preach that resurrection means a physical body returning to recognizable life, many of the more progressive churches simply do *not* think of resurrection or Easter in such a concrete and literal way. And, there have been different interpretations of the "Easter Event" for ages. For instance, back in the early 1900's, a group of radically conservative Christians put out some pamphlets called the Fundamentals, which led eventually to the word "fundamentalism" in English. They insisted that one had to believe that Jesus' *physical body*...the Greek word for that is "*sarx*"...flesh....actually reanimated on Easter Sunday morn. But it seems to me that the reason they had to blare their trumpet so loud about this, and get so belligerent, drawing their lines in the sand, is because congregations all around them simply didn't accept that interpretation of resurrection. Most of these churches had given up the idea of hellfire too, and denied that there would be general resurrection at the end of time for the rest of us. These were the congregations who looked at the empty tomb stories as mythical teaching stories, not sober histories. They did however take the words from the *Letter of Peter* in the New Testament seriously...the letter you heard earlier this morning which says "He was put to death in the *flesh*

(that is, *sarx*), and raised up in spirit." (The Greek word is *pneumati*, for which "in spirit" or even "spiritually" is a better translation. πνεύμα -*pneuma*- in Greek, like *SPIRITVS* in Latin, both *literally* mean "breath of life" or "circulating air...a breeze, or the wind.")

The mere fact that these interpretive words were written during the reign of Domitian...all the way back in the early 80s of our era, tells me that different understandings of the central Christian proclamation were there from the beginning as well.

I am also saying that this variety of approaches has always been true, not just for Christians, but for everyone else as well. And as yet, I see no signs that this variety of approaches is dying out.

So long ago, the Jews at the time of Jesus were all over the map about this. The Ranking Priests in the temple all taught that death was the end of you, and expecting anything else was greedy. The liberal Pharisees, however, claimed that you would live on, or even be resurrected in some fabulous way. Even earlier than this, ancient Sumerian and Babylonian literature clearly makes fun of the idea of living forever. Egyptian literature of the same period, however, says that living forever is possible... at least for those wealthy enough for the mummification process.

So I am saying this morning that, throughout all human history – and whether we are talking secular or religious history makes no difference – human beings have confronted the reality of their mortality most each and every day, with a variety of responses. They may accept it, or deny it, or express bravado about that reality. And many have formed theories to cradle their understanding of its reality...from reincarnation, to some vague or not so vague afterlife, to ghosts or even to utter extinction. They have come to different conclusions in every age and culture.

I do understand that it's hard not to make generalizations and burrow into simplifications, but almost always such generalizations are complete fictions. You may, for example, think that all Christians believe in heaven and hell as destinations for the dead, but you would be completely wrong. Many groups, or denominations, within Christendom, simply say that when you die, your soul...your vitality...sleeps. No trips to heaven. Some say that this sleeping soul will eventually come back to life in a transformed body. Others say that your inner soul only survives, and is absorbed into the vision of God. Since the 19th century, some Protestants and Catholics have imagined a heaven where you would recognize other surviving humans as easily as you could recognize them now, although this idea is relatively a new one. My father, for example, always imagined himself playing pinochle with his mother and father, for example...at a table, with cards, "somewhere." I assure you, pinochle playing is not standard Catholic doctrine. Others, like the Christian Unitarian philosopher Charles Hartshorne, used to say that all of the stories in the New Testament that deal with death mean only this...that after we die our lives will be remembered in the mind of God. And even then, you'll have to deal with an unexpected diversity ...because, by "God," Harshorne meant something entirely different from the "traditional" model of the originator of the universe. You see how complex it gets?

Then there are those who use the anxieties people feel about death to control them with more and more vivid threats of torture in hell. The religious progressives at the turn of the century were surprised by this turn, since most of them had already stopped preaching sermons on hell after

death. The tent revivals of people like Billy Sunday disgusted them. They were trying to focus on getting rid of a more patently real "hell" here on earth, divorcing the metaphor from any life-after-death significance. The poverty, disease, and cruelty on earth was visible and solid...true images of hell indeed. It needed to lose its power. And for many of these Christians, heaven *after* death had often been reduced to Karl Marx's famous opiate, or pain-killer. For many, they realized, heaven and hell were not theories about life after death as much as they were symbols that would one day redress injustices here on earth after this life was over.

But mostly, at the turn of the last century, the whole idea of hell faded in educated circles particularly, often replaced by a more positive heaven-on-earth image. Socialists, progressives, our own ancestors, the Universalists and the Unitarians, all joined in lifting up the idea that any establishment of heaven-on-earth would have to be *our* responsibility. To make of our years on earth The Golden Isle, where peace, prosperity for all and justice for all would be the norm, just as in our children's story this morning, was a human project, not a New Jerusalem coming down from the clouds. Their idea was that the privileged, like the prince in the story this morning, would be willing to give up all their comforts for the sake of a better life for others. And if they were not willing, later Leninists affirmed, they would be *made* to give them up.

