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Living Streams: Living Beyond Chaos
Psalm 23.1-3, Psalm 42

Psychologist Richard Carlson wrote, “I used to think my life would begin once the problem was solved, the debt was paid, the conflict was resolved and the chaos calmed until I woke up one day and realized that was my life.”

When we wake up each day we have a reservoir of energy and we choose to expend that energy throughout the day in ways that are helpful, and in ways that are unhelpful, in ways that are life-giving and ways that are life-draining, in ways that contribute to the lives of others and in ways that keep us stuck in the cocoon of our own anxieties. Think about your own energy today – where is it directed?

Rather than waiting for someday in the future where we hope the whirlwind of life will be different than it is today, rather than wishing life was somehow different than it is, the challenge is to find that place of calm and peace in the midst of the whirlwind and use our energy in life-giving ways.

It is a mistake to think that peace comes in the absence of chaos. Peace comes from being attentive to God’s presence in the midst of the chaos and living each moment with intention and love. One of my favorite books is *The Secret of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd. The main character of the book is a little girl by the name of Lily. Lily is a young girl who ran away from home because her mother had been tragically killed and her father was a mean and abusive kind of man.

She runs to the little town of Tiberon, South Carolina, and there she is taken in by a beautiful black woman by the name of August.

August knew Lily's mother. Knew Lily's grandmother. And, yes, August loved the little girl Lily.

One day they were talking, and while they were talking it was thundering and lightning outside, and August started telling Lily the truth, the truth about her young life. That Lily's mother had married because she was pregnant with Lily. Yes, that she had been what is sometimes called an "unwanted" child. That her mother had gone through a terrible period of depression and abandoned Lily for a few months. That her mother had come back to get Lily, and was going to run away with her, but then she was killed. When the little girl heard this news, this story of her chaotic life, hot, wild tears exploded from her eyes. She was hurt. She was grieving. She held on tightly to the arms and waist of August as if she were a life preserver.

After telling Lily her story, August said to the little girl, 'Come on, let's get you to bed.'

And then Lily recalls what happened next. In the honey house where she slept, August waited till she crawled under the sheets, then bent over and kissed her forehead.

August looked at Lily and said, "Every person on the face of the earth makes mistakes, Lily, every last one. We're all so human. Your mother made a terrible mistake, but she tried to fix it."

"Good night" Lily said and rolled onto her side.

"Remember," August said from the doorway. "There is nothing perfect. There is only life."

Isn't that the truth...there is nothing perfect, there is only life. Couldn't you say that about your life?

I find it interesting when I do weddings how much anxious energy people put into trying to make everything perfect often at the expense of living each moment along the way. I often tell couples that perfect weddings leave no stories to tell your grandchildren.

You are only left with saying, ‘It was perfect.’ What’s interesting is that the stories of our lives often result when things aren’t perfect, when things don’t go as planned, when chaos happens. There is nothing perfect; there is only life.

What we know is that sometimes life is messy and chaotic. When you are at A and you want to get to B, it is never a straight line. There are always detours and bumps and unexpected obstacles.

I just drove by myself from Minneapolis to Bend this past week. After 16 hours of driving the second day, I was 10 miles east of Burns thinking I was going to make it home when the traffic was stopped. I sat on Hwy 20 for an hour. I was stressed, frustrated expending all of this energy beating myself up for taking the scenic route that day rather than the quicker way home. I was spending all of this energy, regretting my decision, thinking how inconvenient this was to me wishing I could just be home in my bed. I was spending all of this energy fighting accepting the reality that I was stuck on Hwy 20. I used my phone and posted my frustration on Facebook. A couple of you responded and simply reminded me to breathe. Thank you. In breathing, I stopped fighting what was and became more present to what is. In becoming present, I started praying for the people involved in the accident that was causing the hold-up. In praying and centering my heart on love surrounding those in the accident and those called to the rescue in light and love, I felt a sense of calm in the chaos.

There is nothing perfect; there is only life.

Life was swirling inside the heart of the psalmist centuries ago, swirling like wind in a thunderstorm, swirling like dust on the floor of the desert, swirling like litter at a football stadium after the game.

Something had dried out inside the psalmist.

