

Sermon: The Arrival of Spring**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: March 22, 2009**

And so we enter into the spring when the evidence of new life after a long cold winter begins to emerge. The length of night and day was equal on the vernal equinox and now every day the light begins to gradually overtake the dark and our days become longer and warmer. We see all this in the Book of Creation at this time of year even as we read in the book of our sacred scriptures about love that overcomes violence and death. As the promise of rebirth is writ large across the earth and the heavens in the natural world and as we sense that in our own selves on a warm spring afternoon, so too are we coming closer in the Christian calendar to Palm Sunday and Holy Week which represent the winter of loss, betrayal, pain and death but that leads us to the high holy day of Easter, the celebration of resurrection, of the awakening into the eternal. And as it happens in the natural world and is revealed in our scriptures, so too do most all of us know the truth of this story in our own lives, the stories of winter giving way to spring, death giving way to new life, sorrow turned to joy.

On Monday I got up and realized I had a day off in front of me and so I decided to go boarding on a beautiful warm sunny spring day. On my way to the mountain, I stopped in for a cup of coffee at the little Hinesburg gas and grocery store that's there right before you turn onto Hollow Rd to head over to Huntington. And as I walked in I noticed these two tough looking guys in their late teens, I would say, both with baggy pants and big shirts and scruffy facial hair. One had a baseball hat that was turned sideways and the other had a bandana wrapped around his head. And I was pouring myself a cup of coffee when suddenly there came this really loud whooping sound from the kid who had the hat on. I looked up and he had both hands in the air and was literally jumping up and down saying "whooooohooo!" And he turned to his buddy and gave him a big hug and jumped a little with him in his arms and his friend - taken aback - kind of pulled himself away. The owner of the store who was behind the counter with a grin on her face said "well, I'm glad you are excited but you have to be here on time and work all the hours I'm asking you to work." "I know, I know," the teenager said excitedly, "you can count on me!" He had just gotten a job at this store and we were witnessing this spontaneous unmeasured burst of joy. He ran outside to make a couple of calls on his cell

But all the signs of spring are not just warmth and green and light, there is also of course the mud. In order to get from winter to spring we gotta go through mud and there are moments where we might wonder if it is worth it. The writer and educator Parker Palmer has a beautiful way of talking about this transitional season we call mud season here in Vermont which comes between the cold harsh reality of winter and the green re-birthing of spring. He says:

Before spring becomes beautiful, it is plug ugly, nothing but mud and muck. I have walked in the early spring through fields that will suck your boots off, a world so wet and woeful it makes you yearn for the return of ice. But in that muddy mess, the conditions for rebirth are being created.

I love the fact that the word “humus” – the decayed vegetable matter that feeds the roots of plants – come from the same root that gives rise to the word humility. It helps me understand that the humiliating events of life, the events that leave “mud on my face” or that make “my name mud”, may just create the fertile soil in which some-thing new can grow.

In my own life, as winters segue into spring, I find it not only hard to cope with mud but also hard to credit the small harbingers of larger life to come, hard to hope fully until the outcome is more secure....

How do we cope with the mud in our own lives, trusting that its really only a matter of being patient, because ice giving way to mud means that the spring is coming. Can we in the seasons of our spirits sit in the mud without rushing back towards the frozen ground of winter or without pressing too soon into a forced spring, you know, putting on our shorts and tank tops and rushing outside only to find ourselves freezing in the still chilly reality of the changing season?

There is a beautiful prayer to Mary that I learned from Tracy and when I spent a year at the Benedictine Abbey in Connecticut. Its an ancient Gregorian chant that strikes me as a perfect prayer to lift up when we are tired of winter and still knee deep in the mud of our lives wondering if spring will ever truly come. I'll sing it in Latin but the translation goes like this

Hail holy queen, mother of mercy,
our life, our sweetness and our hope.
To you do we cry poor banished children of Eve,
To you do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping
in this valley of tears.
Turn then, most gracious advocate
your eyes of mercy toward us.
And after this, our exile,
Show us the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary

SALVE REGINA

D Bm Bm/A G A
Salve Regina, Mater misericordiae,

Bm A G D A Bm Bm/A G A D
Vita dulcedo et spes nostra salve.

D Bm Bm/A G A
Ad te clamamus exsules filii Hevae.

Bm A G D A Bm Bm/A A
Ad te suspiramus gementes et flentes,

Bm Bm/A G A D
in hac lacrimarum valle.

G D Bm A
Eja ergo advocata nostra,

Bm A G D A Bm Bm/A G A G A Bm Bm/A G
illos tuos misericordes oculos ad nos converte.

D G D A Bm Bm/A G A
Et Jesum benedictum fructum ventris tui

G D Bm Bm/A G A G
nobis post hoc exsilium ostende.

D G D
O-- clemens,

Bm Bm/A G A
O----- pia,

Bm A G D A Bm Bm/A G
O----- dulcis

G A D
Virgo Maria.

For it is not just the natural processes promising that spring will come into our hearts as well as the earth and its not just some impersonal energy force that we are all swept up in – I mean, I think there is a level at which that is true too – but God, Our Creator, the Creator of this earth and all its incredible and miraculous processes is a God of birthing as well as a God of seeking, a Presence who loves and actively pursues out of love those of us who “send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.” God doesn’t just leave the world to turn as the world turns but exerts God’s power through the stirrings and advancement of love in our lives. God doesn’t advance in any other way but through love and so there are limits, but for the one who has accepted God’s advancements there is new birthing even in this midst of what feels like a banishment from Eden.

This is what the Psalmist was trying to express when he said in the 23rd Psalm “the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. You make me to lie down in green pastures, you lead me beside still waters, you restore my soul.” He was expressing this amazing sense of God’s tender and loving presence leading us through the winter valley of death to the pastures of springtime where we are anointed with healing oils and where we again experience the abundance of the earth and our cup overflows...

Choir sings: The 23rd Psalm