

"Springtime Grace"

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Based on Genesis 6-8; Song of Solomon 7, 8; Matthew 5:45 16:2f. Luke 6:35.

(see end of sermon notes below)

"The winter is forbidden till December, and exits March the second on the dot." So sang Camelot's King Arthur in Stratford last week. In less than Camelot where we live, the king's deadline has come and gone.

Spring usually arrives here predictably as lovely context and metaphor for Easter, but except for occasional teasing days in March and (briefly) yesterday, winter coats are still in reach.

June Callwood in her little book on Canada said no one on earth anticipates the first days of Spring like we do here. Inuit people, she says, after the dark of Arctic winter, used to greet the sun's first appearance on the horizon in stunned silence, and with upraised arms.

We understand that. There I was beside the lake one March morning, to the astonishment of other dog-walkers, raising my own arms to the suddenly resplendent sun! Quite a change from Florida where we used to work in winter; sunscreen year round there. In Canada, Callwood reminds us only 4% of land is available for cultivation; prairie wheat sprouts on ground dependably free from frost only 90 days of the year.

No wonder when Spring comes tumbling disheveled out of the grey woods, garden stores spill on sidewalks, muddy lawns hint green, and weekends spill into picnic parks and lakeside cottages, hearts and even arms in Canada lift up.

The hum of Spring signaling new busyness in nature is sign of slowing down for us. Winter shoulders finally loosen, trips to Stratford planned, or Algonquin, even Queens

Quay with Muskoka chairs and yellow beach umbrellas in the sun. The weather of our lives is worked against the contrapuntal rhythm of the season's change – a silent "witness", says St. Paul to the indiscriminating love of God who graces us, he says (Acts 14-17), with "*rain and fruitful seasons*" for "*our nourishment and gladness.*"

I

Rain, which brings us not just to this Spring's downpours, tornadoes and unprecedented floods, but to the story of Noah's Ark, with all its reminders of Bill Cosby's funny version, and toy sets with giraffes' necks poking out the top. The part we read climaxes (8:22) with God declaring, no matter our evil ways, "*while earth remains, planting and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, will never cease.*"

There are many versions of the flood story, not just in the Bible. Aboriginal people the world around tell it in their sacred tales. Israelites, new in the Promised Land, heard flood stories from those already there. Space-robots recently beamed back word there was once a cataclysmic flood on Mars.

Did it really happen? Do all these versions echo some race-deep memory of an actual event millennia ago, or do they reflect more local disasters such as once occurred around the Persian Gulf (it's now been found) on a scale reducing even this year's killing floods to trickles.

It doesn't matter. The story's true not because it really happened, but because it says something true about the way things are yesterday, today, always. That's why it was remembered, and why two, often contradictory, versions are included in the Bible, with no concern at all about which one was right. Did the animals go in two by two or seven by seven? Did the flood last 61 days or 150? The Bible tells us both, and leaves it there.

The version we didn't read was related by sixth century priests obsessed with numbers and rules for cleanliness. The one we read was put together four centuries earlier, and tells with simple artistry what's still true – that no matter we've twisted God's world round and spoiled the seasons of the earth and of our lives, we're still and always surrounded and upheld by a steady love that never lets us go

This storyteller speaks of God in intimate and human terms. He – or she (maybe a grandmother told it for the first time) – never talks about "the deity" or "first cause." So anxious is she to convey God's deep concern for us she even dares tell how God feels. Human wickedness was so widespread, she says, as though glancing up from

CNN, that “God, heartbroken, was sorry he had ever made the human race.” *“Lonely, disappointed Father. Angry wrinkled Old Majesty,”* cries the narrator in Bernstein’s Kaddish symphony.

But later, like a worried mother, God carefully shuts the door tight behind the ship’s unlikely crew when they’re finally all aboard. God can’t help caring like that, the storyteller says.

That caring, she believes, is reflected in the rhythm of the seasons’ turn, dependable context for our twitching lives and sign, for those who notice, of God’s surrounding love.

II

Insurance companies used to refer to tsunamis and earthquakes as “acts of God.” The old storyteller knew better. Besides the Noah story, she knew the story of creation, with God’s brooding spirit hovering over the primeval waters – waters of chaos mocking our best technology, chaos lashing like a dragon’s tail into our vain efforts to control the world. Leviathan, the monster, the Bible sometimes calls this chaos, rejecting tamed down names like Katrina or BP (Isaiah 27:1).

But there in the centre, the storyteller knows – neither causing the chaos, nor doing away with it – a hovering presence, from the beginning and always, weeping with those who weep amid the worst that comes, and still hovering, creating new mornings, new possibilities – new Acts of God in the unlikely but still recurring birth of Love.

Love that floats a ship above the rising waters. Love that rents a truck, like a friend of ours did, and personally drives 45,000 tons of food to victims of Katrina. Love that, no matter radiation, repairs inside contaminated nuclear stations in Japan. Love that reaches compassionate arms from around the world to reach hurting places.

