

“A Moment in Time” / Ezekiel 17:22-24 / 17 June 2012

Once, years ago, an elderly missionary, who had just come home from forty years in the Congo, wrote me a paper letter. At the end of the letter, he asked, “How are you participating in the life of God?” I’d never heard language like that before. At the time, it puzzled me and intrigued me all at once. So, we get to participate in the life of God? What does it mean? “I will plant a cedar on a lofty mountain,” the Prophet Ezekiel has God saying. “In the shade of its branches, every kind of winged creature will rest. I bring low the high tree. I make high the low tree. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.” We’ve all seen green trees drying up, and we’ve occasionally seen the dry trees beginning to flourish. Things have their times and their seasons, and sometimes unexpectedly, things we’d written off come cycling back around. Has it ever occurred to you that in all their cycles and seasons, we—all of us—trees, animals, people—we’re participating in the very life of God?

Well, that’s a pretty lofty thought. Let’s approach it from a different angle. So just last Monday, there were seven Presbyterian pastors sitting around a table in a church basement. It was a clergy lunch, and we’d come expecting to discuss issues in the larger church. We were various ages, three of us in our 40s, the rest older. We served a variety of churches: some urban, some suburban, some small, some medium sized, some wildly conservative, and others less so. The fellow who was leading our discussion wanted to talk about the afterlife, of all things, which is not my favorite topic, especially among pastors. I would have preferred to discuss something a little more relevant to the needs of the world, but some of those guys were inching closer and closer to the afterlife, and so I suppose it seemed relevant enough to them. We sat there and made chitchat about our conceptions of heaven. What’s it like? Will we have bodies? If we were married and widowed and married again, will we get two spouses in heaven? (Could get messy.) How do people spend their time in heaven? Since work is what makes life meaningful and satisfying here below, will there be work to do in heaven? Someone said that they saw a single-frame comic strip about heaven with a guy sitting on the edge of a cloud in a white robe, looking kind of bored, and he says, “I kind of wish I’d brought a magazine.”

In time, the question arose, “Let’s pretend that heaven really is just the thing you see in the comic strips...with clouds, and harps, and halos, and wings. How old will our bodies be?” Or, more precisely, at what stage of human development will they be? Will we remain the same age that we were when we died? For most of us, there’s not much fun in that! Will our bodies be in their prime, and if so, when is a person’s prime? Our physical prime is somewhere in our early 20s. But in some ways, being in our physical prime creates a sense of urgency that nobody quite wants in heaven. Our physical prime and our emotional prime don’t usually occur at the same time. Many people claim that, despite some physical decline and perhaps some hair loss, they’re actually happier in their 30s and 40s than they ever were in their 20s. I know people who are thoroughly enjoying their 50s and 60s. And we’ve all known people on whom the mantle of old age has settled like the first snow of the season: beautiful, peaceful, contented in a way that they never were back in their turbulent primes. We’ve seen this happen to our grouchy uncles after they become grandpas. The further I get from 21, the more able I am to care about other people, listen to them, see them, love them. I think it’s because it just takes so long for us to learn to love ourselves. The Greek philosopher Plato believed that everyone is 30 years old in the afterlife: mature but still youthful.

During this curious, almost playful conversation among seven pastors, the oldest minister finally spoke up, and he said, “I don’t care about any afterlife. I preach great funerals,” he said. “But in the neighborhood where I grew up, in the 1940s, there were a lot of Jews. And in every Jewish household, there were photos, going up the staircase, of the family members who couldn’t make it out of Europe. So, God didn’t prevent the Holocaust from happening, but the afterlife is supposed to come and make it all better?” (Ah, the Holocaust trump card!) Well, you could have heard a spider sneeze in that church basement. The presbytery official who was leading the discussions tried to reply non-judgmentally. The other pastors looked at each other sideways, then offered their stock answers about evil, and human choices, and freewill.

After lunch, as we were cleaning up our plates and heading off to our cars, I said to the older fellow who had mentioned the Holocaust, “Thanks for having the courage to speak your mind. You know they could call in the Committee on Ministry to get you defrocked?” He said, “I’m retiring at the end of the year, and I’m too old to care what people think. Besides, I believe that God is good. I just don’t think God swoops in to fix things. I think fixing things is our job.” For him, the time for guardedness has passed. He doesn’t have to worry about his colleagues’ opinion of him. He doesn’t have to worry about the presbytery’s hazing committees, poring over his doctrine to see if it’s orthodox. He doesn’t have to tow the party line anymore. He’s free to speak about the kind of faith that he holds at the end of a long career in the church. And his pension will be waiting for him. There’s a new kind of freedom in the late phase of life where he finds himself. It occurred to me that maybe, just maybe, the truth is so big that we can only know it in increments: the trust and innocence of childhood is truth; the certainties and passions of youth are truth; the calm acceptance and even the ambiguities of old age are truth. They’re all truth, but we can’t have them all at once. They only come in their time.

