

Hemmed In

In Barbara Brown Taylor's memoir, *An Altar in the World*, she recounts stories of her father wakening her to wonderful things, particularly a shower of falling stars:

"I did not know then that they were called the tears of St. Lawrence, or that they returned every August. All I knew was that my father could be trusted when he told me there was something I needed to see. Some nights that meant looking through a large book of photographs from *Life* magazine that had arrived in that day's mail. Other nights it meant climbing in the car with him to go find the fire that was causing an orange glow in the sky. My father was such an accomplished chaser of fire engines that he could tell a brush fire from a house fire by the kind of smoke it sent up into the sky.

On the night I am remembering, he told me to pull the pale blue blanket off of my bed and bring it to the deck. The air was sweet and cool. The sky bristled with stars. After my father had folded the blanket in half, he lay down on it with his hands folded behind his head. Katy and I lay down beside him, one under each elbow, where we could smell the chapstick, tobacco, strong coffee smell of our father. If he explained what we were looking for, I do not remember that either. All I remember is lying there beside him looking into a sky I had never really looked into before, or at least never for so long.

When I breathed in, I seemed huge to myself. I felt as much a part of the sky as a feather on a bird's belly. When I breathed out, I became so small that I feared I might vanish. What was a seven-year-old girl, under that great weight of stars?

When the first one fell, we all gasped and clutched at one another. *Did you see that? I did! Where did it go? To the far side of the moon.*

More and more stars fell as the night deepened. Some of them made clean arcs across the sky, while others disappeared before they had gone halfway. Watching them, I gained the understanding that the planet I was lying on looked like a star from somewhere else in the universe. It too might fall at any moment, taking me along with it. This understanding made my stomach flop even as it increased my investment in what was going on above my head. When my father woke me later, I could not believe that I had fallen asleep. How do you fall asleep, with whole worlds plummeting before your eyes?"¹

When was the last time you felt that kind of wonder?

When was the last time you felt that kind of security?

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (San Francisco, HarperOne: 2009) pp18-19

The 139th Psalm is something of a hymn of awaking to the power and wonder of God. The psalmist marvels at all that God has done, and marvels that God remains with her.

How often do we pause to reflect and wonder over the reality that the God who created all that is, and will ever be, created you and me with the same care as the universe?

To ponder on what God has done is to face that we exist within the surety of God's power and love, at least if we have any humility regarding ourselves and our purpose.

When I consider the texts for today, two themes emerge.

It is overstating to declare that they are the heart of Christian discipleship.

They are the very promises and demands that enlivened the faith of reformers like Luther and Calvin and civil rights leaders like King and Rustin, and may do the same for you and me.

The first is the *unfailing presence of God*.

The second is *the unequivocal calling to follow that God... to follow Jesus Christ... even and especially into an unknown future*.

There are any number of gradual or abrupt shifts in life circumstances that can leave us feeling bereft, disoriented, hurting, and torn.

Sure, change is constant, but most of us require at least a minute or two to adjust, and I strongly suspect those of us who easily lean into the future are comfortable doing so from the perceived security of the present.

Wipe away that security, that stability, and most of us will cling to what we know rather than lean into something new.

Trust is foundational.

The security of God is everlasting in a world where we could bite the dust, literally, every single minute of every single day.

The psalmist knew that.

Those themes of security and calling are linked inextricably. The calling that Jesus places before us is not to follow an unknown God, but rather to come alongside Jesus Christ himself. Christ calls us not to go into a future alone, but with him beside us.

That is the sort of security the Psalmist sings about.

For many years, Diogenes Allen taught philosophy and theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. He was somewhat legendary for his exacting nature when it came to God-talk.

Allen understood something that we do well to remember: When we speak of God, we must do so from the vantage point of deepest humility and caution. Because to do otherwise, glibly

to prate on about our pet ideas and personal biases is not only to do violence to our understanding of God, but to others' understanding of God as well.

Ultimately, Allen came to see such posturing as blaspheming against God. Consequently, he began to see colleagues as enemies of God and found himself indulging in hatred, not just of their errors, but of them personally. Suddenly, it occurred to him that perhaps God did not regard his colleagues as enemies, even if he did.

