

STILL SMALL SWEET SPIRIT: a sermon for Pentecost Sunday, 2006 by Dan Stern
1 Kings 19:11-13 and Acts 2:1-21

And a third reading for today, from UCC writer Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer-Prize winning novel, *Gilead*:

“It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of creation and turns it to radiance – for a moment or a year or the span of a life. And then...it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know it had anything to do with fire, or light. (And yet) the Lord is more constant and far more extravagant...Where you turn your eyes, the world can shine like transfiguration...There is more beauty than our eyes can bear...precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm.”

Today I want to do something to honor four of the precious and beautiful things I was privileged to see, hear, and experience during my sabbatical. You'll be hearing of other precious sabbatical sightings and sounds, of course, in the weeks to come, and you'll have a chance to view some of our digital photos on the church web site.

Meanwhile, along with today's powerful Pentecost Sunday reading from the Book of Acts, in which God's Spirit appears to be associated with the coming of much confusion and fury, much wind and fire, I chose to juxtapose one of my favorite OT passages: the one telling of God NOT being in the hurricane wind, God NOT being in the earthquake, and God NOT being in the fire, but rather, God in a gentle, quiet whisper, because that's mainly how I experienced God during my sabbatical. The NRSV translates this I Kings passage to say that God was heard in the sound of sheer silence! And in the OLD RSV, the familiar Bible translation of my childhood, it says God was heard in a STILL, SMALL VOICE.

I also juxtapose these passages because although there are hurricanes, earthquakes, and fires raging a-plenty in our world, the very LAST reality to be discovered IN such loud, generally disastrous, climactic phenomena is God! What is being found first and most in post-earthquake Indonesia today is the disease, death and displacement of thousands. Things NOT to be mistaken as having anything to do with God's holy spirit! Disease, death and displacement have to do with just the opposite. It was not our loving God that was heard and seen in the hurricane winds that hit New Orleans last year either, nor in the inexcusably-pathetic federal response. God's work of love did not cause the hurricane, nor the pathetic response. Blame global warming. Blame callous graft and incompetence in high places. But credit God for those still, small quiet whispers of an effective response that come IN SPITE OF human graft and incompetence. God's spirit sound is not the rumble of earthquake, it's not the roar of tsunami or hurricane gale, it's the still, small voice that can be detected after or in spite of the rumble and roar. It's a still small sweet spirit voice which accompanies a persistent whispering presence of holy-spirit-inspired hope.

God's spirit is not only heard. It is seen as well. God gives us spiritual vision. “Our young shall see visions”, says the prophet Joel, “And our old shall dream dreams.”

I must be getting old. I'm afraid no certain nor dramatic visions came to me during my sabbatical. I did dream a lot of dreams though. I wrote some of them down in the decoupled journal Deb Schumacher made for me as a gift just prior to my departure (*show it*). During my sabbatical, I got some needed distance from my everyday worries and routines. And yet on a near-nightly basis, I found that I dreamed about Broadview, I dreamed about all of you. And accompanying those dreams, I prayed for you, for Broadview Church, not in a worrisome way, but in a dreamy, visionary way. You made it possible for me to do this. I am so very grateful and thank you from the bottom of my heart. While you took on many organizational tasks during a busy season, you graced me with the opportunity and the responsibility to focus prayerfully on God's still, small voice. It has been refreshing and renewing for me to do so, and I hope it will bear sweet fruit in the Broadview faith community in the months and years to come.

Along with the prophet Joel, my good friend and colleague, Thomas Anastasi, who has been on several sabbatical pilgrimages during his tenure as a pastor also told me before I left that what was supposed to happen was for me see a vision of some kind. (I'm not sure whether that happened or not. Maybe I'm not sure because the prophet Joel says it's the YOUNG ones who will see the visions; it's the OLD ones who will dream the dreams! But maybe, as the old pastor in Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Giliad*, tells it, we get clear about our visions over time, not all at once. We may only realize we've seen visions in the first place when we're looking back at them, perhaps after years of only seeing them, as the Apostle Paul puts it, through a glass darkly. But long after earthquakes have stilled, storms and fires have abated, even after, perhaps, a LONG period of seeming visionlessness, the vision may yet come clear. After sheer silence, God's still, small, clear, sweet whisper may come wafting through.

