

A Troubled Spirit
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United Church of Strafford, Vermont
March 3, 2024, Third Sunday in Lent
Psalm 51; John 12:17-33

Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this Third Sunday in Lent. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and welcome to you online.

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We share the belief that the land and all life are gifts of the Spirit, and that our role is to honor and protect the creation, building a loving community that includes all.

On any given Sunday there are those among us who are more able to give and those more in need of receiving. We need our diversity. Those with troubled spirits need those who are at peace, and those who are at peace need those with troubled spirits because both conditions come with their own gifts.

Struggle and grief are gifts to those around us when we share them, just as much as calm and joy. Each truth, each perspective, each developmental stage or spiritual state has its gift and it needs all the others in order to be balanced and complete.

So let us give thanks for one another, whatever it is we bring here, and linger after the service to extend our care and support, both in the sanctuary and on Zoom, greeting especially those who may need what we have to give, or who may have what we need to receive.

Call to Worship Lent recalls Jesus in the wilderness of purification and preparation for new life, and also in his last days journeying toward the cross and Easter dawn.

Lent confronts us with the fact that we have inner work to do in order to be what the Spirit needs us to be, yet even in the midst of Lent, we have reason to hope. The Spirit brings transformation, new life comes beyond a wilderness of struggle.

The 51st Psalm is a traditional Lenten reading. It is attributed to King David who sees the truth of his terrible wrongs and longs to move beyond his old ways of thinking and acting. The Psalm has some beautiful verses and it also has some statements we may struggle with, like God

as a bone-crusher, but if we are disturbed by them, that is good. The whole point of the Psalm is that we need to know our inner truth and allow our spirit to be disturbed.

A troubled spirit is what God needs from us in order to be able to transform us into a higher level of consciousness. So let us welcome Lenten struggle and give thanks and worship together.

Children's Time Today I am going to tell a story from the Narnia book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Aslan is a lion who is like Jesus, or as Melvin Coburn once pointed out, Aslan the lion is like the Lions of Strafford, always working to make the world a kinder and more loving place.

Today's episode is about a mean, bossy boy named Eustace Scrubb. [Illustration 1] Here you can see him torturing butterflies. He got pulled into Narnia seemingly by accident with his cousins Lucy and Edmond, and he was trouble from the start.

One day Eustace snuck off and stumbled into a deep ravine where he saw a dying dragon. [Illustration 2] It started to rain after the dragon was dead, and Eustace ran into its cave and found mounds of treasure. Eustace thought, wow, now I am so rich I can really boss everyone around. He put on a King's gold bracelet which went all the way up his arm, and he fell asleep dreaming about being powerful and mean.

He did not know that if you sleep on a dragon's hoard and let dragonish thoughts into your heart, you become a dragon. [Illustration 3] Here you can see he was unhappy about it with the bracelet cutting into his skin.

He suffered loneliness, pain and worry for weeks, and his struggling, troubled heart changed him for the better. [Illustration 4] He became humble and considerate of others and actually started to like people, even Reepicheep the mouse, but he was still a dragon and it made him very sad.

Then when he most wanted to be human again, the lion Aslan came and led him to a mountaintop garden where there was a healing spring or holy well. Aslan told Eustace he could shed his dragon skin like a snake. Eustace dug his claws in and the skin came right off, except under the first layer was another, and then another.

Finally, Aslan said, I need to help you, and Aslan dug his claws right down to Eustace's heart and it really hurt, but then the skin came off completely. Aslan threw Eustace into the water and he was a boy again. After that Eustace wasn't perfect, but he grew kinder and more loving.

We are not perfect either, but we can always grow more spiritually mature even when we are ancient like me. The Spirit will help us if we really want it. One of the ways we show that we want to grow is by turning to the Spirit in our hearts in prayer. Let us pray together the Lord's Prayer...

A Troubled Spirit

Two views of the universe have competed in Christian tradition. One view is that God is separate and above, watching and judging us from heaven. The other is that God is in all things and all things are in God. How we think about this determines how we think about the world.

The view of God as separate leads some Christians to see no reason to protect the environment or respect people who are of different religions or who differ from their view of what is a normal and right way to be. They take literally Jesus' words that hating this life and world will win you eternity. They do not understand that he is actually talking about a healthy detachment that lets go of self-interest in its loving treatment of the world.

On the other hand, the view of God in all things and all things in God makes clear that everyone and everything is sacred and needs to be treated with reverence and care.

