

So How's the Weather

August 25, 2013

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Gathering, Greeting, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here,
after a week of pleasant summery weather,
to worship, to lift our hearts above the fray,
and focus for a time on an ethical radiance,
brighter than blue moons, or yellow suns.

And so, bearing witness *both* to our world as it is, *and* as Love can imagine it, we would claim that vision of a just world for our own lives. And because of a growing sense of kinship with all beings, inviting our compassion, we begin in this celebration to engage our mission with our whole lives: body, mind, and heart.

Singing: #1002 Comfort Me

Ingathering

Once upon a time, the sun and the north wind were having a conversation, when the north wind started to brag about how strong it was. "I am so strong, I can blow whole trees over!" the wind bragged. "Ha!" said the sun, "I am not impressed. I bet I am stronger than you." "You!" cried the wind. "You!? Why you move slowly across the sky, never any faster one day than the next. But I never sit still...and sometimes I am so fast I even surprise myself." So the argument got louder and louder, and finally, the moon, who was sound asleep on the other side of the earth, popped over the horizon and said, "Hey you guys! I am trying to sleep here. Can you tone it down a bit? Why not just have some sort of contest to see which of you is stronger. Then, when that is settled, I can get me some shuteye."

So the sun and the moon actually thought that might be a good idea. Both thought they could win...so they entered the contest with gusto! So they asked the moon for advice, "What kind of contest?"

"You see that guy down there, the one in the poncho?" asked the moon. "We see him," said the wind and the sun. "Why don't you see which of you is strong enough to get that fella's poncho right off his back!"

"Great idea," the sun and wind chimed in together. "I get to go first!" cried the wind. "Fine with me," said the sun.

So the wind gathered some thick and gloomy clouds and started to blow as hard as it could. Woosh! Woosh! The wind made sure it was cold, too. But although the poncho of the guy walking below almost blew off his back, he caught it in time, wrapped his arms around himself

tight to protect himself from the cold north wind. The wind blew harder, but the man held on to his poncho all the tighter. Finally, the wind gave up. "Hah! You won't do any better," said the wind to the sun.

"We'll see," said the sun. And so the sun just grew bright and hot and shined down warmth and heat on the man. Soon the man was sweating, so he took off his poncho, just like that. Then he started to take off his vest. "Boy, is it ever hot!" he said. It was when the man started to roll up his sleeves that the wind finally conceded.

"You did it!" said the wind. "You are stronger."

"That doesn't mean we can't be friends," said the sun, smiling. And they both decided it was better to be friends than to do contests.

And the moon? Well the moon smiled too, dropped below the horizon, and just fell sweetly to sleep.

Greeting (announcements and caring cards)

Affirming #1015 I Know I Can (first verse of this jazz
hymn sung by Amy Rakowczyk)

The changes in our life must come from the impossibility to live otherwise than according to the demands of our conscience...not from our intellectual resolution to try a new form of life.

Лев Николаевич Толстой / Leo Tolstoi 1903

Singing #1015 I Know I Can (rest of the verses)

Communing

Please rise in body or spirit for the path to silence. The sequence this morning is a list of names, all genders, a rainbow of every color, a gathering of all ages, including children, a constellation of differing religions and cultures, differing economic realities. All of them are the known civil rights martyrs of the civil rights era, whose sad deaths served to let those of us who survived that era truly begin to see openings in our racialized culture, and possibilities for dismantling it, inch by inch, law by law, understanding by understanding, relinquishment by relinquishment, heart by heart. I will say their names aloud, and then we will keep the silence that cradles them even now:

Rev. George Lee

Lamar Smith Emmet Till

John Earl Reese Willie Edwards

Mack Charles Parker Herbert Lee

Corporal Roman Ducksworth Paul Guihard

William Louis Moore Medgar Evers

Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley

Virgil Lamar Ware Louis Allen
Johnnie Mae Chapell Rev. Bruce Klunder
Henry Hezekiah Dee Charles Moore
James Chaney Andrew Goodman
Michael Henry Lt. Col Lemuel Penn
Jimmie Lee Jackson Rev. James Reeb (UU)
Viola Liuzzo (UU) Oneal Moore
Willie Brewster Jonathan Myrick Daniels
Samuel Younge Jr Vernon Dahmer
Ben Chester White Clarence Triggs
Wharlest Jackson Benjamin Brown
Samuel Hammond Jr.
Delano Herman Middleton
Henry Ezekial Smith
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The Great Silence

Our lives are part of the larger history of the world and our lives are part of a smaller story as well, our own. Thus we set aside time to remember and name, either silently in our heart, or whispered aloud, the names of those we love, struggle to love, those who love us, those whom we miss because they are far away, and those whom we mourn.