Love that comes through those arms, but not from them. Love that refuses to give Leviathan the last word. Love, Mary learned in her Easter garden (John 20), which neither tornadoes nor earthquakes – not cancer, car crashes, tragic deaths, nor anything else in all creation can ever separate us from.

Listen, says the old grandmother, telling about the great flood and the ship that floated high, the very seasons in their passing are acts of God too, signs of God’s love.

Only to those who notice, of course. Nobody’s forced. There’s always another explanation. God never leaves a signature in the corner of the sunset. You either see it, or you don’t.

The old storyteller sees the signature. Reaching deep into the divine heart, she hears God saying *“Never again will I curse the ground because of people, though they have this bent toward evil from their earliest days. While earth remains, planting and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall never cease.”*

At Easter as the season turns, we sometimes notice – *“Lo, the fair beauty of earth, from the dead of the winter arising, every good gift of the year, now with its Saviour returns”* (Hail Glad Festival Day ca.582).

III

Some places, the season’s turn is sudden. Here it’s more gradual. Seasons overlap, and we keep track; Canadians hold the world record for weather reports. In Egypt usually there’s nothing to report – just tomorrow: another fine day. It’s different here. Every night cheerful readers of mysterious circles and lines mesmerize us with highs and lows and pressure readings. Not that they’re always right, or even often – but who remembers? It’s like election promises – they could be last year’s re-runs. One radio station abandoning Environment Canada just asks passersby, and announces what they think; results, they say, are just as good.

But we like to know the records, to compare this April’s rainfall to ‘73 and ‘42. Like baseball averages on sports which follows, the numbers fit our heads. Who can unravel the other solemn news – Tibet, Gaddafi’s family, seasonally adjusted employment, the accusations and denials. But the reassuring forecast always follows. One night last summer it took five times as long as a report of 1000 Nigerians drowning in the sea.

Jesus said (or nearly said): *“You say ‘Red sky at night, sailor’s delight; red sky at morning, sailors take warning.’ You forecast the weather – why can’t you read the signs of the times?”* (Mt.16:3 Peterson Version) Churchill’s book about people sleeping through coming chaos before the War was called *“The Gathering Storm.”* We do better analyzing weather charts than staying awake to worse storms coming than smiling Weather Women have heard of yet.

Warnings arrive weekly in unread Saturday features or New Yorkers flipped through quickly so as not to miss the cartoons. Forecasts of looming disasters – yawning gaps and growing between rich and poor, hungry children multiplying on God’s abundant earth, the draining off of oil and water and wood and clean air, the warming and the rising of the seas. As these reports clunk into the blue box – there’s not much evidence they have been heard. *“You forecast the weather why can’t you read the signs of the times?”*

IV

You're not even all that good at the weather, the Noah story says. You forget it speaks of a patient love that puts up for now with what we do. Human hearts are so evil the storyteller says we break God's heart. But even as floods rise, she says, God floats a ship on the waters. Not able completely to give up on us, God's mind changes before the story ends. Though hearts still bend towards evil, God surrounds and encompasses us with daily mercy, regular in its season, faithful context for whatever we might do.

So, days after the Hiroshima bomb, green grass grew on the terrorized ground. For all we've soaked the earth with blood, still the land yields fruit in season, and is not yet choked on meanness. Still patient tides wipe trodden beaches daily clean, still there are breaths to take, hummingbirds and ladyslippers, just and unjust alike are washed by rain and warmed by sun. Whatever we've done or undone, in season and out, like Kate and William's wedding guests, we're ushered royally into each fresh day. *"While earth remains, planting and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall never cease"*.

The rhythm of the seasons is in our blood as well. *"The force that drives the green fuse through the flower drives my green age"*, says Dylan Thomas. We also bloom and sometimes blight and one day disappear. We have the springtime of our youth, and then mature and autumn days. Unlike the earth, our seasons mix and overlap. Springtime youth is not immune to the "winter of our discontent", and there are 85 year-olds we know (some here today), autumn in their bones, but summer still strong in their hearts.

Unlike the leaves and hummingbirds, to some extent we make our own seasons. Paul in prison wrote to his friend Timothy, asking him to bring a cloak he'd left behind. 'Come soon', he says. *"Come before winter"* (II Tim. 4:21), before like drooping daffodils your blooming time is done.

Read the real weather reports of God's world and of your life while you are briefly here. Don't ask, "Why did this Act of God happen?" Be an Act of God yourself! Gather your life in Springtime and do what God waits for. Adjust your priorities. Float a ship. Pay your taxes; contribute to the common good. Rent a truck. Phone that person who hurt you. Take someone's hand. *"Come before winter"*, while the coming power is in you, *"Last year is dead,"* as poet Philip Larkin almost said, *"[God's Spring] leaves say, Begin afresh, afresh, afresh."*

So once again we balance together here on Springtime's edge. Gathered in our church, a motley group, like Noah's crew, before this sculptured image of a ship – from earliest days, an image of the church. Like Noah, what we do in here between the storms, the rising waters all around, is open a window week by week. We sing, we pray. We tell old stories of God's faithfulness. We remember Jesus who is kind to the ungrateful, though we grieve him to his heart.