He was thirsty for some kind of peace of mind, for joy of spirit, thirsty for happiness, thirsty for his life to be different...thirsty and parched for God...that beautiful image..."just as a deer thirsts for flowing streams, so our souls thirst for God."

Fundamentally, we all long and yearn for God. There is a God-shaped well in each of our hearts that can only be filled by the refreshing water of God. We try in so many ways to fill that well with so many things that eventually dry up and evaporate leaving us thirsty for more.

The psalms are so wonderful. Scripture speaks to us but the psalms speak for us. Sometimes they are called "songs of the heart". Psalms beautifully express the truth, there is nothing perfect; only life.

The psalmist in Psalm 42 asks the question with the bluntness of a hammer: "When will I ever see the face of God?"

The face in Hebrew thought is the essence, the light and soul of a person. The face radiates the energy of a person. To want to see the face of God is to want God's presence, God's essence, God's energy.

For the psalmist, God felt absent or at least indifferent to his chaotic life. No doubt most of us know what that feels like.

The psalmist says, “My tears have become my food both night and day.” A diet of tears. There is nothing perfect; there is only life. What do you do to find calm in the midst of your chaos?

My guess is you do what most of us try to do when chaos arrives. You try to eliminate it. It’s as natural as trying to pull your hand away from a burning fire. It hurts! Chaos is uncomfortable.

It’s natural to want to stop the swirling chaos, because I think if I can stop the chaos then I can find the calm and peace I am so desperate to experience. When life is different, then I can know peace.

Yet, eliminating chaos doesn’t guarantee calm.

What if chaos is exactly what we need? What if the chaos needs us?

Think about me being stuck on Hwy 20...maybe I needed this experience to learn to be present? Maybe me being there and being present in the posture of prayer with the energy of love was needed?

What if the whirlwind of life, the imperfections of our life is bringing us some gift?

I often think of that line from the Bible, “I am bringing forth something new. Even now, so you see it?” When we spend our energy wishing life was different perhaps we miss “the something new.”

What if the challenges of life are life-giving in some way? There’s a teaching in Buddhism that invites you not to run away from your problems but to embrace your problems as a gift – they

are present in our lives to expand our hearts and deepen our compassion.

Think about the book of Genesis where it says in the beginning there was chaos and God created the world, created life out of chaos.

There is no creativity without chaos and there is no chaos without creativity.

There is nothing perfect; there is only life – is a way of saying God’s loving and creative Spirit is present in our less than perfect lives; in our chaotic, troubled, heartbroken lives – creation is possible, creativity is possible, new life is possible.

Leonard Cohen wrote, “Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

When I read Psalm 42 this past week, I was struck by the inner dialogue and honest struggle of the psalmist as he goes back and forth holding both doubt and faith in tension.

He asks, “Why is my soul so downcast?”

Then he says to himself, “Hope in God.”

Then he asks, “Why has God forgotten me?”

Then he says, “I shall praise God forever.”

My guess is most of us can relate to this inner dialogue. But what is important to notice is that the psalmist is willing to live in the whirlwind...live in the tension. He doesn’t try to run away from it, to deny what is happening...he stays with it. He doesn’t settle for easy answers.

He doesn't settle for glib, religious clichés...hoping the easy answers and religious clichés will somehow eliminate the storm. He seeks God's face, God's energy, God's presence in the midst of the storm.

Instead, the ancient wisdom we find here is that chaos shapes faith and faith is rediscovered in the midst of the chaos.

How do we find calm and peace in our chaos? I want to suggest something very simple this morning. You breathe. Yes, breathe. You breathe.

Another way of saying this is that in the midst of the chaos of our lives, we try to stay present in the moment, be attentive to God's presence in the moment.

Not resenting. Not complaining. Not escaping. Not retreating. Not becoming bitter. Not becoming cynical. Not leaping ahead to next week. Not remorseful over yesterday. But being present in this moment.

We spend so much of our energy being somewhere other than where we are...rehearsing, regretting, resenting the chaos of yesterday...imagining and fearing the chaos of tomorrow.

What we forget is that it is only in this present moment that we can awaken and be attentive to God's presence. It is in the present that we can access the power and energy of God's love that is there for us.

