

"Fundamental Wildness" by Anna Gilcher

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Sermon for Seekers Church

October 22, 2006

Season: "Dreaming Anew"

Job chapter 38

Mark 10:35-45

Fundamental Wildness

"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge..." "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" Amazing words pointing to the fundamental wildness of God.

The fundamental wildness of God.

breathe

Fundamental. Wildness.

breathe

I am going to read a long passage from Jerry May's last book, written as he was dying, *The Wisdom of Wilderness*. He's writing about being in a tent, alone, in the wilderness. (Gerald G. May, *The Wisdom of Wilderness: Experiencing the Healing Power of Nature*, New York: HarperCollins, 2006, 30-34)

*I lie awake for a long time, sleepy yet energized by fear. I realize the fear is just happening, all by itself. Nothing is scaring me. It's not that I have an idea about what might be of danger and then become afraid of it. It's the fear-feeling itself that comes, and then my mind looks for something to be afraid of. Rustling leaves, the snap of a twig breaking, what is it? Or who? Some small creature moving, a skunk, a possum, who knows or cares? It's too still now, and the tiny sounds crack the silence, make me jump, my heart beat fast. Nothing more to do. Just sleep. **Please God let me sleep now, because there's nothing more to do.***

I sleep and dream. I dream that a car drives up into my campsite, its headlights bearing down on my pup tent, closer and closer until I am awake. I'm not sure it really was a dream. I think I smell exhaust fumes. I sleep again, dreaming of sounds, and I am certain the growl has come from a close wild presence that is just a few inches from me, just on the other side of the thin shadow canvas of the tent. I am sharp awake now and smell something right here, a brusque, wild smell, the smell of something alive and very near. I lie still, nostrils open to the smell, ears sharp into the silence, eyes keen into absolute darkness and it growls again.

The bear is right next to me, its side brushing the tent canvas, its growl deep, resonant, slow. This is no dream and I am terrified and yet I feel a strange calmness over everything, so difficult to describe. It's like some kind of

fierce embrace. I lie absolutely still, staring wide-eyed at nothing. My mind appears, thinking fast. What do you do to get rid of a bear? I heard somewhere you bang pots and pans together. **Okay. Do I have any pots and pans? No, dummy, you put them in the car with the food so they wouldn't attract bears. Okay. Okay. So there's nothing to do. Still nothing. Lie here, still, be scared, nothing more to do.** And here, maybe, another deeper voice, just a hint of a touch of the Power of the Slowing whispering, "Be frightened. Just be frightened."

The bear paws at something, ambles toward the picnic table, comes back once around the other side of the tent. And leaves. Just like that. A patrol through my campsite with no wasted motion. No more growls. Nothing. My back and legs hurt from the solid hard ground and from keeping still. My heart is beating so loudly I'm sure the bear must hear it. And I have never felt so alive.

I lie unmoving for a very long time after the bear leaves, my senses completely alert, no thoughts, no images, seeing nothing, hearing only my heart and breath and the sounds of the night. For the first time in my life, I am experiencing pure fear. I am completely present in it, in a place beyond all coping because there is nothing to do. I have never before experienced such clean, unadulterated purity of emotion. This fear is naked. It consists, in these slowly passing moments, of my heart pounding, my breath rushing yet fully silent, my body ready for anything, my mind absolutely empty, open, waiting. I **am** fear. It is beautiful. **(pause)**

...How can I describe my sense of the privilege of feeling so impeccably afraid and my supreme gratitude for it? **(pause)**

After the bear left, I rolled slowly onto my stomach, found my flashlight, opened the tent flap, and sent the light beam across the campsite to the surrounding trees. Nothing there.

Wobbly and breathless all at once, I crawled out of the tent and stood, took a few unsteady steps to where I could lean against a tree, unbuttoned my fly. When I had finished I looked up and there, beyond the branches, completely unexpected, were hundreds of thousands of stars, a night brilliance so overwhelming I fell back against the tree, grasping for it, not to keep from falling but to stay on earth. "Thank you, God," I whispered into the radiant night.

...I am not completely certain what I was saying thank you for. It wasn't just for the star-beauty, nor for surviving the bear experience. It seemed to be for the privilege of being alive in the totality of everything, the gift of fully existing right then and there. Fear, like any other strong emotion, can make you exquisitely conscious of living, perfectly aware of being in the moment. It can only do that, however, on those rare occasions when you don't try to fight it, run away from it, cope with it, suppress it, tame it, or otherwise domesticate it. The real gift of that night was that I had been unable to do anything about my fear of the bear. Lying there in the tent, I could not run away; I could not make the bear go away; I could not reassure myself that things were going to be all right; I could not trick my mind into thinking about something else. There was nothing to be done, and that was the gift. I could only be there in the real situation, being real, being pure fear. That is why, I think, that after the bear left, as I grabbed that sweet tree under the stars, I became pure gratitude.

