



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

God Does Not Hover In Silence

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.
December 6, 2009 - Lessons and Carols

I've counted up all the poems we will either hear or sing during this service of Advent Lessons and Carols. The total is 19, counting the hymn we sang just a moment ago. This service has more poetry in it than any other throughout the Church Year.

The psychologist, Robert Holden, says that "So often in everyday life it is so easy to live from a place of prose rather than poetry." The days of Advent are days in which our hearts are prepared to receive in them – in the heart – the place of poetry – remember the phrase, "I've learned this poem by heart?" – to receive in the heart, the birth of the Christ Child – the baby about whom more poetry has been written than about any other historical figure.

The reason I am thinking this year about the poetic dimensions of this service is because of an article I read recently in *The New Yorker* magazine. The book is called, "Saved by a Poem; the Transformative Power of Words." The author, Kim Rosen, argues that when a poem calls to you (and she includes in the category of poetry, hymns, anthems, and passages of scripture, the forms of the poetry we will hear tonight) -- when a poem calls to you, certain words in that poem actually have the power to save you. When using the word, "Save" as in "save you," Thomas Merton said that salvation is not about saving you from hell or saving you into heaven. Rather, being saved is about your discovering the true self God gave you at your creation and discovering the unique journey God wants for you.

The woman who wrote the book, *Saved By A Poem*, writes that "to take a poem into your life is to fill yourself with words that ignite your true essence, aligning your thoughts, words, and deeds with your heart's wisdom and longing. The simple and powerful act of creating a deep relationship with a poem you love can change your life and, through your spoken words, the lives of those around you." (Rosen, Kim, *Saved by a Poem; the Transformative Power of Words*. xviii). That process, of course, is the age-old miracle of transformation – you and me being changed so that we can in turn change the world.

But often in order to do that you and I must reverse our living from a place of prose to living from a place of poetry. In this, my Advent-reading book, *Saved By a Poem*, there is a CD that comes with the book. The author chose 9 friends to select a poem that saved their life and called them to live from a place of poetry instead of prose. On the CD they read that poem and then comment on the poem's power in their life.

The man who says, “So often in everyday life it is so easy to live from a place of prose rather than poetry,” chose to read the poem, “I Know the Way You Can Get,” written by the 14th century Persian poet, Hafez.

The poem begins (and here is the 20th poem we will hear tonight),

I know the way you can get
When you have not had a drink of Love:

Your face hardens,
Your sweet muscles cramp.
Children become concerned
About a strange look that appears in your eyes
Which even begins to worry your own mirror
And nose.

Squirrels and birds sense your sadness
And call an important conference in a tall tree.
They decide which secret code to chant
To help your mind and soul.

Even angels fear that brand of madness
That arrays itself against the world
And throws sharp stones and spears into
The innocent
And into one's self.

O I know the way you can get
If you have not been drinking Love:

You might rip apart
Every sentence your friends and teachers say,
Looking for hidden clauses.

You might weigh every word on a scale
Like a dead fish.

You might pull out a ruler to measure
From every angle in your darkness
The beautiful dimensions of a heart you once
Trusted.

I know the way you can get
If you have not had a drink from Love's
Hands.

That is why all the Great Ones speak of

The vital need
To keep remembering God,
So you will come to know and see God
As being so Playful
And Wanting,
Just Wanting to help.

From: 'I Heard God Laughing - Renderings of Hafiz' - Daniel Ladinsky

Isn't that the call we receive tonight from the Great Ones – the writer of Genesis, the prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zechariah, the poem about the angel Gabriel visiting Mary, the evangelist, John, and Jesus's mother Mary too? Aren't they all speaking of the vital need to keep remembering God, to come and know and see God as being so playful, and wanting, just wanting to help? Aren't they all warning you and me of the way you can get when you have not had a drink of Love? Your face hardens, Your sweet muscles cramp. Even the squirrels and the birds sense your sadness and call an important conference in a tall tree. They decide which secret code to chant to help your mind and soul.

Robert Holden calls this not only living life from a place of prose instead of poetry, but a life of being what he calls, “dysfunctionally independent” when we try to do too much of our life by ourselves. He says, “I've had a long lineage of dysfunctional independence in my family and I ran with it and tried to be self-made person.” But that didn't work and this Hafez poem saved him by reminding him to have a “radical co-dependency with that which created you. A full-on dependence with God.”

The person I personally know who makes it his business to memorize poems when they call to him (I don't know if he would say that they “save” him or not) is Rabbi Leonard Beerman, the rabbi-in-residence of our church. From time to time he emails a group of us or mentions in a speech, a sermon, or in a prayer, a poem he has tried to keep “freshly remembered” as he puts it.

Last month, praying at the Human Rights Watch dinner in Beverly Hills, Rabbi Beerman quoted from a poem from the great Israeli poet, Daliah Ravikovich, who died just a few years ago, considered to be the outstanding woman poet of the Hebrew language.

“One of her best known poems is entitled, “Hovering at a Low Altitude.” In this poem, there is a female narrator who presents herself in a very satirical way as witness to the rape and murder of an Arab shepherd child. The narrator watches from the safe distance of a low altitude and does nothing. As she watches she says, “I'm not here.” She sees the little girl, yet she says over and over, “I'm not here.” The image of hovering in this poem (the Hebrew word is *rechifa*) contains a double meaning, connecting the language of army bulletins --“Low flying helicopters in hovering formations over the Gaza strip”-- with Tel Aviv slang, where *l'rachef* means “to be cool, by staying detached from the political situation.” The image of low altitude hovering over an atrocity is an emblem of the situation of the ordinary citizen knowing, but choosing not to see certain terrible acts being perpetrated. It is primarily a parable of the moral untenability of detached observation.” (Beerman Leonard, Human Rights Watch, November 17, 2009, Beverly Hilton Hotel)

That is why we in this faith community consider it morally untenable to maintain any detachment or any silence when a country like Uganda proposes passing laws that execute homosexual persons for being who God made them to be.

That is why we in this faith community consider it morally untenable to maintain any detachment or any silence when a Church leader like the Archbishop of Canterbury uses his pulpit to be silent about Uganda but rather condemns the diocese of Los Angeles for electing a woman in a life-long partnership with another woman as its suffragan bishop.

That is why we in this faith community consider it morally untenable to maintain any detachment or any silence when a president as wise and reflective as Barack Obama chooses to send 30,000 additional troops into a foolish and immoral war in Afghanistan.

That is why we in this faith community consider it morally untenable to maintain any detachment or any silence when this nation will not provide universal health care when 222 Americans die each day from lack of health care.

We know the way you can get when you have not had a drink of Love: Your face hardens, your heart muscles cramp. Children die after that strange look comes that appears in your eyes.

We know the way you can get if you have not had a drink from Love's Hands.

That is why all the Great Ones speak of the vital need to keep remembering God, the One who never hovers, detached and silent. The One for whom we wait to be born in the manger is the one who lived and died and rose again so that you and I will come to know and see God as being so Playful And Wanting, Just Wanting to help.

Amen.