

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

John 11:1-45
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 130
Romans 8:6-11

March 29, 2020
The Fifth Sunday of Lent

I want to do a little something different this morning. Instead of a traditional sermon, I want us to create time to reflect on a piece of poetry I recently read by Jan Richardson (one of my favorite poets). It was actually written for the season of Epiphany but I found its words to be profoundly suited for our current context of coronavirus and quarantines.

As a refresher...the season of Epiphany, which runs from January 6 up until the beginning of the Lenten season, “allows us time to reflect on the stories of Jesus among us, those stories which reveal the Jesus we know—God’s son, miracle maker, teacher, prophet, and healer.”¹

As I read this poem and thought about the importance of Epiphany in our lives I realized that we are all seeking answers right now from the Jesus we know. We want the miracle maker, the teacher, the prophet, the healer. But, as we continue our social isolation, I wonder how many of you are finding yourselves disappointed, hopeless, and worried, wondering how faith can sustain you right now. Wondering how you may find the Jesus you know in the midst of the world we are living in today.

So, let’s get started. For our poetry reflection, I will break it down by stanza. And as I do, I want you to reflect on how these words might provide you hope as we travel this uncharted journey together.

For Those Who Have Far to Travel
A Blessing for Epiphany

*If you could see
the journey whole,
you might never
undertake it,
might never dare
the first step
that propels you
from the place
you have known
toward the place
you know not.*

¹ Jenifer Gamber; <https://buildfaith.org/epiphany-revelations/>

"...from the place you have known toward the place you know not..."

For me, this first stanza simply states where we are...on a journey we did not plan but have found ourselves on it anyway. A journey we would not have asked for or wanted. Some of you are on the front lines, giving of yourselves day in and day out to care for those who are sick. Others are working tirelessly to get food to those in need. Others of you have lost jobs and retirement savings. Still others are trying to take care of children, reassuring them, teaching them, loving them through a world they can't possibly understand. How do you find the Jesus you know in this place you do not know?

*Call it
one of the mercies
of the road:
that we see it
only by stages
as it opens
before us,
as it comes into
our keeping,
step by
single step.*

"...we see it only by stages..."

Thank goodness that's true. You may find that you are struggling to get through each day. Praying for answers but not sure if you are strong enough to maintain hope. You can't look too far forward for fear of disappointment and defeat. So you take it the only way you can, step by step, learning as you go. Faith, like knowledge, often grows incrementally, as we grow stronger with each stage that we navigate. We start to find the Jesus that we know by continually putting our trust in God and realizing that even the smallest amount of trust makes a difference in our experience of faith. Take it by stages.

*There is nothing
for it but to go,
and by our going
take the vows
the pilgrim takes:
to be faithful to
the next step;
to rely on more
than the map;
to heed the signposts
of intuition and dream;
to follow the star
that only you
will recognize;*

“...take the vows the pilgrim takes...” and ““...rely on more than the map...”

For me that means to keep walking. Be consistent. The pilgrim travels unknown distances with sore feet and at times a sore spirit. But the pilgrim keeps traveling with whatever sustenance they have, with whatever strength they can muster because each step of the journey is a vow to learn what God might reveal through the process. So keep going but realize that no human-made map can give us all that we need. It seems everywhere we turn there are different ways to solve the problem. Different perspectives on what is best for our future well-being. And so, a whole debate over whose is right and who is wrong ensues. But as Christians, we know that we follow a different map; not in exclusion to our earthly maps because we need those too; but a God given map to guide us in the midst of uncertainty; a navigation tool that rises above the endless statistics and projections. The Jesus we know gives us principles of love and mercy and grace to light our way. Indeed, this is a different kind of map.

*to keep an open eye
for the wonders that
attend the path;
to press on
beyond distractions,
beyond fatigue,
beyond what would
tempt you
from the way.
There are vows
that only you
will know:
the secret promises
for your particular path
and the new ones
you will need to make
when the road
is revealed
by turns
you could not
have foreseen.*

“...to keep an open eye for the wonders that attend the path...”

When we believe that through Jesus we are renewed, we start to look at the world around us differently. We begin to see beauty in places of despair. We begin to not only see God’s love and mercy and grace in our own lives but we begin to give that love and mercy and grace to others. We begin to grow in community even though we are tired and discouraged. We look deeper at the world around us. We take care of one another’s needs. We keep an eye open. Life is always changing. We make plans and circumstances cause us to reroute and reorient. God calls us to simply keep seeking our calling no matter what may come our way. We have been given gifts that are unique to each of us and when the road shifts, we are called to shift along with it, to apply

our gifts in ways that lift up the Kingdom of God, to develop new ways of sharing God's love, to contribute to solutions wherever and however we can. We build new ways of being. The Jesus we know inspires us to seek goodness out of hardship and blessing out of adversity. Keep your eyes open and make new paths.

*Keep them, break them,
make them again;
each promise becomes
part of the path,
each choice creates
the road
that will take you
to the place
where at last
you will kneel
to offer the gift
most needed—
the gift that only you
can give—
before turning to go
home by
another way.*

"...the road that will take you to the place where at last you will kneel..."

It may take some time, but there will be a day when we kneel in gratitude for what we have learned, for the ways we have grown, for the contributions we have given to the well-being of God's creation. Out of every obstacle, God is indeed working for good. We may not see the goodness right away but it will emerge. The Jesus we know has not left us and is in fact, working through us as we continue to pray and serve and love one another.

So what does the Jesus you know look like right now?

If we are honest, we often want Jesus the way we want him...the Jesus who can make our pain go away. The Jesus who can fix what's wrong. The Jesus who can heal the sick, make a virus disappear, bring jobs back, fix the economy, heal a broken world. However, Jesus may show up differently than we expected but he does show up. The way home just may look a little different than it did before.

We have indeed been rerouted but we will get home. Let this new way will change you. That is what Epiphany, of seeing Christ manifested in our lives, is all about. Let us take it step by step with map that only God can provide. Let us keep our eyes open so that we may love and serve one another however we can. And finally, let us be grateful knowing that Jesus, God's son, miracle maker, teacher, prophet, and healer, is right there by our side. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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—Jan Richardson