

Longing Before and After

Sunday, May 10, 2020

The Rev. Barbara E. Davis

Romans 8:18-28

In August of 2001, I took a trip to the Pacific Northwest. I had friends from seminary there, who lived just outside of Seattle. Karen and I had been together just a few years. We considered ourselves married, although the Marriage Equality Act was only a glimmer in someone's eye. Likewise, our daughters were only a glimmer in our eyes, our separation was unimaginable. It was a trip *before* many of the things that I would now name as seminal events in my adult life. We spent a few days with our friends, kayaking off the San Juan Islands and one day hiking out near Mt. Baker. We ate amazing food in downtown Seattle and caught a baseball game at what was then called Safeco Field.

It was only a few weeks after we returned that the terrorist attacks of September 11 happened, altering the landscape of our city and lives. For a long time, the photos from that trip were difficult to even look at; they seemed to tell of a time that had been so fleeting, so far away, so innocent. Even when I look at them now, I see an something in my face that is hard to recognize: innocence, youthfulness, anticipation. Maybe it is a look of longing before I could have known what to be longing for.

We are in a similar kind time, although it is sort of limbo. We know there was a before. We know what we longed for then, but we are holding our breath a bit waiting still to see what will come after. The photograph of these days has a long exposure time. We are no longer before, but we are not yet after, so our longing pulls in both directions. I have noticed that we are talking about before as a staff and in my family.

Remember last year at this time when we were worried about – fill in whatever blank – remember earlier this year in the concourse when we were celebrating colleagues' birthdays, sitting on the couches in the concourse. Remember the last day before the coronavirus closed the school buildings. January, February, early March were a lifetime ago.

I've heard a lot of people describe this time as being "compressed" that the days are both long and go by with a speed that is mind-boggling. We are all busy adjusting our expectations, lowering our standards, realizing what is really important to us and focusing on those things. We are grieving, alarmed, frightened, anxious, sad, all in within moments of time. Sometimes we are content, filled with gratitude, aware of our blessings, and even happy. Most days are such a jumble of feelings that we are content to move through them, not trying too hard to make meaning out of each one.

It is no wonder that Paul's words to the young church in Rome make a new kind of sense to us now. We know that eager longing; we know the sound of those labor pains of the world. We know the sound of our own groaning. But what, we wonder, is being birthed in this time?

Two years ago on Mother's Day, I preached a sermon called "Star Gazing with Birds." Remember two years at this time? Jon Walton had just retired a few weeks ago. You all, with the exception of the search committee, had not yet met Bob, although he was due to arrive in just another week. About half of our current program staff were not yet on our team. In that sermon, I told the story of author Terry Tempest Williams's mother, who left her daughter, a writer, all of her journals. After her mother's death, William's went to the shelf of journals to find that every single one of these journals was blank.

As William's wrestles throughout the book with the meaning of this gift from her mother, she asks the question of these blank journals: How shall I live? It is a question that these days seem to be asking us over and over again.

Throughout the book she offers this refrain:

Once upon a time, when women were birds, there was a simple understanding that to sing at dawn and to sing at dusk was to heal the world through joy. The birds still remember what we have forgotten, that the world is meant to be celebrated.ⁱ

When I re-read those verses, I was struck by how resonate they are for these days. I have heard so many people still in the city talk about on zoom calls how they can hear the birds more clearly in their apartments, a side effect of less street and highway traffic.

So many of you celebrate near dusk with the cheers for the essential workers, a simple act of offering healing to the world through joy and appreciation.

Two years ago in that sermon, I went on to ask a further series of questions expanding on that simple question, how shall I live? I asked, "In this day and age, how are we to live as if the world is meant to be celebrated? What gets in the way of healing the world through joy? What in our spiritual lives stops us from celebrating the world?" Like a before photograph, those questions seem stuck in time a bit to me. How different were the answers to those questions just two years ago.

Maybe it has been hearing the birds, maybe it has just been talking with all of you about the changes you've been experiencing and what you like and don't like about this time, but a few weeks ago I realized that I was not only aware of how the world was changing, I was aware that I was changing. Maybe you feel this way about yourself in these days too.

