

THE JOY AND THE CALLING: PRAISE OF NAMED AND NAMELESS

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CHALICE LIGHTING

We light this chalice as a symbol of what burns brightly in the innermost part of us, waiting to come forward. We light this chalice in the hope that today we will see with unclouded eyes the opening for this revelation.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Over and over again in the Hebrew Bible, it says “And the Lord spoke to Moses.” The speaking ranges over a multitude of subjects great and small, from the Ten Commandments down to the very particular particulars of how to sacrifice a goat, what could be eaten when, how to lay out the temple, and on and on. The God depicted in these sacred texts is a very talkative deity, whose extended remarks then had to be republished by Moses to his people. They all must have been exhausted. This was in the days before the rule of the twenty-minute sermon, of course. [laughter] Actually, it’s more of a guideline

Naturally, the thoughtful rabbis of Judaism have always taken their sacred texts very seriously; but you have to wonder what they think of all that divine talking. Do they really buy it, theologically? If God did that much talking, would anything be left of human life beyond obedience?

Stephen Mitchell, an astute translator and interpreter of religious texts, imagined how a dialogue on this subject among the most learned rabbis might go. He wrote down his imaginings in a short parable, called “Sinai”. In it, we are invited to eavesdrop on this dialogue.

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Rabbi Ezra says, “Moses did receive a commandment, but only one, only the First. All the others blended into silence, as all colors blend into white.”

Rabbi Gamaliel says, “No, Moses received only the first phrase of the First Commandment: ‘I am the Unnamable.’ ”

Rabbi Elhanan says, “No, Moses saw on Mount Sinai what he had heard from the Burning Bush. There was just one message: ‘I am.’ ”

Rabbi Samuel says, “No, not even that. The only word The Unnamable whispered to Moses was ‘I.’”

And then, Rabbi Yosi says, “In the holy tongue, the word for ‘I’ is ‘anokhi,’ spelled with four letters: aleph-nun-kaph-yod. What Moses received from God was this and only this: the first letter of the word ‘I.’”

An awkward silence follows. Then one of the rabbis says, “but aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and the first letter of the Hebrew word for ‘I’, is a silent letter.”

And Rabbi Yosi responds, “Just so.”

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What is in play in this dialogue about the allocation of talking and silence between deity and humanity? What does it have to do, if anything, with why we are here in this world? Come, let us bring many names. Come, let us worship together.

SERMON

A woman walks home on a late winter afternoon in Copenhagen. As she approaches her block, she notices emergency vehicles gathered near her building, lights flashing. A small draped body lies on the sidewalk, yellow police tape cordoning it off. She finds out that it is the body of a young boy who lives in her building. Apparently there has been a fall from the roof above. She goes up there and finds the police writing up their report.

The condition of the snow around the footprints of the dead boy, ending abruptly at the edge of the roof, draws her attention. The more she looks at it, the more she is convinced that his death was not accidental.

She tries to explain to the police what she sees in the snow, but they brush her off. Ordered to leave, she complies; but she knows she will not be able to let this rest. She will find out who wanted this child dead, and why.

The woman’s name is Smilla Jaspersen. She is the main character in a compelling mystery novel called Smilla’s Sense Of Snow. Her capacity to pay this kind of acute attention is a gift of her native tribe in Greenland, where people see fine differentiations in the snow, revealing surprising information about how to live, even how to survive. Snow is a matter of life and death for them.

We all know that paying attention is important, of course. I used to worry that my daughter, Marianne, was having trouble figuring this out. “Marianne is so intelligent,” I once said to my friend Edd. “I just cannot understand why she won’t pay attention.” Edd looked at me in that knowing, sympathetic way that wise friends have, and said “Preston, she’s paying attention. She’s just not paying attention to what you want her to pay attention to.” [laughter]

We are always paying attention. But how often do we pay attention to how we are paying attention? If we did, might we find that we have overlooked some important possibilities – maybe even matters of life and death, in some sense or another?

The kind of attention Smilla Jaspersen paid to snow is extraordinary, but there is nothing uniquely human about it. Many animals have similar remarkable sensory capacities. But humans have the capacity for a qualitatively different kind of attention. At a young age, we begin to develop the awareness that we and everyone and everything around us are separate, differentiated. This awareness leads in turn to questions about where we came from, who we are, and where we are going. We don't have answers to these questions. Eventually, we realize we are going to die. We suffer from what the philosophers call existential anxiety.

These burdens come in a package deal that also includes extraordinary gifts. Our painful awareness of separation gives us a unique capacity to divide the world into differentiated pieces. And with that comes the capacity to see the unity and wholeness of which each differentiated piece of our world is a part. In such moments, a tree is no longer just a tree, even a grain of sand is no longer just a grain of sand. We see differentiation and unity, and use them both to make meaning.

The name we give to this greatly expanded and nuanced capacity for paying attention is consciousness. How conscious we are is a matter of the breadth and depth of our capacity to pay attention, and the strength of our ability to choose the appropriate focus. It can be directed not just outwardly to the world, but also inwardly, to our interior selves. This enables us to discover what lies outside of our field of attention, in the domain that psychologists call the unconscious.