Still others, like Iris DiMent, the singer, have gone further along this pre-death idea of heaven.

*We don't have a prophet to tell us
what our future holds
We've only got each other
and the love we carry in our souls
Though this world's full of trouble
and the path we walk is never clear
There's still this whole lotta heaven
shinin' in a river of tears*

She is saying that yes, we mustn't wait till death in order to see heaven; we have to see it here and now, long before everything is made fair and just and golden. We have to see heaven shining even in those tears that fall down our cheeks because we hurt so much. The brightness symbolized by heaven is for now, not tomorrow. Eternal life, she is saying, is not about long duration, infinite years ahead, calendar sheets in the wind...but it's a luminous quality, visible in each and every moment right now.

But despite the last five thousand years of interpretation and re-interpretation and outright mutual criticism, the actual *fact* of mortality, unadorned by interpretation, greets us every day. The metaphors never cover up the reality.

But I have more to say: the idea of some sort of survival beyond death is not just based on interpreting scriptures, or the loud theological proclamations of preachers, or the manipulative famous "cold-readings" offered by folks who claim to talk with our dead relatives "on the other side."

These ideas are often rooted in something closer to home. For there are unexpected, unmediated and unnerving human experiences which many of us have that cause us to speculate about death in different ways. I remember the first time I witnessed someone actually dying, all of my ideas around mortality were completely upturned. This man had been in a coma for a long time. He weighed no more than a few small birds would weigh. His elbow joints were wider than his actual arms, his face had sunken, and he had not opened his eyes, or shown any responsiveness, in over three weeks. Suddenly, he opened his long-shut-eyes, raised himself up on his non-existent elbows, and grabbed his wife's hand with strength, and said to her, "Goodbye Marilyn. I am going now. I want you to know I have loved you from the first moment I saw you. Good bye." And then he took my hand, and said, "Goodbye Mark. I am going now. I want you to know I am dying happy, for I have seen my sons all grown up and doing well. Goodbye."

Then he lay down, this 40-year-old man, and stopped breathing, just like that. What was I to make of a man in a coma rising up, and then consciously telling us that he knew he was going "now"? That event haunted me for years.

Or this week, my friend Susan called me to tell me about the Florida memorial of her husband, my good friend and dear love, Flip, who had died of early onset Alzheimers.

I spoke my eulogy at his memorial in Kansas City a few weeks ago. This was a smaller memorial for his family back in Sarasota. Susan had taken some ashes to scatter on the beach there, near where he grew up. And as she was doing so, a ping-pong ball bounced past her, blown the by wind, bouncing off stones.

This would be strange enough in itself, but there's more. Flip had been a stage entertainer all of his life. One of his major juggling accomplishments was to blow three ping-pong balls out of his mouth, one at a time, pfumph, pfumph, pfumph...and then catch them in reverse order in his mouth. He was famous for it. So Susan watched the ball. The wind blew it around her several times. "And what was a ping pong ball doing on the beach, anyway?" she asked herself.

Now please, don't imagine that she thought that Flip was there in ghostly form giving her a sign. That would be *an interpretation* of the event, not the emotional experience she was having. She was content to let the experience be as it was...moving, transformative, a source of both laughter and tears...but, but...she *did have it*. Just as I had the experience of a man announcing his own death from a break in his coma.

Am I saying that there is some sort of spiritual life after death? No, I can't know any such thing...but I *too* have had many odd experiences after friends have died, experiences that don't make any immediate sense, but where my awe and amazement are kindled in fresh new ways. After my best friend Stefan died, his partner Richard and I were taking a break from *shiva* (the eight day Jewish mourning period), and climbed up a steep staircase connecting two streets in San Francisco. It was a beautiful, bright sunny day. Suddenly, a dark cat leapt off a nearby garage and landed at our feet right between us. The cat looked up at each of us, his head moving back and forth, then made three figure eights around our legs. Then it sat for a moment in front of us again, looking at each of us face-to-face. And immediately, after making a little cry, this stranger cat leapt back up onto the garage roof, and disappeared over its gable. Richard and I

looked at each other with amazed smiles and said in tandem, "Stefan?" Now please. Stefan never had a cat; neither Richard or I have ever favored the idea of the transmigration of souls, and cats, as far as I know, act like that all the time. But...we were grief-stricken to the marrow of our bones, sensitive, torn open, and almost anything could have offered us that comforting sense of presence, a flash of reconnection. We could have interpreted it as Stefan letting us know that he was OK, but that's not what we said. We just were thankful for this wondrous event on a day of grief.