For a long time, you and I may keep getting, not full-blown visions, but glimpses of God's glory. And yet that should be enough. And we'll keep hearing, if we're listening, God's still, small voice; that will be enough for us as well.

So then here-enough for this morning – are my own four examples of sabbatical-time sightings and sounds of God's Spirit at work:

Example #1: At Easter time and for several days during Holy Week in Chicago, we are the guests of our good friend, Nick, who is grieving the recent loss of his longtime partner, Rob, to AIDS. We mostly just spend quiet time with him, sharing meals and playing cards. On Easter Sunday morning, we attend worship with him. To me, Nick has never seemed so convinced of his resurrection faith, and of his personal belief in the heavenly reuniting of loved ones. Nick truly believes that after death, there will again come life, loved ones will again gather around the banquet table. After the gale-like fury of grief, the still, small sweet voices of loved ones reunited. I found myself thinking of many of you, both of your grief and of your dogged resurrection hope.

Example #2: Sam and I are driving across North Dakota. We hear the faint sound of rural ambulance making its way in the same direction through the prairie flatlands, no doubt trying to reach some distant hospital. For hours we only barely hear the ambulance's plaintive wail somewhere behind us. Finally, it passes us on the freeway, siren blaring. Immediately, the death of Peggy, my oldest sister, comes to mind, how her dying from polio happened long ago after she

had been driven in a similar ambulance for 6 hours through Eastern Washington winter snows, in an effort to get her to an iron lung available only in faraway Spokane. She was only 15-years old. She didn't make it. I was still a 9-month-old baby when she died, so I had never grieved the tragedy that so affected my whole family of origin. But when I heard the sound and caught sight of that ambulance in North Dakota, it hit me like a ton of bricks that it was my sister Peggy who was inside it. And I found myself weeping freely and long. It felt like I was releasing long-clinging demons, and accomplishing important grief work. After weeping, it was quiet again, and I could hear God's still, small comforting whispers.

Example #3: Later at dusk that very same day, having traveled further through the stark spiritual geography of North Dakota, we enter the northerly portion of the Black Hills and realize that a freak wind-blown springtime snowstorm has recently passed through. It created beautifully-patterned snowdrifts along cliffs and fences, catching the shadows of the waxing daylight. The storm may have also contributed to some area flooding. But we didn't see God in the storm, nor in the flood. Instead, we noticed everywhere around us abundant steam, like thick fog, rising and evaporating, the results of the first warm day following that snowstorm. Through the fog, through a glass darkly, we saw and imagined things holy and beatific. All that beautifully-blanketing drifted snow, turning right before our eyes into steam, and accompanied by the crackling, hissing still, small sounds of the melting ice. We looked at each other and knew (then and there) that God was still speaking.

Example #4: I am on the volcanic island of Ometepe on Lake Nicaragua. I meet a Nicaraguan man named Alvaro Molina. I learn about how hard he has been working to preserve the incredible bio-diversity of his native land. I learn that he's also been busy drafting ethical guidelines for religion-based health care initiatives in Nicaragua. I tell him I am a Protestant minister, and he asks me to critique the ethical guidelines he is developing. We are now corresponding. I hope I can assist him in training US church volunteers to go to 3rd World places in a more respectful manner. Often missionaries and religion-based health care workers, disregarding the cultural norms and established structures of local communities, end up doing more harm than good. Alvaro's is a voice crying out for justice and respect in a wilderness of poverty and exploitation. But in a small, quiet way, God is still speaking through him. I hope I can help.

We haven't begun to tell you of all our adventures. You can count on hearing more. I am glad to be back. Amen.