

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

June 14, 2020, The 2nd Sunday of Pentecost/The 11th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Romans 5:1-8, Genesis 18:1-5, 21:1-7

“IS ANYTHING TOO WONDERFUL FOR THE LORD?”

Several weeks ago, I was listening to a podcast in which Dr. Brene Brown was interviewing Dr. Vivek Murthy our former Surgeon General, who said that we tend to focus on what we know. Then he told an old parable he heard growing up:

A man is looking under a street light and a passerby comes by and says “Hey can I help you, what are you looking for?”

And the man searching says: “I lost my keys; I’m trying to find them.”

And he says: “OK, let me help you.”

So, they keep looking. Finally, the gentleman who walked up said “You know, I really can’t find anything, are you sure lost them here?”

And he said: “No, I lost them in the bush over there, but the lights over here and that’s why I’m looking here.”

Brene Brown interview with Dr. Vivek Murthy, “Unlocking Us with Brene Brown
<https://brenebrown.com/podcast/dr-vivek-murthy-and-brene-on-loneliness-and-connection/>

We are living in a time and season when the old ways of thinking and knowing have changed, but we’re not always sure where to look for new answers.

John Philip Newell, an author and teacher about Celtic Christianity, has been spending the last five weeks posting “Wisdom in the Pandemic” videos on YouTube, from his garden in Edinburgh, Scotland. I recommend all five of them to you! You’ll find the address in the printed bulletin you got in the mail.

His guiding question in these videos is:

“how do we access wisdom now during the world pandemic,
 and how will we choose to live beyond the pandemic.”

He wonders what are the changes we are seeing that need to happen in our relationship with the earth, and our relationship with one another as races, peoples and nations.

Each week he turns to teachers from the past to see what they have to say to us. Last week he spoke about learning from a young Jewish woman from the Netherlands, Etty Hillesum, who lived and died during the Nazi occupation of her nation during World War II. She was a young Jewish woman in her twenties, who worked and was later imprisoned at the Westerbork Transit Camp, before being sent to Auschwitz where she died. Before being sent to the concentration camp, she kept a diary that survived. John Philip Newell says that she saw her diary and her life as a dialog with God.

While still in her home in Amsterdam, part of the way that she would deal with the heartbreaking difficulty of the days, was to gaze out her window at the beautiful blooming Jasmine. Then while in the Westerbork Transit Camp she would go to the fence and gaze across the fields at the yellow blossoming she could see on the horizon.

She would hold these two things in her awareness: the beauty of the blossoming, and the unimaginable suffering that was all around her.

She also wrote of believing a new day would come and she hoped to be part of that new day.

She said that she could offer that new day the voice, the soul, the memory of a people who have suffered, because the soul of those who have suffered belongs in the new day.

Then John Philip Newell asks:

“What is the ‘new day’ that we are longing for,
 what new relationships with the sacredness of the earth,
 what new relationships between us as peoples, and nations, and individuals...
 What just and reverent relationships are we longing for?”

Etty Hillesum said at the end of her life that the way to prepare for the new day is to live it now in our hearts. John Philip says: “Her voice lives among us now, she is inviting us to live the new day we are hoping for now within us, and to see that new day in our hearts as preparing for the foundations for real change.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqWPyEppPfc>

As we follow Etty Hillesum’s wisdom to look to the beauty around us, and also to the pain and suffering around us in our world, we see the beauty of spring merging into summer, and we see the suffering that Covid 19 has brought into our own lives, and those we love, and to our local and global communities. This world pandemic has changed, and is changing, us.

We also see around us the results of the racial divides in our nation. I have had conversations with some of you from Togo, and some of you who grew up here in the Midwest, and others who have stories from growing up and living in other parts of our country. This is a season for us to truly hear about the variety of Americas we live in together.

This is a season to celebrate the beauty of our diversity, and to mourn the ways we have let that diversity divide us.

This is a season, in John Philip Newell’s words, to ask ourselves as individuals, as the Christian church, and as First Presbyterian Church of East Moline,

“What is the ‘new day’ that we are longing for,
 what new relationships with the sacredness of the earth,
 what new relationships between us as peoples, and nations, and races and
 individuals...
 What just and reverent relationships are we longing for?”

Borrowing from John Philip Newell’s practice of listening to teachers from the past as we ask ourselves what new day we are hoping for, this morning we hear the story of our mother of faith, Sarah and her husband Abraham.

Sarah was 90 years old when the three visitors came to the tent and the compound, she shared with her husband Abraham and their extended family. The Bible says that God was one of these visitors, and scholars think maybe the other two were angels or attendants to God.

Sarah knew about change; she knew about the unexpected. The voice of God had led them to leave their known world in the region of Babylon in Ur, and to travel hundreds of miles across the desert to the land of Canaan. (Genesis 12). They had been promised by God that Abraham would be the father of a great nation. But no baby had come for Sarah, and here they were settled into a new land and settled far into old age.

Sarah knew change.