“I will plant a cedar on a lofty mountain,” the Prophet Ezekiel has God saying. “In the shade of its branches, every kind of winged creature will rest. I bring low the high tree. I make high the low tree. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.” It’s easy to see where Jesus gets his botanical imagery in the Book of Mark; he borrows it from the prophet, whose words were familiar to Jesus’ hearers. It would be like you or me putting a creative spin on the words of Shakespeare or Robert Frost. Of course, Ezekiel is talking about the fate of nations, which history has shown, will rise and fall about every two hundred years. But Ezekiel could also be speaking about our individual lives, with all their busyness, all their memories, all their wonder, and joy, and regret. Every moment is packed with potential; some of it we see, and most of it is beyond our knowing. We only know the truth of the season we’re in: People, like nations, take root. We have our seasons of growth. Perhaps we flourish or at least maintain a kind of stasis for a while. Eventually, we fall into decline. But where one thing declines in us—our hearing, our quick wittedness—another thing springs to new life. And in all these phases there is goodness, and beauty, and truth. We just don’t get to have it all at once. And so, as my elderly missionary friend asked me so long ago, “How do we participate in the life of God?” In the same way a tree does: moment-by-moment, hour-by-hour, decade-by-decade, never fully apprehending the whole of life at a single time, never having a complete grasp of the scope and grandeur of God’s truth, but seeing bits at a time. And so I ask, at the time in life where you find yourself today, at your age, at this point in your life’s journey, how do you participate in the life of God?

Presbyterians used to be known as fatalists. The story is told of a dour old Scotch-Irish woman who was a devout Presbyterian and a steadfast Calvinist. She believed that God had long ago planned each hair on her head, each drop of rain, each stray weed that found its way into her garden. If anything happened, it was because God had actively willed it. One day she fell down the steep wooden stairs from the second floor of her house. Then, in a daze, she rolled over the landing and tumbled straight down the stone stairs into her basement. As she lay moaning on the cold floor, she said, "At least that's over." Our faith tradition has historically emphasized "providence," the notion that God has a plan, and that plan is being acted out in big and little ways, at all times, and in all places...even in a fall down the stairs. On one hand, it can seem stifling to say that God foreordains everything that comes to pass. It makes God seem like a heavenly puppetmaster, pulling strings from above. If this is the case, then we are merely actors playing our part; the script was written in the mind of God since before the mountains rose out of the sea. On the other hand, if a loving God has planned it all out beforehand, then there's nothing to fear. Life is somehow safe, and everything that befalls us has some greater significance, some greater meaning.

I can't tell you what to believe about all of that. I've come to a place where I see God as the force of life within all living things, forever taking brokenness and reworking it into wholeness. Wasting nothing, not even pain and loss, but taking our chaos and making sense from it. In time, perhaps a very long time, weaving beauty out of horror, wisdom out of folly, joy out of sorrow. Insofar as God is a force, forever making life out of death, inexorably redeeming what seemed lost, then I agree with the woman who fell down the stairs that God has a plan, which even the strongest can never resist. Does that mean that God actively causes everything that happens? I don't think we need to take it that far. My point is that the scariest thing about the suggesting that we participate in the life of God is the fact that we probably prefer a God who doesn't need our help. But if all living plays itself out within the greater arena of God's life, then it's a joy and a privilege to be given a part.

One thing you and I do control is the use we make of the moments that we are given. Years take their toll, but it's the moments that create us again and again. Think of the moments around which your life coalesces: a kind word when you expected to be punished, an understanding smile, a simple answer, "yes." A newborn's cry. That baby seems like a blank slate—which it is. But we soon discover that it carries in its tiny self all the genetic makeup of its parents, its unknown ancestors, eons of history. Even a newborn isn't *entirely* new. We celebrate July 4, but my guess is that there was a lot brewing in the 13 colonies on June 17, 1776, too. And July 5 probably didn't feel that different from the days leading up to it. Each moment, fresh and new, bears seeds of the unseen past, but it's also packed with possibility for the future. Each new moment holds the accrual of the moments that went before, but it also holds a new grain of wildness and potential. We participate in the life of God by taking the moments as they come, heavy with old baggage, yes, but also fraught with new promise, and then—like God—we work to bring about something new from something old. We participate in the very life of God by finding the grain of good possibility in all our fresh moments, then dedicating those moments to the causes of truth, and goodness, and beauty. The tree sprouts from the ground, flourishes, withers, and perhaps flourishes again. Maybe we can only know the life's great truths in increments, moment-by-moment, hour-by-hour.

And so, what does this mean for you and me? It means that every season of life has its wisdom to impart: the trust and innocence of childhood, the passion and certainties of youth, the acceptance and ambiguities of old age. Each of them has their truth to give us, and we can never seem to carry all life's truths at once. All our seasons are good: the days of contentment, the boring times, the restless times, the directionless times, the times we hardly notice because they're so packed with tasks and duties. All of it comes from God's good hand, and somehow God is present in all of them. Wherever we find ourselves on the long journey of life today, it's as good a place as any. And it's unwise to yearn for yesterday or tomorrow, because the only time in our life that's packed with divine potential is the moment at hand, a moment that is good, and holy, and full of possibility. This is the only moment in which you can ever change. This is the only moment in which the world can be made new. This is the only moment in which you can participate in the very life of God. How will you participate in the life of God? Amen.