All of my ministry I have heard similar stories from folks, including from skeptics, atheists and agnostics, who were completely embarrassed to have had such an experience. They usually kept it secret from everyone, even though it had a mysterious impact on them when they had it. Many people who have these experiences write them off as "merely" psychological...but then, they never tell anyone anyway, because they think it makes them look soft-headed.

Me personally? I don't interpret these experiences, in either the light of theology, philosophy or even psychology, although all of those categories may be chomping at the bit to interpret such an experience. I am content to let mystery be mystery, and to take what positive comfort comes from such unusual, and unusually common, and often awe-striking experiences.

Perhaps this is exactly what happened to the students of Jesus, Peter for example. One day up in the Galilee, Episcopal Bishop Shelby Spong theorizes, about *six months* after the death of their teacher at the hands of the Roman prefect, Peter, perhaps while breaking bread just as Jesus had done all of his life, had the experience of his teacher being recognizable in that simple act of taking supper. "He was killed in the flesh, but raised in spirit," was how he apparently put his insight...not as a ghost or anything, mind you, or an hallucination, or worse, a reanimated corpse ...but in the everyday action of having a meal with those you love. An act of love and sharing and communion.

All the angel and empty tomb stories were written much, much later, concrete and inflexible *interpretations* of the joyous experience Peter had and shared originally. Leaving *us*, ultimately, with clumsy stories of resuscitation which have polluted much of our thinking about our mortality.

For me, Easter has always been less a meditation on my mortality and more an affirmation of life, an affirmation of heaven being here and now, even in this river of tears. Easter is sharing meals with friends, breaking bread with them, expressing love openly and freely now...despite the fact that one day I will not be alive. Eternal life is now, not tomorrow....I'm not sure I even want to live forever, with infinite days, personally. Norbert Capek, who invented the Flower Ceremony we'll celebrate today, did want to live forever, and thought life pointless without it.... but then, he knew the kind of suffering that led to his death at Dachau, and I have not. It might make a difference, that kind of suffering. If my life was miserable from day one, as many of the millions alive on earth can attest, I wouldn't be too fond of someone saying "Oh, buck up and get real. There is no justice, you were just unfortunate, and when you die, you die...no justice for you." On the other hand, many of our ancestors in Poland, the Socinians, believed that when you died, your soul slept too; and they suffered a lot too, yet maintained their position. So I don't know. I simply don't know. And I'm ok with that.

And I conclude this morning by telling you an Easter story I did not witness personally, but an Easter story in which I personally knew the subject. Some of you know that I was good friends with my colleague Forrest Church, who died a few years ago – around my exact age – of esophageal cancer. He fought the cancer for years. Oh, how he fought. But eventually, just like the great man I spoke of last week, Carl Sagan, he succumbed to it. As he lay dying in his house, his wife Carolyn and other family members and friends gathered around, he was barely breathing. But they were all present to his dying. His wife Carolyn finally climbed into bed with him, and held him. Then she got up, and said aloud, "God bless Forest Church." After which, immediately, he stopped breathing. And what did everyone do? Weep? Gnash their teeth? No...something far more Eastery...they broke into a long and sustained applause. In gratitude for a life well lived. Not a perfect life, mind you. Forrest wasn't perfect, and would be the first to say so. But he did lead an amazing, rich, loving and expansive life. I can applaud that.

It's that applause which signs the deepest meaning of Easter and life for me...not what theories we have about how long "forever" is or what the soul looks like, or doesn't look like. It's gratitude, in this heaven which is also a river of tears, for a life well lived.

Offering

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 thus bless the grace and work of our principled and rooted community of love, peace and justice making.

Flower Ceremony

A. The Consecration of the Flowers (adapted from Capek, 1923)

East: Spirit of Life, we find your blessing in these messengers of fellowship and love.

South: May they remind us, even though our skills and what we know is different from each other, and can do different things, to be yet unified in our desire for mutual affection, and devotion to Love's holy purpose.

West: May they also remind us of the value of working and playing together, and sharing ourselves openly and kindly. May we cherish the gifts of friendship.

North: May we not let our awareness of another's talents discourage us, or warp our relationship with envy, but may we realize that, what *ever* we do, great or small, counts, and that therefore the efforts of all of us are needed to do Spirit's work in this world.

B. Prayer of Norbert Capek *written in the concentration camp of Dachau, not long before his life was taken. 1942*

Solo (Jolinda)

It is worthwhile to live and struggle
courageously for sacred ideals.
Whatever winds may blow, O fire of my soul,
I trust you will never flicker out.
Even though I've been disappointed a thousand times
I have lived in the middle of eternity.

Unison

**All who overcome what holds them back
give wings to their heart
and enter the golden age.
May we take these flowers as a sign of that age,
which blossoms right now in our hands.**

Distribution of the Flowers

#63 Spring Has Now Unwrapped the Flowers