

## **“The Sea: Presence and Trust”**

Sermon for June 29th, 2008 by Joe Summers

(Readings Genesis 22:1-14, Romans 6:12-23, Matthew 10:40-42)

Soren Kierkegaard said that love and God are the only two realities that everyone experiences but which no one can describe. The fact that words like “heart” are simply metaphors for a realities I know to be real, but which can’t be communicated other than through metaphors, helps me persevere with God language--to accept the fact that God language is our metaphor to describe realities that are every bit as real to me as love, and yet which I know will always be beyond my being able to fully know or communicate.

In our gospel today Jesus says that he and God will be present whenever we welcome the stranger, the little one, the poor, or the prophet. That got me thinking about presence.

When I feel myself fully present, I feel I am in the presence of the divine, the holy, what Thomas Merton described as the hidden wholeness, what other mystics have described as an invisible glory or light infusing all things. And yet, part of this strange condition of being human is that being present does not come easily or automatically. It’s easy for us not to be present, to be disconnected from the world around us or within us. It’s easy for us to be so cut off from ourselves that we may not see a Mack truck driving straight at us---let alone anything so subtle as being able to hear the song of the universe.

In reading On the Blue Shore of Silence, a book of poems by Pablo Neruda about the sea which was translated by Alastair Reid, I found myself thinking about presence: about the joy of being fully present, about how being present and my experience of the presence of God, doesn’t seem to explain anything, but gives me an unexplainable hope and trust and sense of life’s meaning. For Neruda, it is the sea that seems to evoke this sense of presence in him.

In mid-life Neruda moved into a house on the ocean to a place he called Isla Negra, even though it wasn’t an island, and there are no black sand beaches in the area. In this period Neruda felt renewed in part through his relationship to the sea and wrote some of his greatest poems about that relationship.

Here’s one:

### **The Sea**

I need the sea because it teaches me.  
I don’t know if I learn music or awareness,  
if it’s a single wave or it’s vast existence,  
or only its harsh voice or its shining  
suggestion of fishes and ships.  
The fact is that until I fall asleep,  
in some magnetic way I move in  
the university of the waves.

It's not simply the shells crunched  
as if some shivering planet  
were giving signs of its gradual death;  
no, I reconstruct the day out of a fragment,  
the stalactite from a sliver of salt,  
and the great god out of a spoonful.

What it taught me before, I keep. It's air  
ceaseless wind, water and sand.

It seems a small thing for a young man,  
to have come here to live with his own fire;  
nevertheless, the pulse that rose  
and fell in its abyss,  
the crackling of the blue cold,  
the gradual wearing away of the star,  
the soft unfolding of the wave,  
squandering snow with its foam,  
the quiet power out there, sure  
as a stone shrine in the depths,  
replace my world in which were growing  
stubborn sorrow, gathering oblivion,  
and my life changed suddenly;  
as I became part of its pure movement.

What those of us who find ourselves in a world of “growing stubborn sorrow, gathering oblivion,” would give to be renewed in “pure movement.”

It's not surprising that, feeling stuck in mid-life, Neruda moved back to the sea, because it was the sea that he felt first opened him up to the world. In his poem “The First Sea” Neruda describes an incident where, as a child, he paddled a boat by himself down the Rive Cautin, through the rainforest, down to the sea. During his journey, the young, lost Pablo--saw a sea wave come crashing down like a crumbling tower, only to blend back into the ocean with all its fury and somehow in the process: “I broke free of my roots. My country grew in size. My world of wood split open. The prison of the forests opened a green door, letting in the wave in all its thunder, and, with the shock of the sea, my life widened into space.”

It is somehow, mysteriously the sea, that enables Neruda to feed those who he longs to help as he describes in his poem “The Poet's Obligation.”

### **The Poet's Obligation**

To whoever is not listening to the sea  
this Friday morning, to whoever is cooped up

in house or office, factory or woman  
or street or mine or dry prison cell:  
to him I come, and, without speaking or looking,  
I arrive and open the door of his prison,  
and a vibration starts up, vague and insistent,  
a long rumble of thunder adds itself  
to the weight of the planet and the foam,  
the groaning rivers of the ocean rise,  
the star vibrates swiftly in its corona,  
and the sea beats, dies, and goes on beating.