Look to the rainbow and follow the dream, the lyrics sing. And so, may we do so, strengthened by this song of gratitude...

Singing: Look to the Rainbow

(Burton Lane, sung by Amy Rakowczyk)

Reading:

The First Reading *is an excerpt from a longer poem by Remica L. Bingham, called Marchers Headed for Washington: Baltimore, 1963 It's about the poet's grandmother in Baltimore, who cooked food for those who were travelling to march with Dr. King in Washington, 50 years ago this week:*

For days, my father's mother let dawn rub the back of her neck and shoulders, rising in time to see the moon.

As shards of light brightened the darkest spot in her kitchen...she'd leave her work and enter the bedroom her four sons shared.

Wiping at the sleep clouding their eyes,
one by one her boys marched
to the closet searching for the starched sets
of hand-me-down Sunday-best awaiting them.

If all was right...each bowtie securely in place,
they would line up in seats on the porch...
even the youngest, not yet five, then kneel, daily,
offering brief instructions: Listen, children, and watch.

When the morning cooking was done and more
waited in pots atop the stove for the afternoon,
she began piling plates so high they had to be doubled,
covered in foil, and set in brown paper bags
strong enough to endure fifty more stone-ridden miles.

When travelers approached, the first son to spot them would stand and shout, “Here two come, mama!”...or three or four...even nine came into view once. Rushing to the door with arms outstretched, he’d clutch the plates warming his small hands, then go to the roadside with her message: “This is for the journey, my mama said, in hopes that none of you would ever stop.”

She fed hundreds that way, never seeing any face close enough to recall it clearly, her name unknown by those saying grace. Her marching – from kitchen to porch, then steadily back again – all but in place.

The Second Reading *is from the Gospel of Luke, written late in the first century by an author claiming to be the physician who traveled with Paul of Tarsus on his journeys. This type of authorship claim was not deceptive in the ancient world, but considered an honorific.*

Then he spoke to those who gathered around him: “When you see clouds coming in from the west, you say, ‘Storm’s coming’—and you’re right. And when the wind comes out of the south, you say, ‘Today’s going to be a hot one’—and you’re right. O come on! You know how to figure out what the weather is going to be by reading the signs you see, so why, I wonder, are the signs of the times so difficult for you to discern?

Indeed...why are you not deciding for yourselves what’s best for you to be doing in this world? You know, why not show the common sense you’d use if, while being taken to court, you decided to settle up with your accuser on the way, knowing that if the case ended up in the present-day court system, you’d probably go to jail, or pay every last penny of some fine.”

Preaching

So it’s *fifty years* since the March on Washington! Hard to believe. My mother used to say that time moves faster as you get older, and that certainly seems to be true for me too. Furthermore, history seems to recede *away* from me *just as fast* as the future seems to gallop *toward* me.

In his most excellent presentation there that day, Martin Luther King improvised the last and most famous part of the speech, the part everyone remembers because of the rhetorical power of using the phrase “I have a dream” over and over and over. Seems that Mahalia Jackson, the great singer with whom he was friends, saw that he was a nervous wreck about what he prepared, and so belted out to him, “Tell them about the dream, Martin! Tell them about the dream!”

And so he went off script and told them.

Preachers like me love that story. It somehow makes me feel a bit better that so lionized a preacher as Dr. King had these ferocious self-doubts and insecurities before he stood up to talk, doubts like every preacher I know has (and you may be assured that I myself am one of the preachers that I know). But more importantly, King's insecurity reminds me that you don't have to be swaggeringly confident to accomplish something remarkable.

The written manuscript of his talk, so well blended with the improvised part of it, moves his speech to the very top of everyone's list of great moments in the twentieth century.

People who were there in Washington that day remember where they were standing or sitting that day. They remember what they ate. And they remember the weather. It was hot as could be, some said. Someone fainted. Others were cooling their feet in the Reflecting Pond.

Of course, the actual weather recorded by the instruments on that day wasn't really that hot. 83 was the high, 63 the low. Not really very scorching. But then, *all* those people! The largest march in Washington---city of marches--- ever, up till that time. All those people! The stunning speech, filled with spirit that lifted folks out of their doldrums and worries for a while and fastened them to a dream with wings. So I guess it really *was* hot that day...but not necessarily because the sun was shining in the sky. Dr. King put it this way in his speech, using the language of his era: *"This sweltering summer of the colored people's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality."*

This last summer, 50 years after that one, was unusual. I've heard more people talking about weather, not as a metaphor for something else, but literally as summer weather...you know, sun, clouds, rain, and swelter. I certainly know I myself brought the subject up more than any summer in recent history. When I was in New York City visiting my friends Kip and Matt, it was 100 degrees, sticky humid, every single day, and at least 110 in the subway stations. I didn't just talk about it, I positively whined.