Knowing his attitudes had no place in the Christian life, he sought a remedy and began praying. His meditations led him to the realization that if God did not regard these people as enemies, neither should he.

But his awareness didn't stop at this realization. He continued in prayer. With continual prayer, he found not only that his attitudes changed, but that he discovered something more.

Finally, he wrote, "The peace and joy that arise from this practice come from the presence of God in the Holy Spirit. Its tranquility can be compared to the harmonizing notes of the bass clef that are sounded more or less continuously beneath a melody in the treble clef. God's peace and joy (bass clef) can thus coexist with many other thoughts and feelings (treble clef), and God's peace and joy can be brought to awareness by a simple shift of attention. This is one way we may have a habitual awareness of God. It was my hunger for a habitual presence that led me to the study of spirituality in the first place."²

Habitual awareness of the presence of God is a spiritual discipline that must be *developed*.

Most of us do not simply awaken one day to know of God's presence.

Instead, we are *trained* through Christian formation to see it.

We condition ourselves to be aware of God's work where others see merely existence.

This is not the same as suggesting that we indulge in magical thinking that blithely attributes divine activity to what is simply a logical progression of activities, but rather that we become trained to see that the *whole* series of actions, whatever they are, exist within the providence of God.

That is what it is to rest in the security of God.

But there is more.

To rest in the security of God, to be "hemmed in" as the Psalmist was, is to know that God's activity is not dependent on our perception or our acceptance of God's invitation.

Importantly, God's participation in our lives is never dependent on our invitation.

²Diogenes Allen, Spiritual Theology: The Theology of Yesterday for Spiritual Help Today (Cowley Publications, Lanham: 1997) pp88-89

Stay with me: If all of creation rests in God's constant care, then *not one thing exists* outside of it.

The God who calls us to follow has always walked alongside us.

The God who walks alongside us is the God who pursues us like a persistent lover.

The persistent lover is the God who will not rest until we come to awareness of the presence of God in all the earth; in all the universe.

That is the heart of redemption, the heart of inward repair of our deepest selves.

Perhaps that is how Augustine comes to the words, "Thou hast made us for thyself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee."

There is a legend of a church in Switzerland, sometimes called the Mountain Valley Cathedral; it seems to exist only in preachers' imaginations.

It is described as having high arches, columns that float above the nave, stained glass windows that glow in the sunlight, and an extraordinary pipe organ.

Pipe organs are always something of an exercise in alchemy, and there was something about the metallurgy, or the reverberations from the room, the rate of sound decay, whatever it was, the organ was reputed to be stunning in its tone and clarity, ethereal and wondrous. When played, it would ring out through the whole valley, filling it with beauty and joy.

Until the day the pipes grew silent.

No one could figure out what had gone wrong; the organ simply wouldn't sound.

The leaders of the church brought in experts to try to fix their beloved organ, but it only got worse. Rather than sounding as it once had, each iteration of repairs only brought out the worst in the instrument.

It was out of tune.

The pipes didn't sing, they groaned in disharmony.

No one could stand to hear it.

An elderly woman came to the church and coaxed the sexton into allowing her access to the pipes.

For two days, she worked in silence. Nary a note was sounded.

Muffled thuds and scrapes could be heard from below the pipe chamber.

Three days in, just as the sexton and the pastor were becoming truly worried about what was going on, the organ burst into glorious song.

The pipes rang out over the valley and when the sound of their beloved organ hit the ears of the villagers, they stopped what they were doing and listened.

As they made their way to the church, even the rocks and trees of the mountains seemed fairly to burst into song.

When the music finally stopped, one person asked the question that was on all of their minds: How had this old woman succeeded in repairing their organ when all of the experts had failed?

The woman smiled a sphinxlike smile and said, "It was I who built this organ fifty years ago, and it was only I who could restore it."

The God who hemmed in the Psalmist, the God who even now hems us in, is the God of creation. The God who hems us in is the God who made us, and the God who restores us.

And so it is that *this* God invites us to be awakened to wonderful things, and to follow in the security of God's all-powerful love.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.