**"After the Rain: Becoming"**

**A Sermon for University Congregational Church**

**Sunday, May 8, 2022**

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Traditional Word

"Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you believe in Him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." -- Romans 15:13

"I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." -- Philippians 1:6

Contemporary Word

Transitions, big or small, are rarely straightforward. They require abandoning the parts of ourselves that feel safe and familiar. It is a massive task to intentionally choose change over comfort…[b]ecoming my true self was brutal, but the process brought out the beauty in my life that I ached for. It made room for more love and less judgment, more self-belief, and less fear. –Alexandra Elle, *After the Rain*

AFTER THE RAIN: BECOMING

Once, a poet, who had just witnessed the devastation and the carnage of wounded men in a Union hospital during the throes of the Civil war, wrote these tender words:

"When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,

And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,

I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,

Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,

And thought of him I love.

In the depths of the destruction of the American Civil War, Walt Whitman managed to create one of the most lasting images of poetic beauty. How can poetry do this? How can it take something as awful as war and inspire humans to plumb the depths of their spirits and write verses of unimaginable beauty and power? And, just as important, what is it about poetry that it has such a strange and wonderful hold on our imaginations? Why do mortals love immortal words, arranged in a specific fashion, designed to evoke some sort of response? The question then is, why poetry? And how does it helps us become?

An online contributor to the website Quora wrote this about why we mortals love poetry: "Because it depicts the pain of heart with utmost subtlety like no other form. It is the voice of the heart of the dreamers, the heartbroken, the artists, the introverts in its purest form. It says all that is unheard or unsaid. It is a voice that comes directly from the heart and touches our soul."

I like that—somehow, the manner in which a poet can string together words that make our brains think about things in a different way—we can see the world anew. And it is this ability to adapt and change and see things new that can assist us in our process of becoming—for whether we like it or not, we ARE becoming something all of the time—what will you become? An angry woman who holds hurts and resentments and lashes out until you finally feel justified and vindicated in your transactional ways? Or will you listen to the words of the poets, apostles, prophets, and sages and let their spirits guide you into becoming a more loving and kind person? Or, as in my case, will it be some mixture of the two? Constantly trying to rid myself of the terrible game of winners and losers—of where I believe if I don't repay you for the wrongs you have done me, then I am somehow a loser—and balancing that with my growing ability to be non-transactional. It takes a lot of practice, but it might be the way to save our world.

For today's prayer (and as the lyrics to the second anthem), we used a poem by Sara Teasdale. She was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on August 8, 1884, into an old, established, and highly religious and devout family. The young woman had a passion for the English language and for poetry and found herself, in young adulthood, living in Chicago—becoming what she wanted to become.

Teasdale began to surround herself with the poetic "greats" of that City of Broad Shoulders but knew that as a woman in a misogynistic world, she would have to marry. After rejecting several suitors, she eventually agreed to be wed to Mr. Ersnt Filsinger. They moved to New York City, where Sara would continue to write her poetry and would soon win the prestigious Columbia University Poetry Society Prize—which became the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry—of which Teasdale would win another one as well—doing all of this in the years between 1918 and 1921.

Only in her mid-twenties, Sara Teasdale had become the established poet she hoped to be. She had become what she wanted to become. Teasdale would continue to write gorgeous poetry for the next decade until her life took a decidedly dark turn in the late 1920s. It was then that she suffered from a persistent and challenging form of pneumonia and became homebound. Sara Teasdale had struggled with loneliness and depression her entire life, and she died by suicide on January 29, 1933, after taking an entire bottle of sleeping pills. Her final collection of poems, Strange Victory, appeared posthumously that same year. She was not yet fifty when she died.

Even though the artist struggled with depression, she could still produce great art, even when she didn't think she could. It's one thing to look upon adversity and figure out ways to fix your life, and an entirely different thing to survive adversity and have it change your life for the better. While both are born out of a sense of hope for a better future, the latter, the ability to use adversity to change your life into something better, requires a persistent and faithful approach to your life. Vision is necessary to become what we want to become. If your vision is to simply return your life to the way it was BEFORE the crisis (whatever it may have been), then that's likely what you will return to—but if you can imagine a different, better future than the one affected by the crisis—then it is THAT vision that will drive your journey to recovery. Vision matters—regardless of what naysayers may tell you. And for many people with depression, they can not see a way to have a vision. Their brains and thinking don't allow them to imagine a future that often fails to have them in it.

In her book After the Rain, the book we're using for this current sermon series—author Alexandre Elle talks much about the crises that changed her life. She writes: Transitions, big or small, are rarely straightforward. They require abandoning the parts of ourselves that feel safe and familiar. It is a massive task to intentionally choose change over comfort…[b]ecoming my true self was brutal, but the process brought out the beauty in my life that I ached for. It made room for more love and less judgment, more self-belief, and less fear."

We say it a lot from up here—from this pulpit, Robin and I and others—and we know a foundational truth: words matter. And the ancient Jewish people believed this to be fundamentally true as well. For the ancients, words brought forth something—they weren't wasted—they held power. And they still hold power. There's a reason that the Apostle Paul said that the pen is mightier than the sword. A sword might get you a quick victory on a field of battle, but the words we use—the rhetoric we employ—those last much longer than the few moments the sword was being used. The consequence of the sword is death-dealing. The consequence of the word is life-giving. Both are powerful, but only one can grant you a future of becoming—a future where you may pursue the life you wish to pursue.