Here, in Columbus, there was far more rain than I ever remember in the summer. Thunderstorms almost every day for a while, some of which blew down plenty of large branches and even whole trees. Grey skies too, almost like in February, during parts of July.

When I would talk to my sister, or friends of mine in California, or New York, we *always* started off wondering about the weather, which undeniably has been unusual pretty much everywhere.

And that word "everywhere" defines my fascination with the presence of weather in our lives. I can safely say that every single moment of human history has been lived in some kind of weather system. It may have been hot when Lincoln spoke at Gettysberg, warm when Cleopatra sailed on her barge to greet Antony, chilly when Buddha sat under his tree, or stormy when Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan. But there is no place on earth...even in blest Hawaii...where weather patterns, in all their variety, conveniently fail to show up.

Since ancient times, folks have tried to predict the unpredictable...that is, predict tomorrow's weather...undoubtedly because weather is so capricious. It's a little scary for many of us to just submit to the anarchy of weather, which is beyond our control utterly. No one can blow the clouds away, or will the rain off course. No one has power over the weather. It stands very nicely as a sign that reveals our limitations as human beings.

And that may be why I've always loved that passage in the gospel of Luke which you heard earlier. It's one of my favorites, it associates the weather, over which we have no control...with social issues, over which we might indeed exert an influence; a most interesting metaphor. I summarize the meaning of the passage this way..."I see everyone trying to control the weather by predicting it...but where are your dreams and predictions for a more just social system?" Or, rendered into breezier language, the actual passage reads like this: *Seems like you can read all the signals about what's going to happen tomorrow with the weather: "red sky at morning, sailor take warning; red sky at night, sailor's delight" ...but for some reason you can't interpret the signs of the times. Can't you see what's going on around you? he asks. Look carefully. See it. You have to respond to it, make some sort of choice about what to do in response. You have to think for yourselves, not let others think for you.* Then he offers this little scenario...*Imagine, the Galilean says, someone powerful is taking you to court to get something from you. Wouldn't it be better to not let the court and law systems...corrupt as they are...make decisions about your life for you? Why not enter into a one on one, direct relationship with your opponent, and figure out a way to end the ancient quarrel you have. Far better that, than submitting to getting yourself ground up by the system which doesn't care for you one whit as a human being.*

This is one of the most radical statements in all the first century gathered literature pertaining to the great Jewish teacher. It's radical central message is this: *As long as you go around letting others make life-and-death decisions about your life without doing what you can to address the vast inequalities that allow one section of humanity to dismiss the rest of us, things won't change for the better. They'll just keep slipping down the slope toward deeper and deeper inequality, which is like a powerful storm that destroys both the haves and the have-nots, eventually.*

Those who have studied early first century Galilee sociologically report that such conditions describe *exactly* what was going on back then, between the years 25 and 35, and these words from Luke squarely address that particular and specific situation.

I personally think that the present world in the USA resembles that ancient world in the Galilee. *Signs of the times.* It infuriates me that every single day...and I mean every day...I encounter people who have to make impossible medical choices because, despite their hard work, they're neither afforded health insurance, nor make enough to afford to buy that themselves. Those who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid coverage can be hit by a random health disaster just as easily as those who are out of work entirely. In both cases, without Medicaid, they lose everything. They lose their whole lives, which I assure you are just as precious to them as my life is to me, and your life is to you. In ancient times, if you lost everything, because you couldn't afford any available healthcare, but you didn't just want to lie down and die, the popular theory was that you had displeased Heaven and were being singled out for punishment. It was your own damn fault. Today, the theology is the same, and *get this*, you don't even have to use God-talk..."you must have been one of those lazy socialist types not to be able to get an honest job that

covers your health care"...or, "you're simply *unlucky* to have been hit by catastrophic illness (say Alzheimer's, or cancer), but too bad...what does your bad luck have to do with me? Don't hate me and try to change the health care system in this country just because I have had good luck."

Signs of the times: In state after state, women's health access has been dismantled piece by piece, law by law, and sadly, man by man. Using tricks and devious methods every time.