When I got serious about daily spiritual practice, I started to see how this inward-looking consciousness works. I was collaborating with another minister on a project, communicating back and forth. He said he would get back to me on a particular day to confirm how some parts of the project would be handled, but then he didn't. By the next day, I sensed some energy being diverted into feeling annoyed about not hearing from him. I was able to step back enough to see that the emotional energy was out of proportion to what was actually at stake in the situation. Nothing that bad was going to happen if this communication got delayed for a day, or even more.

That realization made it possible to step back further and ask, "Since this can't be explained by what's happening in the present, is it maybe a replay of some unfinished emotional business from an earlier time?" I realized it was. And once I got to that point, the particulars of that old emotional business didn't even matter that much. I didn't need to work all of that out. Raised to consciousness, that it lost its power to tug on my attention, to pull me away from the present and cause me to misinterpret what was actually happening.

By focusing attention on the present, and away from the past and the future, our consciousness opens up the space for creativity. It is the space revered in this morning's poem by Archibald MacLeish, who refuses to make monuments to the beauty he sees. For him, no chiseling heavy words like fame and forever into some marbled permanence. He creates a simple, ungilded poem to describe the beauty of a woman who, like the proverbial lily, needs no

gilding: “I will say you were young and straight and your skin fair, and you stood in the door and the sun was a shadow of leaves on your shoulders.” The moment is perfectly enough.

Standing in the present, we can be creative, which is always a matter of dividing and differentiating our vision into pieces. Differentiation depends on making meaning – what I see means this, and not that. Meaning depends on naming, without which there is no this or that. And naming is how we pay attention. And so through his poetry, MacLeish creates for us a woman standing in the doorway. He names her beauty so well that she is here with us. We see the sun as a shadow of leaves on her shoulders.

The naming. We have been at it so long, we don’t find it remarkable any more. But what was it like when the first anthropoid pointed at an earthen pot and uttered something, and another one repeated it? The Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard said, “I shall now try to look calmly at myself and begin to act inwardly, for only in this way will I be able, as the child in its first consciously undertaken act refers to itself as ‘I,’ to call myself ‘I’ in a profounder sense.” And from “I” to “you” and “he” and “it” and away we go. These little names are exponential leaps in our capacity to pay attention, and thus to create.

So. Consciousness is thrust upon us when we enter the world of time and space – a capacity with some potential benefits, but costly in terms of existential anxiety. We can make a virtue of the inevitability called consciousness; and maybe by practicing it, our lives will be enriched a little. But is that all there is to this? Just an expensive, mandatory upgrade from a Sony Walkman to an Ipod?

When the beholding gets deep and wide, the beholder herself is transformed by the act of beholding. The more her consciousness expands, the more clearly she sees that she is separate, partial. But she also sees that the part she plays is held in a larger, integrated whole; that she is a part of it, not apart from it. Consciousness is what makes that larger wholeness cohere for us.

We see this, in flashes. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, a traveler sees a badly wounded stranger in the ditch, along the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Something happens to his seeing. Against all reason, he intervenes – recklessly, extravagantly. Not like giving spare change to a panhandler. More like the stranger isn’t a stranger any more, the ditch isn’t just another ditch, and the traveler is longer an ordinary traveler. The circumstances are like countless other unfortunate, violent scenarios of that era. The dramatic difference in the outcome is found in the traveler’s beholding.

Or modernly, as you heard last Sunday, a man with every reason to turn away steps between an interracial couple and the Ku Klux Klan. Militant racism is an old story in his town, and this starts out looking like just another chapter. But something happens to his seeing. It is so profound that it transforms not only the man himself, but also his wife, and particularly his son – who, forty years later, is still writing about it.

Or more mundanely, a man living a chronically overbooked life sets aside a couple of precious hours for gardening. But his commitments for later in the day are unexpectedly canceled, and the whole morning stretches out in front of him, with nothing but the gardening in

view. Time slows down. The past and the future recede. The garden is unchanged, and he is the same productivity-obsessed lawyer he was the day before. But something shifts. When he looks at his unfinished gardening improvement projects, they suddenly look fine, just the way they are. Everything somehow looks both just as it is and just as it should. And that is how he feels about himself too. Later he will name this feeling “perfect enoughness.” Not spectacular, not brilliant, just profoundly sufficient.

In these stories, a deeper Self has come forward, one that usually remains beneath all the monkey mind chatter and fretting of ego and emotion. Down in the domain we call the unconscious. But if the conscious mind can quiet down, so as to pay attention to how attention is being paid, this deeper Self will come forward. It will bring a very different way of paying attention.

In August I attended a five-day men’s retreat with about a hundred other men in the middle of a redwood forest in Northern California. Much of the time was spent in sharing things that are hard to talk about. One of the participants was a young man of 25 or so who was remarkably articulate; but his words were so brilliant that they kept the person uttering them in shadow. And he was verbally incontinent. The words came in torrents – masterful torrents, but so immense they flooded everything.