I know many of you will argue that you can't have one without the other—and I honor that, I do—but for me, for someone who eschews violence and doesn't think that people were created for hitting, only the pen will move us forward into a better life for all—into a better love of God and neighbor. Only the power that resides in those individual words strung together in a particular fashion, that then lands on my ear and makes my brain think about things differently—possibly in a way I'd never considered before—then that is the power that truly changes us. The underlying vision of the rhetoric must be positive—because we know, too, that words can hurt. Words in the hands of a master manipulator can persuade people into evil behaviors. We witness this almost every day—in every context—words matter.

Poet and author Audre Lorde addresses some of this in her incredible poem, Power. There's so much in this poem, and even though we wish its themes of White Supremecy and everyday misogyny had found their way to the garbage dump, this poem still rings true because not that much has changed from when she wrote it in 1978. There's a stanza in her poem that stands out in stark contrast to the venom some of her words hold—hear these words of Audre Lorde: "I have not been able to touch the destruction within me. But unless I learn to use the difference between poetry and rhetoric--my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold or lie limp and useless as an unconnected wire." To Lorde, the intention behind the words almost seems to matter more than the words themselves.

Let me come at this from a different angle—here's a fable: A man's favorite donkey falls into a deep precipice. He can't pull it out no matter how hard he tries. He, therefore, decides to bury it alive. Soil is poured onto the donkey from above. The donkey feels the load, shakes it off, and steps on it. More soil is poured. It shakes it off and steps up. The more the load was poured, the higher it rose. By noon, the donkey was grazing in green pastures. After much shaking off (of problems) And stepping up (learning from them), one might graze in GREEN PASTURES. We pick ourselves up and dust ourselves off and start all over again.

Or this story: Once, a wise man held a seminar to teach people how to get rid of sorrows in their life. Many people gathered to hear the wise man's words. The man entered the room and told a hilarious joke to the crowd. The crowd roared in laughter. After a couple of minutes, he told them the same joke, and only a few of them smiled. When he told the same joke for the third time, no one laughed anymore. The wise man smiled and said," You can't laugh at the same joke over and over. So why do you cry over the same problem over and over?"

Or this line from the Teasdale poem that reads: "I will make this world of my devising--Out of a dream in my lonely mind. I shall find the crystal of peace, – above me--Stars I shall find." Teasdale writes of a future of her devising—out of a dream. She's telling us that out of a vision—a dream—in her lonely mind—she will find peace and stars. It's really quite evocative—and it might change someone's judgment about the depressed mind. I want us to see it as an example of something someone did during one of the moments of their life where they had clarity and understood their purpose. I say this because even though we know the end of Sara's story—of how she succumbed to the disease of depression and took her life—but here's the thing—while we lament what other great works she might have given the world, we can now only hold her poems and writings in our hands and re-member her. We can read her mosaic of words with tear-filled eyes because we feel and share the deep humanity in those words, and we relate to her pain and we empathize with her. We then imprint all of the beauty and all of the death and all of the contradictions she saw in the world into our minds and let Sara's love of life fill our souls. Even though she took her own life, I read Teasdale's poems and understand that in her lucid, non-depressed moments, she did indeed love life. We can't write off her life's work as not being life-giving because she chose in a moment of relapse into her disease to end her life. Depression doesn't allow the sufferer to have hope. It doesn't let the person with the illness have the capacity to see a happier future. It doesn't allow for a vision of hope.

What if the Holy One gave us poetry to help change our minds—to empathize—to become more like the Divine One—more loving and kind. Maybe poetry is one more way we might co-create with the Holy One—how the Holy One and Humanity are locked in a dance of co-creation that can inspire us to create a better, more just world for all. A way for our becoming to unfold.A vision of hope from a God of hope.

By the way, that's one more reason to come to church—Robin and I are hope dealers. We want to give you abundant hope each Sunday morning, so you can have that with you as you go through your week. Ya gotta have hope. And the chief way we Followers of the Ways of Jesus have hope is to trust in a loving, divine presence. The Holy One. God. The God of Hope.

As Paul wrote to the church in Rome: "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you believe in [God] so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." -- Romans 15:13—and then repeats in his letter to the church members in Phillipi: "I am sure of this, that [God] who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." -- Philippians 1:6 Now that's hope—that's faith—that's the belief that we have one more day to try and get it right—one more chance to love God and love our neighbors.

For me, the path to becoming is based on hope. The hope of a God who has promised to walk with us on our journey. A God who has inspired poets great and small to wonder at the human mind and the human condition and then eloquently give us words to pry us away from our certainty and to trust more in that God of Hope. The Holy One. The Spirit that drove Walt Whitman to write these words:

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,

I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

The last scud of day holds back for me,

It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow'd wilds,

It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,

I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,

If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,

But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,

And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,

Missing me one place search another,

I stop somewhere waiting for you.

AMEN

RESOURCES

<https://medium.com/the-mission/how-do-you-become-who-you-really-are-5a2d6766e9ef>

<https://www.4recruitmentservices.com/blog/2017/08/15-motivational-and-inspiring-short-stories>

<https://poets.org/poet/sara-teasdale>