It is that feeling of change that draws me back to Paul's letter to Romans, especially these birthing verses in chapter 8 that Elizabeth read for us this morning. These verses are the mostly gratifying motherly verses in all of scripture. The labor pains and growth they bring is so spot on. These verses do not shine up the process of labor or the suffering it brings to get to the growth. There is no doubt this feeling that Paul is capturing about the world is *labor*. This change that the world is birthing is hand-gripping, screaming, groaning, medication-desiring pain.

This labor is the kind of change that we long not to be in the midst of, but to be through so we can look back and see what learned and where we grew. The change he is speaking of

holds a promise of what will come, but make no mistake, the Romans he is writing to are right in the midst of that change. Like us, they are no longer living before and they are not yet through the labor to the after. Their longing, their hope is a snapshot of that moment.

Sometimes we oversimplify these pictures in our faith story and think the passages that point to a new perspective don't have a before that people were attached to, just an after for which people were longing. But are the Romans really that different from us? They had a before that they loved. They had routines and communities and things that this new way of being in the world were tearing them away from, yet there they were longing for something after.

Paul's letter to the early followers in Rome was one of his later letters, most likely his last, written in about 57-58 of the Common Era. While his earlier letters are first books of the New Testament written about a decade before, his letters to Romans came about a decade prior to the first of the Gospels accounts, which came out of what we know as the community of Mark. Situated as this letter is, with a powerful before and after as it's canonical companions, there is little argument that Romans has had a huge influence on our Christian faith over the centuries. As New Testament scholar Mark Allan Powell tells it, "In the year 386 a young monk named Augustine was converted to Christianity by reading two verses from Paul's letter to the Romans...Over eleven centuries later, in 1515, the Protestant Reformation began with the meditations of a Augustinian monk, Martin Luther, on another text from Romans..."

And a few centuries after that, in 1738, a young Anglican, John Wesley, heard a church leader read aloud from a commentary on Romans that Luther had written."ⁱⁱ All three of these iconic leaders of our faith point to Romans as their before and after moment.

And the Romans of the first century? They had before and after longings around Paul's letter as well. While Rome isn't one of the first places Paul writes to in his ministry in the late 40's, there is surprising evidence that by that time there were already quite a few "followers of the way" as they were known in Rome. In fact, it appears that there were so many and created a significant enough ruckus that Claudius expelled them from Rome sometime in the year 49. After Claudius died in 54 CE, those followers started returning to Rome.ⁱⁱⁱ

Paul writes in this letter about a desire to visit them after he returns to Jerusalem from Corinth, but the theology he develops in this letter will become the cornerstone for Christian tradition. We read the longing in Paul's words before this became so, and live in the longing after so many pivotal experiences of his letter. But can those words point us also to our before and after?

I believe they can. I believe they can because those verses capture the enormity of the sea-change we are in now. The longing we have for both the old normal and the new normal is perfectly, well, normal. But what Paul teaches in this letter is that longing before and longing after are not untied from each other. They are ever and always connected, and often pulling us in both of those directions. We don't have to fight those emotions, we simply have to lean into the knowledge that all of that longing contributes to the hope we have for what will come. Paul sometimes is so simple and smart.

How can we argue with his words, “who hopes for what is seen?” We hope for what we cannot see; we hope for what comes out of today’s uncertainty. We hope because what we longed for before and what we long for now are powerful anchors in our life. Our longings, our desires in this time are not just fleeting feelings that we let go of and resort to old patterns. Our longings point us toward what is front of us. What we long for now is to see what we hope for, but hope keeps moving in front us, leading us onward, leading us toward the days when we will look back and know that these days were what we longed for before.

So, my friends, take heart. Long for what was before. Give yourself space to grieve what you are missing, what you wish was the same. Grieve the celebrations passing us by, the time we will never get back. But do not lose hope. Long for what will come, remind yourself to hope for what you cannot see. Because our longing will move us through these moments, rocking us before and after, assuring us that our labor in these days is not for nothing, it is drawing us toward each other and toward God in ways we never could have seen.

ⁱ Williams, Terry Tempest. 2012. *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-Four Variations on Voice*. (New York, NY: Picador).

ⁱⁱ Powell, Mark Allan. 2009. *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic) p. 255.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 258.