

“Caught”

Sermon for Sunday, January 1st, 2012, by the Rev. Joe Summers

(Readings of the day: Numbers 6:22-27, Galatians 4:4-7, Luke 2:15-21)

Today, January 1st, we're celebrating the Feast of the Holy Name, and today, I want to talk about being caught, what it is that has caught my heart. I want to begin with several poems and songs.

First--this image of being caught.

Amazing grace shall always be my song of praise,
for it was grace that bought my liberty....,
how marvelous the grace that caught my falling soul;
He looked beyond my fault and saw my need.
(From “He looked beyond my fault”)

The image of grace catching our falling souls is such a powerful image for me.

Now a poem about falling.

“Winter” by Forugh Farrokhzad,

(From the poem “Window”, translated from the Persian by Franzaneh Milani)

When my trust hung from the thin
thread of justice
And the hearts of my lamps were
smashed into tiny pieces
All over town
And the childlike eyes of my love were
blindfolded
With the black kerchief of law
When blood was gushing from the
anxious temples of my desire
When my life was nothing other than
the ticking of the clock
I realized I must love
That I must madly love.

Another poem about falling and being caught.

Oh Holy Night
The stars are brightly shining.
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth!
Long lay the world in sin and error pining

till he appeared and the soul felt its worth
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!
Fall on your knees--- Oh hear the angel voices
Oh night divine, O night when Christ was born

Truly he taught us to love one another.

His law is love and his gospel is peace.
Chains shall he break for the slave is our brother
And in his name all oppression shall cease
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we,
Let all within us praise his Holy name

Here the image of the name, through which the soul feels it's worth, and the powerful connection between the soul, feeling its worth, and all oppression ceasing.

Finally, where would we be without a little Elvis. (sing)

Wise Men say
only fools rush in
but I cant help
falling in love with you.....
Take my hand, take my whole life too
for I can't help falling in love with you...

(From "Only Fools rush in")

From the perspective of the soul, life often confronts us with some pretty sinking realities. I'd like to just take a moment to speak to some of the hard, hard realities that people in this small community have to deal with over the last two months.

*Charles and Jerry-- both diagnosed with cancer, now undergoing treatment.

* Jackie and Jane being hospitalized and suffering from-- we don't know exactly what---they among a group of people in this community that includes Elginne, Claude, and Jamie who live with chronic illnesses or conditions ---that doctors haven't been able to figure out or figure out how to treat. Despite all our advances in medicine, there is still so much we don't know.

*Edie's son Bakari--trying to save his life from addiction, so he can live and be there--for his family and his new son.

*Letitia, now that she has terrible difficulty walking, struggling to figure out how you keep living an active life, stay connected to people, when you can't walk or drive.

*Meagan's mom having a severe stroke, so now she can't talk coherently, and Megan and Stephan now having to figure out where/how she can live, as they continue to struggle to un-

derstand what's going on with their child Archie, and why he's not gaining more weight.

*Anita's children--still reeling from the death of their father Charles who, though he was younger than me, died recently, and then also suffering from the further loss of Brenna's former boyfriend George.

*Two other families in the congregation--going through divorces and all the feelings of betrayal and abandonment and anger that make that loss so much more complicated.

And here--we're just talking about the last month or two. If you broaden the scope to the past year--there's much more: Paul and Sam both undergoing treatments for cancer, I.B. having heart surgery, beloved sisters and brothers living with the loss of employment, and/or terrible difficulties in supporting themselves and/or their partners and children, others suffering from the loss of health, mental illness, depression, addiction, and disconnection.

These are the kinds of realities that modern life seemed to promise to deliver us from, and still tries to shield us from, by making them seem really rare and unusual, so we can go about our daily lives not in a state of panic. Yet, here we are.

