

In Perpetual Spring

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
18th Sunday after Pentecost—8 October, 2017
Reverend Jeannette McHugh

Exodus 20.1–20

A couple of weeks ago when I first looked at the readings for today the weather was so warm, and the light and colour of the natural world was so beautiful, that I thought we should really be worshipping outside on a Sunday morning. This was my initial response to the readings: the Old Testament reading was about the giving of the ten commandments—we know about them and we usually deal with them in Lent.

Paul's letter to the Philippians was all about Paul, and how he had all the attributes of a Jew in good standing. He is righteous and learned as a Pharisee, he has suffered for Christ, and how we should all imitate his example. Even the gospel was quite dark with a parable in which innocent labourers and the landowner's son were killed. It closes with Jesus condemning the temple religious hierarchy. Preaching with any kind of certainty about what is required to get us into heaven did not seem to be appropriate on a lovely spring morning.

So, I returned to Exodus, and found a new Spring poem, which by chance complemented the reading very well.

What do we find in the Exodus reading? God is talking directly to his people.

What is God saying to them and what does he want from them?

He is telling them that he loves them and he is giving them rules to live by. There is thunder and lightning and smoke, and a trumpet. Quite understandably the people are afraid of this direct approach and beg Moses to act as a go-between them and God as he done before!

What do we make of this reading in 2017? Did the ancient Jews really believe this all happened exactly as it is written, or did they understand that the story was using poetic language as the writers sought to convey the wonder and mystery of their relationship with a supreme being who created their world, loved them, and left instructions on how they should live?

In our age of quantum physics and Nano particles, when we communicate with each other through satellites, what do we do with stories like this one?

My greatest personal challenge at this time is to know how to interact and interpret the stories and teachings in the Bible which give us the fundamental principles of our Christian faith.

I want to suggest that this task, this challenge, applies to us all.

Each one of us has the wonderful privilege and responsibility of responding to our faith stories and teachings in a way that is honest and true for us at this moment in time.

To begin with, I suggest that we take the stories as they are, and reflect on what we have learnt, before we seek the help of our ministers or books or online.

We take them as they are, without trying to explain them, or dismissing them as stories for simple people who thought that their supreme being lived up in the sky. Then we must choose if we take them literally, or are they words of a poetic nature trying to explain the unexplainable – that somehow we have a relationship with the creative force that made this world and universe and who in some way or other lived in the man Jesus to show us how to interpret and live these ten commandments.

Some months ago, I was puzzling over this when I remembered how I had read the story of Cinderella to my children. The same thing happens when I watch the film 'Pretty Woman', which is really Cinderella for adults.

When I was reading Cinderella, I never stopped to explain that a pumpkin could not really become a carriage, nor six grey mice become horses; my young listeners and I did not need that explanation, we simply accepted it as part of a story which was really about unjust oppression and triumphant reward. Even four year olds knew that!

So now, let us read the second verse of the spring poem in the pewsheet.

On a spring day while walking through a garden ...

Suddenly the archetypal
human desire for peace
with every other species
wells up in you. *The lion
and the lamb cuddling up.*
The snake and the snail, kissing.
Even the prick of the thistle,
queen of the weeds, revives
your secret belief in perpetual spring,
your faith that for every hurt
there is a leaf to cure it.

We do not really believe that the lion and the lamb will cuddle up, nor will the snake and the snail kiss, but we do long for the time when the world will be truly at peace, when there will be no more wars and conflict. We understand that these are cultural images which better convey the depth and strength of our longing.

In the same way, we don't stop to explain the strange events in Cinderella to our children. No, we simply read the story and look at the pictures, and it is ok for a moment to believe that anything is possible, good things *can* happen to ordinary people who have had a hard time up till now.

And if they don't, if nothing changes, that still does not destroy our longing for a more equitable and just world.

When I had finished the first draft of this sermon I turned on the TV and by chance the ancient art, which is still being practiced, of making Japanese swords was on the screen. I watched the process from the beginning of the first firing of the material that had to be mixed in a certain way, and fired at a particular temperature over months and beaten into shape up until the final moments when the commentator, who was Brian Cox, said 'this is the time when the swordsmith must put his soul into the sword'. That's all he said, but I understood that what he was really saying was that all the knowledge, all the gifts, all the practice and experience of the swordsmith must come together in perfect harmony for the finished sword to be perfect.

I close with the gentle suggestion that in this lovely season of spring that we observe nature closely, look closely at new leaves unfolding, new flowers opening, sense the new light and warmth in the air around us. Let us drop our defenses, and be open to accepting that it *is* possible to greet each new day with joy and wonder. And we should especially give thanks that the ancient writers of over 2,000 years ago 'put their souls' into the writing down what had been an oral tradition of poetry and stories of the beginnings of their faith when their God

chose to become involved in the life of a small Hebrew people who were known in the ancient world as Israel.

Most importantly, we should always remember that it is our faith story as well, which means that we really do have the possibility of living in a perpetual spring, if we keep our minds and hearts open to new understandings of the essence of our covenant relationship with our God.

Amen.

In Perpetual Spring

Gardens are also good places
to sulk. You pass beds of
spiky voodoo lilies
and trip over the roots
of a sweet gum tree,
in search of medieval
plants whose leaves,
when they drop off
turn into birds
if they fall on land,
and coloured carp if they
plop into water.

Suddenly the archetypal
human desire for peace
with every other species
wells up in you. *The lion
and the lamb cuddling up.*
The snake and the snail, kissing.
Even the prick of the thistle,
queen of the weeds, revives
your secret belief
in perpetual spring,
your faith that for every hurt
there is a leaf to cure it.

Amy Gerstler, "In Perpetual Spring",
from *Bitter Angel*, (Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon Univ. Pr., 1990).