When the three visitors arrived at their tent that day more change was coming. In the practice of nomadic peoples in those days, and the continued practice of Bedouin people’s today in the Middle

East, their response to visitors was hospitality. They welcomed the strangers, they made them comfortable under a shade tree, they gave them water to drink, and water to wash their feet, and then they prepared a special meal to welcome the strangers. In the custom of the day Sarah did not sit with them, but she was listening from behind the flap of the tent.

In clear, but polite Bible language, the author makes sure we know that Sarah was old. Not only are we told that she was 90, but that it had “ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.” What this literally means is that menopause was so far back in the rearview mirror that Sarah couldn’t see it anymore. Children were not even a dream for her anymore.

So, when God tells Abraham that Sarah will give birth to a son, she laughs. Scholars say we should allow ourselves to hear the humor in this story. When Sarah denies her laughter, God comes back with “oh yes you did!” While its hard to imagine God in a yes-no argument, that is basically what happens.

Green, Joel B, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby, Carolyn J. Sharp, eds,
Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A,
Volume 3 Season after Pentecost, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020, p. 69-70

Then God nudges Sarah, and nudges us, with this wonderful phrase: “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” (18:14)

Or in other translations God says: “There is nothing too difficult for me.” (CEV)

Or: “Is anything too hard for God?” (The Message)

And in time, as is the way with babies, a son arrived to Sarah and to Abraham. They named him Isaac, which means “he laughs or he will laugh.” And Sarah said: “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” And she said, “Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

Sarah knew about change!

As I thought about what Sarah has to teach us in these days of the world pandemic, and cultural and racial upheaval, I began to wonder what would happen if we welcomed these uncertain times as Sarah did the three strangers, with hospitality.

What if these days are bringing us to a new birth, that we can’t even imagine,
because our dreams of a new day are so far back in the rear-view mirror
that they just aren’t real anymore?

The danger of asking this question, about welcoming this season with hospitality, is that you might hear me being insensitive to the pain and deaths of Covid 19, the pain and sorrow and fear of lost jobs and lost wages, the isolation and despair that social distancing has brought to some people.

The other danger is that you might hear me being insensitive, or ignorant, of the pain of systemic racism that is part of our American story.

But what if we learn from Etty Hillesum who stood at the fence of Westerbork Transit camp looking both at the beauty of the yellow blossoms and the horror of her people’s suffering in the midst of the Nazi regime? She allowed both of these images to enter her heart and life.

What if we open our eyes and look at both the beauty and the brokenness of this season of a world pandemic, and the necessary conversations about race in America.

What if let ourselves see both the beauty and the brokenness, and then we like Sarah, accept that something new is being birthed in our midst, and we welcome it with hospitality?

It seems to me that hospitality asks a lot more of us than just being scared, or sad, or overwhelmed by what these days hold.

All of these are obvious and acceptable first responses to a world pandemic and the sorrow of these days as we take a hard look at who we are as a nation of many races.

But then hospitality asks us to befriend the questions raised by a world pandemic and systemic racism.

Hospitality asks us to look at our heart of hearts, and begin to dream of the new day that is coming.

Hospitality asks us, as people of faith who follow Jesus, to look and listen for the ways that our voices and our hearts, will be needed in the new days that are ahead of us.

Hospitality asks us to befriend what can be birthed in the days ahead.

And maybe like Sarah we might laugh and say change is never going to come, and there has been too much pain:

in these last two and a half months,
too much pain in these last two and half weeks,
too much pain in these last 400 years.

Some voices will say it is foolish to hope and work for that new day.
Some voices will say that nothing good can be born from this season.
Some voices will say that hospitality is a joke.

But what if, in the midst of our derisive, broken laughter we hear God speaking to us today? What if, with our eyes holding both the beauty and the brokenness of this season, we hear God say to us: "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" (18:14)

"There is nothing too difficult for me." (CEV)
"Is anything too hard for God?"

And if we let ourselves hear and believe God's voice, then maybe, we who are children of God, will learn to laugh with the Sarah who held the newborn Isaac in her arms.

Because what if these days are bringing us to a new birth?

Isn't it in the mystery, and the surprise, and the promise of faith that we can welcome that new life with joyful laughter?

The history of God's people is a history full of the unexpected!

So let us, like our mother Sarah, befriend and welcome the change held in these days, because something new is being birthed.

Let us dream of that new day, and our place in it, and like Etty Hillesum, live that new day now in our hearts.

And let us in this season of gestation, strive to "hear the voice, the soul, the memory of the people who have suffered, because the soul of those who have suffered belongs in that new day."

(Sermon influenced by: Green, Ibid, p. 71.2.6 "A sermon on these texts would do well to go beyond Sarah's laughter to the absurdity—and wonder that lies behind it—that God can do all things in a way we cannot begin to imagine, even when we are lured to think that wonderful acts of grace do not

seem compelling in our culture of discord and pain. Wonder and awe are in short supply in our culture. How could a worship service, surrounding proclamation of these texts, create a sense of 'wonderfulness' and the joyful absurdity of God's overturning of all reasonable expectations of how our world works?..."