

## Return from the Great Night Sea Journey: What Have We Learned?

Welcome back to the Farmhouse! In the midst of many returnings in this time of winding down of the pandemic, we are back, here, in this special, Spirit-filled place. With gratitude in our hearts for all that has made this return possible. Many of us have been able to return to live connections with our dear families and friends; touching each other, hugging, slapping each other on the back, and maybe even breathing a sigh of relief that we made it through. It is good to begin with gratitude in our hearts.

As we feel that gratitude, I know we also feel much grief for those we may know who did not make it through or who suffered greatly. I know we surely feel much distress that most people around the world have not yet made it through. We still pray that prayer at noon that Catherine invited us to pray over a year ago. We say this: we pray for the poor, for the suffering, for the dying, and for the Earth, as we hold that vigil prayer in the silence.

We hear people say how good it is to be back to normal. How does that strike you when you hear it? On the one hand, I understand. How good it is for some things to be face to face and live again. Perhaps we can be forgiven for forgetting, but the normal before the pandemic that we may be getting back to was not working for many, many of us. Normal meant increasing racism, increasing gun violence, climate disruption, eroding democracy. You know the list. There is still much that evokes fear and anxiety in our hearts in this time when things are coming apart, are dying, and when also something new is being born.

I recall a much earlier prayer that came to us from Carol Martin, then Wilkinson, though Catherine may have had a hand in it too. It went like this:

Deep, unknown, loving Mystery,  
we give ourselves to you in this hour  
to hold, with you, this time  
when things come apart  
and fear grows and compassion is scarce.  
We ask to be knit together in your imagining,  
your longing, your acting Presence  
for this new time being born.  
May we, united inside by your love,  
become ground prepared  
to bear the fruit of mercy and hope.

So we have returned to some degree at least from this pandemic time, but in the larger view of things, we return to a greater night sea journey that is ongoing, from which we have not returned at all. In fact it may have gotten even more perilous that it was before the pandemic.

As we return to the greater night sea journey, I want to ask this question: from this experience of the pandemic, what have we learned? How have we been changed? How have we evolved, how have we grown in spirit and in soul?

Well, I surely don't have the answers to those questions, questions we each have to answer for ourselves, but I do want to invite us to slow down and to take stock of what has happened, to reflect on what we've learned. Rather than just jumping back into the usual life stories we were living before the pandemic. And I'm suggesting that we do that not just for these few minutes, but at least for weeks and maybe months to come.

As I look at our return, here are seven invitations that I see that the pandemic has given us.

1. We are being invited to slow down in response to the urgency of our time. Our sheltering at home in this pandemic, has made us slow down; might we consider holding on to that awhile longer? Bayo Akomolafe, a poet, psychologist and professor who came here from Nigeria offers this wise saying from his native people. "The situation is urgent; we must slow down." The situation is urgent; we must slow down.

2. We are invited to make the journey from fear to faith. There was a lot to fear with this pandemic, and there's still a lot to fear out there. Great fear invites us to great faith.

3. We are invited to befriend mystery and unknowing. All the way through this pandemic we have been learning as we went along. What we were pretty sure of last week, may not be true after all. You can catch the virus from surfaces; well, maybe not so much. Children better stay home so they'll be safe. Well, with all the mental health problems our children have had staying out of school, plus the relative benign course of the disease in children so far -- maybe they're better off in school -- or maybe not, depending on the prevalence of the virus in any given location. We worry if the vaccines will work against the next variant that emerges. So much unknowing and mystery.

4. We are invited to live within our limitations, with not being in total control of everything, or not being as much in control as we might like. Of course there is much we can do and need to do to stop this pandemic, and new technologies have been a godsend, but there is a limit to what we can control. As Richard Rohr says: truly holy people are always humble people.

5. We are invited to let God be God in ways beyond what we have so far understood. May even let God be wild and undomesticated. What is God doing with this pandemic? What is God up to in the larger distress and dysfunction of our time? I can't answer those questions; so you and I are invited to find a way to live with the questions - to let God be God in ways beyond what we can know.