There have been people over the ages in every culture who have evolved to the deepest spiritual state and discovered a Great Spirit, a Tao, a force flowing through the human heart and through all creation. Always the purpose of that flow is to promote love and life and light, to increase compassion and forgiveness and lovingkindness, to establish peace and justice and mercy, to make earth a paradise, a Promised Land, a place where life flourishes in harmony.

Activist and author, Joanna Macy, writes about a conversation she had with John Seed, the Director of the Rainforest Information Centre in Australia. She said to him, "You talk about the struggle against the lumber companies and politicians to save the remaining rainforests. How do you deal with the despair?"

He replied, “I try to remember that it’s not me, John Seed, trying to protect the rainforest. Rather, I am part of the rainforest protecting itself. I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into human thinking.”

We humans are the part of the earth that has recently emerged into consciousness. The Spirit of life was present from the creation of the first living cell to the evolution of the human mind. The same Spirit was in the struggle to raise human consciousness in the Enlightenment or Age of Reason, and the Spirit is in our struggle today to a yet higher consciousness that can see our oneness and create a society that reflects it. We are the part of the creation capable of thinking the thoughts needed to make a sustainable paradise of earth. And we sure have a struggle ahead of us to get there.

No wonder Jesus said, “And now my soul is troubled.” The sacred way leads us into conflict with greed and violent oppression. Humanity develops ever more destructive technologies and systems, and the consciousness of the Spirit and earth within us becomes ever more troubled, and needs to grow ever wiser in order to reassert the laws of love.

The world around us troubles our soul, but the struggle is also within us. Jesus said that we need to lose our life to gain life, Rumi said we need to die before we die, meaning we need to let go of our material orientation and shift to a greater spiritual orientation.

The nature of the universe is to grow and evolve, yet also to resist change. Our old, small self does not want to let go and die even if it can become something greater. As Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence, “all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.”

Sometimes we need to hit rock bottom. That is what happened to King David that led him to write Psalm 51. He had murdered Uriah and lost the baby he had with Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba, and finally acknowledged how far his heart had strayed. He was ready, like Eustace Scrubb in Narnia, to tear the dragon skin off, and he realized that he would need God’s help to do it.

Maybe humanity is reaching the point when we will be finally ready to die to our old ways. Our hope is in Jeremiah’s promise that the Spirit will write a new covenant on the people’s heart, and give us a new and wider consciousness that can help us change our lives and our world.

Jesus is our model in this. Today's passage in John is surreal, with one strange twist after another, but two messages come through that are at the core of what Jesus teaches. First, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." And second, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth [meaning "when I die on the cross"], will draw all people to myself."

We are the consciousness of the universe in this time and place, we are here to think the thoughts of the Spirit, we are here to do what the universe and God need us to do, and to do that we need to die to our old self and our old ways, to let go and crack open and let the seed within us sprout and a new creation come into being within and around us.

Gandhi said, "There comes a time when an individual becomes irresistible and [their] action becomes all-pervasive in its effect. This comes when [they reduce themselves] to zero."

We will draw all to us when we have reduced ourselves to zero so that our consciousness can evolve to see the oneness of all. That death into new life will bear much fruit—the very fruit the earth now needs.

But what kind of seeds are we, and how do the earth and Spirit need us to grow in order to bear fruit for their cause? What do our families and workplaces and communities need us to become to help them adapt to a changing world?

These questions can be troubling, they can feel like a dark wilderness where we wander lost, but spiritual wisdom teaches us to stay on the journey and gives us tools to find our way.

Silent, listening prayer is one of those tools, so let us open to the Spirit and feel how it is moving within us in this moment...

Communion Invitation

We are that part of earth
that the Spirit of earth
has evolved into human thinking.
From the beginning the Spirit
has helped humans emerge
into ever wiser ways of thinking,
aiming ultimately for the way of thinking

that the Spirit made possible in Jesus,
who could think as God thinks and the earth thinks,
seeing the oneness of all creation, all people,
envisioning a world ruled by love and serving it.
The bread and juice symbolize the way that Jesus
embodied the thinking and yearnings of Spirit and earth.
By participating in this ritual we say that we want
to embody and serve the Spirit and earth as Jesus did,
we want his thoughts to be our thoughts,
and the essence of his self to be our self.
So let us join together as one in the hope
that we may be transformed and transform the world.

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

A flock of doves
roosting in an apple tree.
Beauty all around us.