

Nothing

Nehemiah 8:1-12

January 24, 2016

“The Moon And The Yew Tree” by Sylvia Plath.

*This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary
The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue.
The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God
Prickling my ankles and murmuring of their humility
Fumy, spiritous mists inhabit this place.
Separated from my house by a row of headstones.
I simply cannot see where there is to get to.*

*The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right,
White as a knuckle and terribly upset.
It drags the sea after it like a dark crime; it is quiet
With the O-gape of complete despair. I live here.
Twice on Sunday, the bells startle the sky --
Eight great tongues affirming the Resurrection
At the end, they soberly bong out their names.*

*The yew tree points up, it has a Gothic shape.
The eyes lift after it and find the moon.
The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.
Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.
How I would like to believe in tenderness -
The face of the effigy, gentled by candles,
Bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes.*

*I have fallen a long way. Clouds are flowering
Blue and mystical over the face of the stars
Inside the church, the saints will all be blue,
Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews,
Their hands and faces stiff with holiness.
The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild.
And the message of the yew tree is blackness - blackness and silence.*

This is despair: “I simply cannot see where there is to get to” ... “I would like to believe” (but cannot) ... there is “blackness, blackness and silence.” This is despair, but it is not yet utter despair, because the poet still has a voice. She still has something to say.

Despair is the most lethal of the shadows that darken our spirits. In despair, the shadow is overwhelming. The light is there because the light is always there, but despair blocks out the light entirely. All is darkness and you can see nothing.

Depression sees and doesn't see, sees some things clearly, all too clearly, but misses other things. But despair sees nothing. In despair, you are not pessimistic or discouraged or holding on to no more than a sliver of hope. In despair you are holding on to nothing. You have no hope. You have no future. You have no expectations.

In depression, you still have something. You have your grief and you have the "you" who is grieving and you have some hope, however small, of rescue, of finding your "self" again. But in despair you have nothing. All is dark. All is empty. You are empty, emptied of all desire and all feeling and all identity. In despair, you give up. You give up everything. There is nothing left. There is nothing. You are nothing.

God save us from despair!

Go and have a feast! Share your food and wine with those who don't have enough. The joy that the Lord gives you will make you strong.

It is hard, very hard, to save a person in despair. It is impossible for people in despair to save themselves, because they lack even the desire to try. But they can be saved! You can be saved! Food and friends and the Lord can save you.

Go and have a feast. Share your food and wine with those who don't have enough. And the joy that the Lord gives you will make you strong.

So they did. They gathered by the Water Gate on the first day of the seventh month. No reason is given for the choice of that day, the first day of the seventh month, but if you know your Jewish Law, if you read Leviticus and Numbers, you will know that the first day of the seventh month is set aside for rest and for worship, for blowing trumpets and making offerings.

It is Rosh Hashanah, the "head of the year," the Jewish new year festival, a day for taking stock of the year past and looking forward to the year ahead, a time for assessing where you are, for remembering where you have come from, and for looking ahead to where you are going.

Looking ahead. Looking forward. Moving into the future. This is not despair! But these people, the people of Israel, were surely at risk of despair. They had been three generations in Babylon, homeless and increasingly hopeless, slowly but surely emptied of everything that had been theirs: their language, their religion, their identity.

But now they are home, returned from exile, rebuilding their homes and trying to rebuild their lives. They have just completed, under Nehemiah's supervision, the reconstruction of Jerusalem's demolished city walls, and now, on the first day of the seventh month, they gather to celebrate a new year, a new beginning. They ask Ezra to get the book of the Law -- the book that tells God's story and their story, the book that shapes and guides who they are as people who belong to God.

They ask Ezra the priest to get the book and read it to them, and he did. It is quite a scene! The men and women and children of Israel shoulder to shoulder into the city square. Ezra standing on a wooden platform raised high above them where all could see him and all could hear him. Mattithiah and Shema and four others standing with him on the platform to his right. Pedaiah and Mishael and five others standing with him to his left. Jeshau and Bani and eleven others moving among the people, translating the Hebrew into the Aramaic they now spoke, explaining to them what was read, explaining to them what the Law meant, what the Law, what God, required of them.

And the people cried, because they understood. Because they understood how much they had lost, how far they had fallen. Because they understood they had failed. They had failed God. They were no longer God's people. They were nothing.

True or false? They are God's people because they are crying! They are not nothing. This is not despair, because despair cries no tears. Their tears are the mark of their desire for God. Their tears are the door through which God will come to them.

So go home and have a feast! Share your food and wine with those who don't have enough, and the joy that the Lord gives you will make you strong. And they did. They ate and drank joyfully and they shared what they had with others, because they understood, because the joy that the Lord gives did make them strong.

Today is our Rosh Hashanah, our new year's festival, the day of our annual meeting, a time for taking stock and looking forward, for remembering where we have come from and looking ahead to where we are going. Are you going to cry?

There might be reason. It is hard to know what we will be or where we will be as a church in ten years or twenty years or fifty years. You might be tempted to despair. But this is my message to you today. This is the word of the Lord to you today! Go and have a feast! Share your food and wine with those who don't have enough. And the joy that the Lord gives you will make you strong!