

Going Out and Coming In

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2 Kings 2: 10 -12; 3: 3-14 (NRSV)

Psalms 121

Today's lectionary passage from 1 Kings is about wisdom. I think we are all familiar with the stories about the wisdom of Solomon. Most of us know him to be a good and wise king, at least in the beginning of his reign. His initial intentions were good; he wanted to be a good king for his people and so when in a dream he asks God for wisdom, he seemed to be off to a good start. But what caught my ear were these words of Solomon: "I do not know how to go out and come in." What does that mean? In the notes section of my Bible, this phrase is thought to be in reference to military experience, as in going out to do battle, and then coming back in to rest and to prepare for the next battle. Solomon, the king who built the first temple in Jerusalem was also the last king of a united Israel. At the end of his reign, God was so displeased with him that he divided the kingdom in half: Israel and Judah. Did Solomon intentionally squander his gift? Did

he misinterpret what God meant by wisdom? Did he get caught up in the perks of the job? Or did he just get lost in the going out and forgot to come in. I wonder how we can apply that gift of wisdom today to our lives, we who are not kings, or leaders of a nation, but certainly leaders of our own lives. What does it mean to go out and to come in?

Going out

Going out took on a whole new meaning in 2020. First, we were ordered to shelter in place so there was no going out. But the world came to us through our TV, our radio, our newspaper, our computer, our telephone, a zoom meeting. This restricted movement, however, changed the way we lived. Most, if not all, of our familiar patterns and routines were disrupted. It was disorienting. It was as if we were in unfamiliar territory without a map or tools to guide us and we could not see the road ahead.

I attended a workshop a few years ago, entitled “Course Corrections.” The Biblical text for the workshop was Saul’s encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. Saul, before he became Paul, was the zealous persecutor of the followers of Christ. Enroute to Damascus to pursue this mission, he encounters Christ and in this encounter is blinded, spending 3 terrifying days before his sight is restored. But he was forever changed by

this experience. He did not continue his mission as planned but did a complete 180 devoting himself to serving Christ. The leader of the workshop asked: “what do we do when we find ourselves lost without anything or anyone to direct us – without a compass, a dark sky with no stars, adrift in a sea of doubt and uncertainty – what do we do?”

What do we do when not our sight but our very breath is threatened? What do we do when we can't stop thinking about our breath and how it might be our last? What do we do when everything that is happening in the world is somehow focused on breath? The global spread of a virus that attacks the respiratory system; the disproportionate and unjust outbreak of that virus among some because of their race or economic background; the racial reckoning that erupted after millions witness a knee on the neck of George Floyd, fatally blocking his air way, and his cry and the cry of others becoming a protest mantra – “I can't breathe”; the worldwide outbreak of wildfires and floods and record heat that threatened not only our breath but the very survival of the planet which houses our breath. What do we do when we can't wrap our heads around the number of people who have breathed their last breath this past year and a half? It is like we are desperate to breathe and at the same time we can't catch our breath.

In more recent days, there has been a lot of talk about returning to normal. I'm not sure that's possible. What is normal? We have seen things, and heard things, and experienced things, that can't be unseen, or unheard, or unexperienced. Just like the ancient Israelites in the desert after escaping slavery in Egypt, there is no going back. The author, Reynolds Price, wrote: "When you undergo huge trauma in middle life, everybody is in league with us to deny that the old life is ended. Everybody is trying to patch us up and get us back to who we were, when in fact what we need to be told is, You're dead. Who are you going to be tomorrow?"

Coming In

The incredible intersection of all these events of the past 18 months has caused some of us to describe where we are now as apocalyptic. I have said so myself. It felt like we were lost in some Twilight zone or horror movie. But we often use the word apocalypse when what we mean is catastrophic or cataclysmic. The word apocalypse actually means to uncover; to lift the lid off; to reveal. Perhaps in 2020, the veil was lifted, and we were witnessing the world not as what we had believed it to be but what it actually is. But what else has been uncovered or revealed?

Sharon Salzberg, the Buddhist teacher, when asked about the importance of the practice of meditation, has said that the healing is in the

return, not, not in getting lost in the first place. There may be no going back, but there is a return. How do we return? Perhaps first, we just need to take a deep breath. By taking a deep breath, we are sometimes able to let go of whatever has a grip on our hearts and our lungs; to release that grip just enough to create space for something else to come in. We come in to rest, to replenish, to repair, to restore, to renew, to respond. We come in to prepare us to go back out. We come in to remember what we value, who we love, and who loves us. We come in to reclaim the things and people that we thought were lost or forgotten, to recommit to what we value and what is important to us. We come in to remember who we are and whose we are. We come in to remember God. You may notice that all these words begin with “re,” which is Latin for “again.” And why must we begin again and again? Because we forget.

Forgetting to come in

When he was six or seven, the poet, Christian Wiman was attending the First Baptist Church in Dallas with his family. At the end of a Southern Baptist service, there is traditionally something called the Altar Call. This is when the pastor calls up people who wish to publicly commit their lives to Christ. Without telling his parents, the young Wiman ran up to the altar and handed the pastor a sheet of paper on which he had written his first poem:

I love the Lord

And the Lord loves me

I won't forget

And neither will he.

Later in life, Wiman poses this question: “How does one remember God, reach for God, realize God in the midst of one’s life if one is constantly being overwhelmed by that life?”

There is a belief among some religious traditions, that we are born knowing and over time we forget. Joy Harjo, Poet Laureate and member of the Muscogee Creek Nation, has written of her belief that “...though we have instructions and a map buried in our hearts when we enter this world, nothing quite prepares us for the abrupt shift to the breathing realm.” She speaks of children at birth when they “take on breath or inspire spirit” as being closest to the door of knowing everything – the door of eternity. As we age, we get further and further away from that door until we reach the middle years when we begin to approach the other door when we are once again closer to knowing. Perhaps we forget simply because we’re human. Like Solomon, maybe we get caught up in all the trappings of the world, the

things we think we need or want, the things we think are important until our breath is on the line.

Will preached earlier in the year about different types of time:

Chronos time, the one we are most familiar with, the linear, sequential sense of time. But there is also Kairos time which means opportunity.

Perhaps we are caught between those two types of time: caught between a sense of urgency, shifting from thinking we had all the time in the world to fearing that time is running out and the expansive sense time, where we see opportunity before us, where we may find some clarity and peace and purpose.

This space that we gather in today, a space many of us have not been in for over a year, is familiar to us. It is a space where we practice coming in. In the time we have been away, this space has not changed. But perhaps we have. A year of getting lost, a year of catching our breath, a year of 3 days blind, a year of course correction, a year of reckoning and revelation. Where have you been? What have you seen and heard? What have you lost and what have you found?

I'd like to close with another poem by Christian Wiman, called ***Every Riven Thing***. The word riven means rent or split apart.

Every Riven Thing

Christian Wiman

**God goes, belonging to every riven thing he's made
sing his being simply by being
the thing it is:
stone and tree and sky,
man who sees and sings and wonders why
God goes. Belonging, to every riven thing he's made,
means a storm of peace.
Think of the atoms inside the stone.
Think of the man who sits alone
trying to will himself into a stillness where
God goes belonging. To every riven thing he's made
there is given one shade
shaped exactly to the thing itself:
under the tree a darker tree;
under the man the only man to see**

**God goes belonging to every riven thing. He's made
the things that bring him near,
made the mind that makes him go.
A part of what man knows,
apart from what man knows,
God goes belonging to every riven thing he's made.**

Amen.