I found this very annoying. We came for serious work about gender, feelings, and spirit. I didn’t want it eclipsed with this kind of stuff. The retreat also included some one on one and small group interactions with other men. In these, I steered clear of the young wordsmith.

In the final large group meeting of this retreat, people stood up to express their appreciation and say goodbye. The young wordsmith stood up at the very end and delivered a shocker. He offered no insights this time, but said, his voice cracking, “I need you men to see me. That is what being here is all about for me.”

This had been the subtext of all of his smooth intellectual monologues. And I had missed the chance to be present with him. His articulacy had tapped right into my own unfinished emotional business. His speaking took me right back to my own feelings at his age, and even long afterward, that intellect and articulacy were all I was worth, all I had to offer. I did finally behold him, truly see him, but he had to do almost all the work, including a difficult confession to a large group. The final meeting adjourned, and the group had to clear out of our forest campsite immediately. My consciousness came too late for me to act on it by letting him know just how much he really was seen. Admired for his intellect, sure, but mostly just loved simply for his humanity.

I can look at this glass as half-empty, but it’s better to call it half-full, because late really is better than never. Because my Self with a capital “S” did come forward. If these shifts in beholding can happen to me like a sudden visitation, then I can learn to invite them. I can pay attention to the way I pay attention, enlarging my capacity to behold. I can choose the appropriate focus for my attention. And so can anyone.

This contributes powerfully to my journey toward wholeness; but there is something even grander in play here than “my” wholeness. I have to put “my” in quotes, because actually there is no such thing as “my” or “your” wholeness. There is just “wholeness,” which can only be called wholeness if it includes everyone and everything. All a part of, none apart from.

Of our human consciousness the animal, vegetable, and mineral world knows not, cares not. But with all its being, it does cry out for our attention. We see the prospect of its completion through the meaning-making that is the distinctive contribution of humans. Whatever a tree might be before we name it “tree,” so seen and named it participates in an enlarged destiny.

We all have heard the old riddle that asks, if a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? But the more profound question beneath the surface of the riddle is, if a tree is simply standing in the forest, is it really a tree at all if there is no one there to behold and name it? I think not. You may protest that I give humanity too much credit, that I exaggerate the power of naming. You may quote Shakespeare at me, reminding me that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. I would not quarrel about such a renamed blossom, but a nameless rose, a flower with no name at all, would surely no thing be.

And so it is with the entirety of the given world. Its anonymous being is not “the world as we know it” . . . until we know it – until we see it, name the things that are part of it, and praise the whole of it. When we exercise these unique capacities, the world “as we know it” comes into being, by our creation. We have made meaning, and the meaning is completed by praise. Because when we look upon creation, we are not agnostic. Something in us knows that for all its particular tragedies and brokenness, it is good. And so too must be the unnamable mystery from which it, and we, come; and with which we long to be reunited.

In the passage quoted in your order of service, Carl Jung described humanity as “indispensable for the completion of creation.” If he is right, and I think he is, it’s not surprising that those rabbis in the call to worship today were so ready to reinterpret the incessantly talkative God of the Hebrew Bible as a silent deity. The making of meaning through beholding and naming is our calling, reserved for us alone – special enough for God to respect by maintaining an awestruck silence, permitting only one soundless letter of the alphabet to float inobtrusively toward us.

Rainer Maria Rilke heard this calling, describing it in his Ninth Duino Elegy as coming from “this fleeting world” to us, “the most fleeting of all.” We are here, he said, in order to name, “in order to say: house, bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window”; and “to say them more intensely than the Things themselves ever dreamed of existing.” Only in poetry, of course, do things have dreams. But there is nothing imaginary about Rilke’s “intense saying.” It is a gesture toward all artistic expression of the given world -- in poetry and every other form of human creativity.

Carl Jung heard the same call. “Why on earth,” Jung once asked, “should it be necessary for man to achieve, by hook or by crook, a higher level of consciousness? . . . Instead of a real answer,” he said, “I can only make a confession of faith: I believe that, after thousands and

millions of years, someone had to realize that this wonderful world of mountains and oceans, suns and moons, galaxies and nebulae, plants and animals, *exists*.

From a low hill in the plains of East Africa,” he continued, “I once watched the vast herds of wild animals grazing in soundless stillness, as they had done from time immemorial, touched only by the breath of a primeval world. I felt then as if I were the first man, the first creature, to know that all this *is*. The entire world around me was still in a primeval state; it did not know that it *was*. And then, in that one moment in which I came to know, the world sprang into being; without that moment it would never have been. . . . Every advance, even the smallest, along this path of conscious realization adds that much to the world.”

The world is handed to us as a *fait accompli*, in a literally meaningless condition. No labels are provided. This is our fate as mortals. It is our destiny to find wholeness -- reunion with all from which we have been separated. On the journey from fate to destiny, we create the world and enlist it in this destiny. We make meaning – beholding, naming, and praising.

What a vocation!! AMEN.