6. The pandemic invites us to enjoy the essential goodness of life. I hope that you have noticed how simple and ordinary things -- a note of appreciation -- those yellow flowers -- that birdsong in the bushes are somehow more special when you are sheltering in place.

7. And finally on my little list, the pandemic invites us to deep spiritual connection with the Sacred in the natural world. Haven't you noticed -- one thing we could still do during the pandemic was be outside somewhere away from other people? The parks were overcrowded. You couldn't even find a place to park.

So that's my little list. Each of us might come up with a different list of what we are learning from this pandemic time, and that's fine, but what I'm primarily suggesting is that we each do reflect back on what this experience has to teach us. What have we learned? How have we grown in spirit and soul? What of how life has changed for us in this pandemic do we want to carry forward in our lives?

It strikes me that several of these invitations, and the pandemic experience itself, relate strongly to the mythical, archetypal night sea journey which is the subject of our Gospel lesson today, and to which I would now like us to turn our attention. And when I refer to this story as mythical or archetypal, what I am saying is that it is a story that is always happening. A story that is always true.

Jesus and those disciples and followers traveling with him (from what we know including both men and women) are out in the sea in a boat or a few small boats, in the dark, and a great storm comes upon them. The wind tosses them about, the waves wash over the sides of the boat, beginning to swamp the boat. Can you put yourself in that boat, can you feel the fear, even terror? Maybe some of you have been in a small boat in a storm out in the water away from shore. The wind tossing the boat off course, a big wave splashing over the side of the boat. If you haven't been in an actual boat in a storm, surely each one of us has been in a perilous situation, in a "storm" of some shape or form, maybe even close to perishing, maybe even in relation to this pandemic. Oh no, it could happen here, right here at Dayspring!

Can you feel that moment when fear grows and compassion is scarce?

Maybe it took that much desperation to get the followers of Jesus to wake Jesus up. Now suppose we take the view that there is that of Christ in each one of us, even where it may not be at all obvious, and that there is something holy in every part of the natural world as well, that we come to know that every bush is a burning bush. This is, of course, what the contemplative Christian tradition says: all things are in God and God is in all things. We are all mixed blessings. We are all mixed blessings.

So here we are in some perilous situation, on some sort of “night sea journey”, not in control, full of fear, and we cry out that we are perishing, and I wonder: what is it going to take to wake Christ up? The Christ in you, and in you, and in you. Wake up. We need you. We need you. We need you.

Back in the story, Jesus’ followers do manage to wake Jesus up. And what does Jesus do? He talks to the wind. He talks to the waves. Peace. Be still. Then the wind ceases and there is a dead calm.

Reflecting on this moment in the story as if for the first time, one thing that surprises me, modern person that I am, is that Jesus speaks to the natural world, and these others -- the wind and the sea -- obey him. This seem altogether natural for Jesus. “I do this all the time,” he seems to say. He treats them not as objects but as subjects. Not just physical entities, but spiritual entities as well. He deals with this situation that presents in the physical realm by engaging the spiritual realm in conversation. Jesus works in this other realm all the time, and for that reason is so easily misunderstood by his followers then and perhaps now as well. A side question for another time: how are we apprenticing ourselves to that other realm? I do think we know some things about that here at Dayspring. In a time when things come apart, how might we deepen our journey in this other realm of spirit and soul? How might we speak with the wind and the sea?

The other thing that might surprise some of us moderns, it that Jesus is so at home in the wild. Not only in this story, but throughout the Gospel account. I remember a talk by Walter Bruggemann, whose books and visits here inspired us in years past, at Wellspring in 1998 for Ministry of Money when he spoke about the undomesticated wildness of Jesus. This is what he said:

*We’ve had our names on the registry of the ordered ones; what we find is a word from the wilderness -- UNDOMESTICATED. What the Gospel wants to say is that all the money managers couldn’t stop the wildness. If that wilderness way ever gets a first cubit in our bodies, it’s gong to blow the whole thing wide open. The Gospel is about how the managers conspire to eliminate the wilderness word.*

At the end of the story Jesus rebukes his followers, I would guess in some gentle way, asking them: why are you afraid, O ye of little faith? This is not the first time he has said that. Jesus invites them over and over throughout the Gospel to move from fear to faith. Do not be afraid, He says. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. It's what Bonhoeffer wrote about in *The Cost of Discipleship*: The disciple is dragged out of his relative security into a life of absolute insecurity (that is, in truth, into the absolute security and safety of the fellowship of Jesus.)