These kinds of realities lead some to fall off the cliff into meaninglessness, as they embrace the idea that there is no meaning in a world where such things happen in such a random way. But if life had no meaning, these realities wouldn't hurt so much. It's the fact that, for us as human beings, everything has meaning; that's a big part of what makes these realities so painful. Deciding life has no meaning might seem like a good strategy for helping you to avoid the pain, but it only lands you in the void, which is the worst pain of all. Some have the courage to label that void nihilism, more often people, who have despaired of meaning, cover it up, living lives as functional atheists --- people who claim to be believers while living lives that that largely consist of golf and polite conversations-- as but one of many ways I see people leaping into the abyss.

Faced with such realities, others choose a religious escape. I remember a friend whose wife had recently died of cancer and whose son had killed himself--telling me that everything was joy. I think that was, in fact, his experience, as it was shaped by his religious practices, but hearing it all, I could feel there was this terrible sense of desolation. What is left of our lives and world, when you remove everything that causes us suffering? Not much.

Others goes another route and come to feel that suffering is all there is--that happiness and joy must be simply an illusion. Again, this seems like a tragic denial of reality.

But if deciding life is meaningless, or trying to make life all about joy, or all about suffering, are basically states of denial--how do we live lives that do justice to the complexity of our existence? How do we live lives of hope and faith and love that don't deny the hard realities or the joy of our lives? Where is the vision that enables us to embrace the whole of our individual and collective lives in love? What we're talking about here is, not just what you think or feel about God, but how you feel about the world and life itself.

Here is where I've found myself so caught by the Christmas vision and the mystery of the Incarnation, as it comes to us in the images and stories of Christmas.

It struck me on Christmas Eve in the vision of those poor, cold, bottom-of-the-social-ladder shepherds suddenly confronted by an angel-- "And the glory of the Lord shone round them." The Christmas vision is the glory of the Lord, infusing the lives of poor people: glory shining even in a cold, dark barn, where a baby lies in an animal feeding trough. The angel says that's the sign: a baby lying in an animal feeding trough. That's the Christmas vision. Not glory outside of, or apart from, the hardships and suffering we encounter in life--but in the very midst of them. The glory surrounding and within Joseph and Mary as they, like so many poor people, have to flee in the night to protect their child from the kinds of powerful forces that would destroy them. That's the glory, in the midst of the hardships and suffering, of the world of the poor.

And then, the image in our gospel today of Mary: "pondering all these things in her heart." That's the glory that so many have claimed was only the province of the elites: the wealthy, who can travel to the ends of the earth in pursuit of enlightenment, or philosophers, who spend their whole lives studying, or monks and nuns, who spend day and night praying. But here and now-- it's the province of a poor young mother. The glory of the Lord infuses her. She meditates on it in her heart. Her life is a testament to that glory.

And then there's that ultimate Christmas vision "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God..... And from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace."

It's a vision of the universe which we experience, when we let ourselves be reborn in and through the power of this mystery. It's a vision of a universe, a world, that is not a fantasy world, not an alternative universe, but this world now, seen through hearts that enable us to see it through the eyes of a love supreme. It's a new kind of vision that:

Enables us to see and experience--the glory--that is each of us.

Enables us to taste the glory, in the sunlight, of a bright winter's morning, or in the smell of the dark earth of spring.

Enables us to hear a song of love that is sung, sometimes most powerfully, in the midst of the kinds of sorrows and hardships, that are so everywhere abundant--if we stop having to deny them.

Enables us to speak words --that are not unkind and untrue--- but words that engender life and hope--even where it seems none is to be found.

Enable us to be---not passive spectators to an alien random universe, but subject creators who embrace all, as we help to create the realm of love on earth, out of who we are, with whatever materials we are given.

In the beginning was the word. The word was grace, a grace that catches our falling souls. In and through this miraculous, mysterious, gift, we have been graced; we receive the ability to experience grace in and amidst all things. In and through this grace, we have been given the power to grace others--in and amidst all things. In and through this grace, we are enabled to live lives rooted in a love for life and a love for the reality of this world, now transformed in and through this light.

And if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.