There was nothing to be done, and that was the gift. I could only be there in the real situation, being real, being pure fear.

Fundamental wildness.

God, speaking out of the whirlwind. Job, covered with boils, having lost everything, encountering God, present in his own creature-ness, being invited into wildness, into presence beyond coping, beyond arguing, beyond rational thought. Lying absolutely still, his breath rushing, completely silent, being pure fear, as God speaks out of God's God-ness.

breathe

breathe

breathe

"Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand," Job says, "things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."

breathe

breathe

breathe

As I grabbed that sweet tree under the stars, I became pure gratitude.

breathe

breathe

breathe

Words from the original Church of the Saviour recommitment vow echo in my head. I unreservedly and with abandon commit my life and destiny to Christ.

breathe/move

breathe

breathe

I unreservedly and with abandon commit my life and destiny to

Christ

breathe/move

breathe

I believe that God

is the total owner of my life and resources.

breathe/move

breathe

I unreservedly and with abandon commit my life and destiny to Christ. I believe that God is the total owner of my life and resources.

breathe.....pause...

I yearn for this. For purity of presence.

Pure fear. Pure gratitude. Pure sadness. Pure joy.

For a full realization of my creature-ness.

Unreservedly and with abandon, to commit my life and destiny to Christ.

(PAUSE)

When James and John ask Jesus to sit on his right hand and his left, in glory, I think they are yearning for this too. The deep longing is for unity with Jesus, for presence with God. To drink the cup that Jesus drinks and to be baptized with the

baptism that Jesus is baptized with.

You don't understand what you are asking for, says Jesus.

Who are you that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

I know that I don't understand what I am asking for either.

With Job, I have uttered what I do not understand—things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

What will it really look like if I unreservedly and with abandon commit my life and destiny to Christ?

It will be too much. I won't be able to cope. My life won't be my own.

breathe...

“You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

breathe...

The old hymn comes to me. Words by William Alexander Percy.
Music by David McKinley Williams.

(singing)

*They cast their nets in Galilee just off the hills of brown;
such happy, simple fisherfolk, before the Lord came down.*

*Contented, peaceful fishermen, before they ever knew the peace
of God that filled their hearts brimful, and broke them too.*

*Young John who trimmed the flapping sail, homeless, in Patmos
died. Peter, who hauled the teeming net, head-down was
crucified.*

*The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the
sod. Yet let us pray for but one thing-the marvelous peace of
God.*

I am afraid. Like Job, like James and John, like Peter, I
don't know what I am asking for.

This season we are dreaming anew. Of what it means to say
"yes" to God, "yes" to Christ, "yes" to commitment, "yes" to
each other, "yes" to creature-ness.

"Yes" to the marvelous peace of God.

"Yes" to fundamental wildness.

breathe

breathe...

This is dangerous territory. It may not turn out all right.

The bear might come into our tent.

Everything may be taken away from us.

Jesus was crucified.

We will all die.

I just have to be willing.

I just have to be present.

I just have to let the pure rush of fear be in my body, allow my body to breathe, the heart to pound, the grief to be there.

And I am not alone.

Not only is God with *me*, sometimes silent, sometimes speaking out of the whirlwind... but **WE** are dreaming anew, and we are doing this in community, as we share the body and blood, as we get broken and put back together over and over again, as we trust in an all-rightness that's beyond the circumstances of our life-beyond whether the bear comes into the tent, beyond death, beyond the loss of everything... and beyond, too, the blessings and gifts we receive...

As we live in community, as we hurt one another and bless one another and misunderstand one another and make our confessions to one another and forgive one another and feel angry with one another and love one another, we can call each other to a deeper “yes,” to dreaming anew.

We can call one another to the fundamental wildness of our being. To purity of presence. To being with things exactly as they are.

I think this is how we come to deeper trust in the resurrection.

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

breathe

breathe

When I hear Jerry’s words about being pure fear, knowing there’s nothing he can do with the bear being outside our tent, I think there’s an offering of how to be with one another when we hurt each other.

I love you and I’ve hurt you. There’s nothing I can do to fix it. I can’t fix the sadness and fear I feel at having hurt someone I love. And I can’t fix your hurt.

What I can do is be purely present to your pain and mine. I can be fully alive. I can choose not to try to fix or cope or strategize or domesticate. I can sit with you and listen, in awe at how great love and great hurt can co-exist. And in this way, I can be in my fundamental wildness and allow you to be in yours, and know that we are all joined in that place of wildness, of things just-as-they-are.

This is what Jesus did, I think. This is something of what it means for the Son of Man to give his life as a ransom for many. Saying “yes” to being with things as they are. Saying “yes” to fundamental wildness.

breathe

breathe

breathe

Today, then: may we dream anew of being with things exactly as they are... to being in the fundamental wildness...

breathe

...to saying “yes” to the marvelous peace of God.