

Amazed and astonished

Jeremiah 2:4-13

August 28, 2016

I am amazed and astonished.

I am amazed by the vista from atop Blue Hill: islands and bays, dense forest and hills and mountains stretching to the horizon in every direction.

I am amazed by the rhythm of the tides in Penobscot Bay, the level of ocean changing by ten or eleven feet or more in the space of six hours.

I am amazed by the sweet taste in my mouth of a perfectly steamed lobster.

I am amazed by you, by you who faithfully come Sunday after Sunday, not only because you need us, but because you know that we need you.

I am astonished by how quickly a wide and thick convection fog can move into Englishman Bay, leaving me floating in my kayak in the middle of a mile-wide bay surrounded by ocean and not able to see more than forty or fifty feet in any direction.

I am astonished by the huge, enormously huge, granite boulders jumbled at the water's edge on the back side of McGlathery Island.

I am astonished by the resilience and courage and faith of people like Barbra Kitchen, the woman in Hinton, West Virginia, for whom we built front and back decks, and people like some of you who face loss and tragedy and mortal threat without bitterness, but with lightness of being and unwavering hope and undiminished love.

I am astonished by the large vocabulary and complexity of thought and feeling and expression already developed in my three-year-old granddaughter.

These are some of the things that amaze and astonish me, but what is it that amazes the sky? As long as there has been an earth, there has been a sky. The sky has literally seen all there is to see under the sun, so what, if anything, amazes the sky? What, if anything, does the sky find astonishing?

This, that a people tenderly formed and weened and cared for by their God would turn their back, exchanging the living God for worthless substitutes of their own invention. Amazing. Astonishing. Horrifying. These two sins cause the sky to shake with horror:

*they have turned away from [the Lord],
the spring of fresh water,
and they have dug cisterns,
cracked cisterns that can hold no water at all*

Why? Why did they do such a thing? God had rescued them, bringing them out of Egypt where they lived for centuries as a slave people, exploited and abused. God brought them out and led them through the perilous and barren wilderness, leading them, providing for them, protecting them, bringing them through the desert to a good land, a fertile land, the land of promise.

They knew that. They remembered that. The stories of the exodus, of Moses and Miriam and Aaron, the stories of the mighty God who saved them and made them his own, were told again and again, passed down from generation to generation. So why did they turn their backs on the God who never turned his back on them?

Why do we? We know. We remember. We tell and retell the stories of a God who loved the world, loved us, so much that he gave his Son, gave up his Son, for us.

But we know too from our own personal experience. We can remember moments -- tender moments, awesome moments, exhilarating moments -- moments when we saw, when we saw just a glimpse of God's glory: the glory of creation, the glory of love, of grace and mercy and forgiveness, the glory of truth, knowing that love turns back hate, knowing that love can overcome even death, knowing that we are made, all of us, in God's own image, that we are loved, all of us, as we are, because that is how God is.

We know God is, don't we? Then why, why do we turn our backs on him?

Six words: "I would rather do it myself." Rather than take water from a flowing spring, we dig wells, even if the wells won't hold water. "I would rather do it myself." You've seen it. You've done it. I've done it, struggling mightily to do it myself: lift the kayak, carry the lumber, move the rock, take out the stump, not seeking help or even refusing help that is offered. To prove ... what?

And it's not just the little things, the silly things. We want to achieve, to earn, to prove, to win. We want to make ourselves, provide for ourselves, live by our own wisdom and strength. Our modern myths celebrate the victories of the solitary individual who makes it, against all odds: live strong, be all you can be, just do it.

But it's not the way we are made. We are made to be with, to be with each other. We are made to be interdependent, to depend on each other. We are made to depend on God. We do depend on God, whether we acknowledge it or not.

Oh, yes, there is much we can do and should do. We have great power to do good and to do harm, power to tend or neglect, to strive or to give up. We can do something, do a little to take care of the life we have and of the lives of our neighbors and of the earth we share, but we cannot give life. We cannot, by our own wisdom and power, obtain or hold on to any of the things that really matter, we can only receive them as a gift.

It's all gift, isn't it? That's not to minimize our responsibility or disparage our hard and conscientious work, but to tell the truth. It is all gift. We have life only by the generosity of the One who gives it.

I read an editorial this week in the Christian Century magazine that quoted Henri Nouwen talking about what he learned from traveling among poor men and women in Latin America. Nouwen says:

We people of the first world emphasize our rights. We claim our right to food, health, shelter, and education. [We] relate to the goods of life as possessions that are ours and [that] need to be conquered ... and defended. Although the poor in the third world do not deny that they have basic human rights, their emphasis is on the giftedness of life ... The goods that come to them are experienced as free gifts of God ... gifts to be grateful for and to celebrate.

We talk about the difference between seeing the glass half full or half empty, but what if both perceptions are mistaken? Because both have made a prior assumption of how much water belongs in the glass! But isn't there much to be thankful for, isn't there much to be joyful over, that there is water? In the glass? In my glass?

So stop. Stop worrying, stop chasing the wind, stop pretending that your future, your life, is in your hands, in your power to secure or to control. Stop digging cisterns and take a drink, take a good, long, and refreshing drink from the spring of fresh water that is the Lord.