Signs of the times: As soon as the Supreme Court nullified the voting acts passed during the civil rights era, immediately a number of Southern States began to restore restrictions to the ballot, undoing so many provisions established during the civil rights era, and proving to me at least that claims of "color-blindness" are preposterous.

Signs of the times: Well, as you can well imagine, the strange weather has been interpreted by many outspoken, and too often televised, evangelists as signs, not of the times, but of the end of the world. All those plane crashes this summer, all those trains going off the tracks, all those cable cars plummeting in Switzerland, all those summer floods washing away cities even so great as Calgary, with (the evangelist points out with a snicker) *a Muslim mayor*...all signs that the world is going to end. The evangelists then shake all these random events as if they were noisy rattles, distracting their followers from worrying about the present state of things (a state soon to be replaced by the greatest disparity of all, eternal heaven and eternal hell, the one percent and the 99 fixed forever). Why worry about disparities between access to health care here on earth when that final separation makes disparity permanent?

Dr. King and Bayard Rustin, his chief organizer, were both deeply religious, and liberal Christians, and both would have been disgusted by such theological shenanigans. Instead, they faithfully orbited the radical passage in Luke I outlined earlier. They understood that you have to engage with your opponents as human beings...make demands, refuse to listen to the righteous protests of "gradualism" and "you want to make changes too fast," but do the urgent work of transforming society with recognition that in the end, the work of justice for all must *involve* all. It involves *even those who have been oppressors*. He made this very plain in his Dream Speech, when he said, "*I have a dream that one day, out in the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table.*" He spoke not of force, but of insistent persuasion, like the sun's hot rays winning over the cold, brutal power of the windstorm in the fable this morning. Then he said: "*With this faith...(i.e. faith in non-violent confrontation...MLB) we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to climb up for freedom together.*"

Then he adds a few lines that are never quoted since everyone seems so fascinated by the rhythms of his dream litany. He said to those gathered: "*We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities.*"

This is the context of Remica Bingham's poem, where her grandmother cooked hundreds of meals in her kitchen for the thousands driving toward Washington DC for the great March. Few restaurants in those days allowed black travelers to be seated. Few motels were open to people of

color. So as Remica Bingham puts it: "marching all but in place," she herself fed the hungry going past her house. She didn't get to the march...but she was an ally, an ally who shared the dream. *"This is for the journey,"* she said to them, through her four sons, *"in hopes that none of you would ever stop."*

Ah, there it is. How many times have I heard people talk of social history...or the weather... as if there is a conclusion, a finish line, and once a storm is over, it won't happen again. *"Haven't we done that already? Isn't America a better place finally? Don't we have civil rights for everyone. Isn't it time to stop and relax yet? I mean, after all, we elected Mr. Obama as president, didn't we?"* Well, you could ask someone without health care to find out your answer. Or, who lost everything because they couldn't get Medicaid. Or, you could talk to a woman who almost died for lack of Planned Parenthood recently shut down by the local state government. Or, talk to a man who can't work ever because he was in prison... just once. Or, if you don't want to do all that to get your answer, you could listen to Coretta Scott King, whose words, these words, I actually put at the top of your orders of celebration. "You do not finally win a state of freedom that is protected forever. It doesn't work that way. That is what we have not taught young people, or older ones for that matter. " Or, even more clearly, you could ask Dr. King to repeat the closing words of his *I Have A Dream* speech: "Nineteen sixty-three is not an end, but a beginning."

So, how's the weather?

Offering

Remembering that the congregation voted to support our justice missions via the budget, which includes gifts accepted at this offering, we offer us all this opportunity for generosity of spirit, engagement with our vision and a practice session for loving-kindness. Together, we can do so much...

Closing Prayer: Cadenza for Breath, Word and Spirit

Breath, breath, breath, breath, wind and breath.
Spiritus Mundi, Spirit, like at a wild rally,
spirit, like at some championship game,
spirit, clearly reflected in the tired eyes of a woman who has marched for miles,
spirit, clearly somersaulting as the singer belts out in a song, spirit in any language,
spirit in sign...the air rising over a flame,
pneuma, breath, wind, spirit said the Greek philosopher, ruach, wind, breath, spirit said the Hebrew prophet, breath, breath, in every man, woman and child, no exceptions, enlivening all, not a few, breeze, wind, cooling a summer day, and uprooting anything in shallow ground, spiritus, breath wind, never still, always moving, going forward, giving life, reality and metaphor fused. Breath, breath, breath, breath, wind, spirit.

Closing Hymn #1024 You Gotta Do When The Spirit Says Do

Blessing (*extempore*)