Looking back then at this pandemic time, I see Jesus taking this opportunity to invite us to move from fear to faith (or to continue that movement). I see Jesus reminding us again and again that we are not able to control as much as we would like in this world. We do have limits. We do live in a world of mystery and unknowing. We I see Jesus inviting us to be in conversation with that of God in all things, to enter more fully into the realm of spirit. And I hear a deep cry for that of Christ to awaken in each one of us.

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As you return from this pandemic journey, what stories still live in you, inspire you? In closing here's a little story I'm carrying away from this journey. As many of you may know in my little sabbatical this year I've been part of a yearlong program called *Seminary of the Wild - the Wild Earth the Wild Self, the Wild Christ and the Wild Call*. Each week I have spent a half day or more in local wild landscapes, trying to make my way in the realm of spirit that lies within and beyond the more tangible physical world. You could say that I am trying to explore whatever it was that Jesus was doing when he talked to the wind and the sea.

One morning last fall I head to the waterfalls at Cunningham Falls State Park out beyond Frederick. By intention I leave behind the ordinary world, the normal world so many people would like to be back to, and make my way both into the forest and into that spirit world that lies deep with and beyond the ordinary world. I pass the huge old fallen oak tree whose roots grasped a boulder so tightly that when it fell it lifted the huge boulder right up on end and arrive at the waterfall. We exchange greetings. I am about to climb up to the top of the waterfall to sit by an old maple tree with big roots twisting over the rocks and winding into a small cave -- a cave where there lives an old woman who weaves the world. But that story, from the White Mountain Apache, will need to wait for another time.

At the bottom of the waterfall I leave the trail and walk over the rocks past the viewing platform and cross the creek below the falls. As I pass the viewing platform I notice someone is there. My eyes charting my course over the rocks, I only see two

dark-skinned legs of the person on the platform. As I am about to reach the other side of the creek., I hear behind me a voice: What do you think of the protests?

I turn and see a young, athletic looking African-American woman on the viewing platform looking at me. Of course she was referring to the Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of Geroge Floyd. Bear in mind, at this moment I'm a good deal of the way off in some other world.

Words begin to pour out of my mouth from somewhere deep within. Later, I wrote in my journal what I could recall of what I said:

*Oh, we are living in such very difficult times. I am so discouraged. I'm heartsick at the violence, the injustice, the suffering. I think we have to listen to each others' stories -- the stories that got us here. White people, my ancestors, came here and managed to dominate everything, to colonize the Earth, the land, the native peoples that were living here, the people they brought here as slaves, the immigrants working on the farms. It is still happening. There has been so much suffering, so much pain so much death. We have to listen to our stories, to hear the suffering, to feel the pain. This is a terrible time for us. But maybe, just maybe it is the birth pangs of the new people we are to become. Not a people who dominate other people and the Earth, but people who are all struggling together to live in peace and harmony.*

The woman on the platform called back across the creek, "Thank you."

I really have no idea where that came from in me; it's nothing I had ever said before. I have no idea what it may have meant to that woman, no idea what little family that showed up on the viewing platform on the opposite side of the creek thought of this strange moment. I simply make my way up the rock ledges to the top of the waterfall. Tell this story to the old woman who lives in the cave and weaves the world together.

I hope that we see before us a compelling invitation to slow down and take time on the return from the pandemic to ponder its meaning and its wisdom. Ask ourselves: what have we learned? What will we carry with us as we reenter this greater night sea journey? We may consider how we might move from fear to faith in these dark and stormy times, how we might apprentice ourselves to mystery and unknowing, and deepen our journey in the realm of Spirit, more and more finding Christ in all things and all things in Christ. May it be so.

Jim Hall, Dayspring Church, June 20, 2021