And sometimes – not always – hope like a bird wings through with unexpected olive leaves, 45,000 pounds of food, and fresh beginnings for which the cramped world longs. Shutters fly off, windows open. Like Mary in the Easter garden, we are surprised by Springtime Grace. The "Dayspring from on high", they used to call him (Lk 1:78).

For over a century Bloor Street's walls have echoed that good news in Springtime. *"Come my beloved, let us go forth into the fields. There I will give you my love"* (Song of Sol 7:11f).

See the sun and the rain, Jesus says. God is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. Kind to you, down all the years, and years to come. Mary, Peter, all of you. Follow on my Easter way. *"Love your enemies. Do good, expecting nothing in return. You will be children of the Most High."* (Lk 6:35)

More than that, like the Inuit, you will raise your arms at Easter to greet the rising sun. You will be sons and daughters of the Spring, and heralds of the coming Day.

To the blessing of the storm-tossed world, and the glory of God's holy name. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE FIRST READING (for two voices)

B Intertwined in the stories of Genesis are some of the oldest parts of the Bible, dating from probably the 10th century BC. Some scholars say that some of these oldest parts were first told by a woman. This is Eugene Petersen's translation. Listen!

God saw that human evil was out of control. People thought evil, imagined evil – evil, evil, evil from morning to night. God was sorry that he had made the human race in the first place; it broke his heart. God said, "I'll get rid of my ruined creation, make a clean sweep, people, animals, bugs, birds – the works. I'm sorry I made them."

J But Noah was different. God liked what he saw in Noah.

God said to Noah, "It's all over. It's the end of the human race. Violence is everywhere. I'm making a clean sweep. I'm going to bring a flood on the earth that will destroy everything alive. Total destruction.

But I'm going to establish a covenant with you.

Make yourself a ship, bring your family on board. Also take two of each living creature, a male & a female of every species of bird, mammal & reptile – two of everything. Bring them on board with you, to preserve their lives along with yours.

B Noah did everything God commanded him to do. The waters of the flood came upon the earth. Underground springs emptied, and the windows of heaven were thrown open. And God made the door of the ship secure, and locked Noah and his passengers safely inside.

J And the waters rose, and lifted the ship high over the Earth. The waters kept rising until even the highest mountains were covered. Everything died. Anything that moved – dead. Birds, farm animals, wild animals, the entire teeming exuberance of life – dead.

Only Noah, and those who were with him on the ship, survived.

B But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and farm animals with him on the ship. God caused the wind to blow, and the floodwaters began to go down. The underground springs were shut off, the windows of heaven closed and the rain

ended. Inch by inch the water lowered. The tops of the mountain were seen again. The worst was over.

J Noah opened the window he had built into the ship. He sent out a dove to check on the flood conditions, but the dove found no place to set her foot; she returned. Noah put out his hand, caught her, and brought her into the ship again.

B He waited, and again he sent her out. She came back to him in the evening, and there in her beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf. The next time he sent the dove out, she never returned again. Noah opened the hatch of the ship and, look! – the land was dry.

J Then Noah built an altar to God, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. God smelled the sweet fragrance, and thought, “Never again will I curse the ground because of people. I know they have this bent toward evil from their earliest days, but never again will I kill off everything living as I’ve just done.”

J “While Earth remains, planting & harvest, cold & heat, summer & winter, day & night will never cease.”

B O afflicted ones, storm-tossed and not comforted, though the mountains may shake, and the hills be removed, my steadfast love for you shall not depart.

You can find those words in chapters 6 to 8 in the book of Genesis, and the 54th chapter of the book of Isaiah.

Top of Form

B Some Pharisees and Sadducees were at him again, pressing Jesus to prove himself to them. He told them, “You have a saying that goes ‘Red sky at night, sailor’s delight; red sky at morning, sailors take warning.’ You find it easy enough to forecast the weather – why can’t you read the signs of the times?”

J Listen to what Jesus says:

“God makes the sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on just and unjust alike.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Anyone can do that. If you do good to those who do good to you, what does that prove? Anyone can do that ... But I say to you, love your enemies. Do good, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great.

You will be children of the Most High who is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. Be merciful, just as God, from whom you come, is merciful.

B Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear in the earth; the time of singing has come, the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

J The fig tree puts forth its figs, the vines are in blossom and give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

B Set me as a seal upon your heart, and upon your arm; for love is strong as death.

J Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If I were to offer for love all the wealth of my house, it would not be enough.

B Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the fields; let us go out early to the vineyards, and see whether the grape blossoms have opened and the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give you my love.

J Fear not, says the Lord your God. I have called you by name, you are mine. You are honoured, and precious in my sight. And I love you.

B You can find those words in the 5th & 16th chapters of Matthew, the 6th chapter of Luke, chapters 4 & 7 of the Song of Solomon, & the 43rd chapter of Isaiah.