So, drawn on by my destiny,  
I ceaselessly must listen to and keep  
the sea's lamenting in my awareness,  
I must feel the crash of the hard water  
and gather it up in a perpetual cup  
so that, wherever those in prison may be,  
wherever they suffer the sentence of the autumn,  
I may be present with an errant wave,  
may move, in and out of windows,  
and hearing me, eyes may lift themselves  
asking, "How can I reach the sea?"  
And I will pass to them, saying nothing,  
the starry echoes of the wave,  
a breaking up of foam and of quicksand,  
a rustling of salt withdrawing itself,  
the grey cry of sea-birds on the coast.

So, through me, freedom and the sea  
will make their answer to the shrouded heart.

Here's another:

### **Nothing More**

I made my contract with the truth  
to restore light to the earth.

I wished to be like bread.  
The struggle never found me wanting.

But here I am with what I loved,  
with the solitude I lost.

In the shadow of that stone,  
I do not rest.

The sea is working,  
working in my silence.

What Neruda describes his poetry doing is what liturgy at its best does for me. It's what I felt in our Gerry and Anita's wedding liturgy yesterday: the reconnecting to the movement of life, the heart, the universe. That's what give me the joy to persevere.

Neruda lead an amazing life. He had great, great successes, and yet his life ended in tragedy. Having given his life for the poor of the earth, particularly for those in his Chile, dying of a growing malignancy, Neruda's last days were spent seeing democracy in Chile shattered by a U.S. government- backed military coup and with it the news of many of his friends being murdered and tortured. Again it is to the sea that he now turns as he faces his own death and this great emptiness of loss and sorrow.

Soliloquy in the Waves  
Yes, but here I am alone.  
A wave,  
builds up,  
perhaps it says its name, I don't understand,  
it mutters, hums in its load  
of movement and foam  
and withdraws. Who  
can I ask what it said to me?  
Who among the waves  
can I name?  
And I wait.  
Once again the clearness approached,  
the soft numbers  
rose in foam  
and I didn't know what to call them.  
So they whispered away,  
seeped into the mouth of the sand.  
Time obliterated all lips  
with the patience  
of shadow and  
the orange kiss  
of summer.  
I stayed alone,  
unable to respond to what the world  
was obviously offering me,

listening to  
that richness spreading itself,  
the mysterious grapes  
of salt, love unknown,  
and in the fading day  
only a rumor remained,  
further away each time,  
until everything that was able to  
changed itself into silence.

Praying is about practicing the presence of God: the heart waking up, living again, feeling again, experiencing the presence that gives us life and brings us back to life.

The things of this world, sand, water, salt, sun, cold, earth, plants, --help make us present again--all of us out of dis-connection.

Being present is about recovering ourselves, recovering the world, recovering God in the here and now. For people in the early church it was such a powerful experience that they described it as the difference between a living death and a living living, which they called eternal life. The experience of the presence of God is eternal life: life reigning in the midst of life. It's an experience you can have even in the midst of a prison cell, even in the midst of great suffering. That was the good news the early church offered to the world and to people who seemed stuck in non-living.

May these seas move through us that we and our world might know the pure movement once again. May it be so.

Before I end, I want to say a quick final word about our first reading---the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac.

It is a terribly mysterious story. On the surface it seems simply awful: a story about people learning to do what is most inhumane for the divine. But beneath the surface it is the story that has most moved Jews and Muslims through the ages: a story about discovering the deepest level of trust-- the kind of trust that can enable us to stay present-- no matter what is happening in our lives. That story may or may not work for you, but I would challenge us to consider whether it is possible to live with a heart, to live being free and letting others be free, to open ourselves to the great sea of the universe and to be able to swim and enjoy ourselves amidst those seas -- despite how destructive and dangerous they can be-- without this kind of trust. Amen

Note: Except for "Nothing More", the translations of all these poems are taken from On the Blue Shore of Silence poems by Pablo Neruda that have been translated by Alastair Reid. Leigh Baguley also lent me To Go Singing Through the World: The Childhood of Pablo Neruda, which is a wonderful children's book by Deborah Krogan Ray, which tells the wonderful story

of some of the other important formative influences on the young Neruda: growing up near the Southern tip of Chile and how Neruda loved to explore the rain forest, being raised by a step-mom who was descended from the original indigenous people of Chile, having the eventual Nobel prize winner Gabriela Mistral come to live in his small town and become his mentor.

Excerpt from **The First Sea**

Child of those rivers,  
I kept on  
traveling the earth  
along the same river edges  
toward the same sea-foam  
and when the sea of that time  
crashed down like a broken tower,  
rose curling in its rage,  
I broke free of my roots.  
My country grew in size.  
My world of wood split open.  
The prison of the forests  
opened a green door,  
letting in the wave in all its thunder,  
and, with the shock of the sea,  
my life widened into space.