The only power we have is the power of right now. I may wish I moved this Bible yesterday and even regret that I didn't. I may hope I will move it tomorrow and fear the consequences and imagine the worst if I don't but the only power I have to move the Bible is the power of right now.

The Bible says, “This is the day the Lord has made. This is the moment. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

This is the moment we have access to the deep well of the refreshing waters of God’s love.

I believe one of the most important things a church can do is teach people the practice of being present in the moment because it is only in the present moment that you can experience love and give love.

When the chaos of life is swirling around us, it is learning to stop, breathe, be fully present in the moment, be attentive to the energy of God’s love that is present in this moment.

I love that phrase in Psalm 23, “God leads me beside still waters...God restores my soul” Notice we are not promised that the chaotic valleys of the shadow of death will be taken from us, we are promised the strength and calm of God’s presence to live in those valleys.

So just as I was reminded at 11pm at night stuck on Hwy 20 to breathe and it shifted my awareness and energy, we need to learn to breathe in the Spirit of God’s presence.

I suggest using the words from Psalm 46 – “Be still and know God.”

It means that when we become still and quiet in our hearts and minds and be present in this moment...not ruminating about yesterday...not worried about tomorrow...but focusing on your breath, becoming present, then we will know God. The word ‘know’ here in the Hebrew means experience... Be still and

experience the energy and living streams of God's love running through your life.

There's an exercise I find helpful using Psalm 46, focusing on my breath repeating –

Be still and know God

Be still and know

Be still

Be.

I encourage you to try this for 5 minutes a couple times each day. This exercise helps you put your mind in neutral, not focused on the past or worried about the future, not having your energy sucked into the whirlwind, but focusing on the present and the presence of God surrendering to a peace and a calm in the midst of the chaos. There is nothing perfect; there is only life.

Sometimes the most courageous thing we can do in the midst of our chaos is breathe and discover the energy of God's love in this very moment and trust God is the One who brings forth life and love out of the chaos.

I read a story recently about a man who was in the security line at the Indianapolis airport. The line was long and the environment was especially chaotic as it was right before Thanksgiving. As people were taking off their shoes, their belts, their computers and anything metal and putting their carry bags on the screening table, this man noticed an elderly woman ahead of him having a hard time getting her shoes off and her bags and purse on the table and people were grumbling, impatient, even angry that she was slowing down the line and impacting their plans.

There was a great deal of tension in their air. People were looking at their watches. You could almost hear an audible sound of disgust and resentment that they were being slowed down.

Suddenly, a man behind her sat down all his stuff and stepped forward to help this elderly lady. He talked to her calmly about how hard this process was, lifted her bags onto the screening table, stooped down and helped her untie and remove her shoes and put them in one of those bins to go through the screening process. He helped her feel at ease as she walked through the screening gate.

Then he put his things on the screening table and went through the careening gate himself and immediately helped the elderly woman gather her belongings off the table and found a place where she could sit down and put her shoes back on.

She thanked him profusely for all he had done to help her get through this process. She told him that she was going to visit her grandchildren. He took the time and asked her about them so she got out her pictures and showed them to him with great pride.

The man asked what gate she was going to and then got a wheelchair and pushed it down to her gate listening to her talk all the while.

When the man who was observing all of this from back in the line finally got through the security screening himself, he was going to the same gate. He knew the person who had taken so much time to help this woman looked familiar and he was shocked when he realized that the man who had gone out of his way to calmly help this woman was the former coach of the Indianapolis Colts: **TONY DUNGY**.

Tony Dungy was fully present and in being fully present his heart knew what was needed in that particular situation. He wasn't so wrapped up in thinking about the past or the future or his own schedule. In being fully present in that moment, he was able to

exercise the power of love and express the compassion that was needed in that moment.

On Hwy 20 – being reminded in the midst of the chaos to breath – in breathing I made my heart available to God’s heart that was available to me. In being aware of God’s heart in that moment, I remembered the most important thing you can do in any moment is to love, and, in loving, we find strength and peace.

There is nothing perfect; there is only life.

What do we thirst for in this chaotic, messy life of ours? We thirst for God.

Be still, breathe, be present.

Be still and know God.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.