

Proper 14C; 8 August, 2010
Is 1:1, 10-20; Ps 50:1-8, 23-24
Heb 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12: 32-40

The Rev. Deborah Meister

This week, I was privileged to see an extraordinary exhibit called *Alzheimer's: Forgetting Piece by Piece*.¹ A set of fifty-two quilts made by artists who are also caretakers for loved-ones with Alzheimer's, the pieces document the fragmenting lives of the patients and the grief and confusion of those who care for them. A number depicted neurons pulling away from one another, the quilting becoming increasingly ragged as the colors dulled and the pattern frayed. Others included pictures of the patient. One artist showed her father as three trees, the first thick with leaves, on each leaf a word: capable, smart, savvy, shrewd, successful. The leaves were falling off the second until, on the last tree, only a handful remain: human being, beloved, dignity.² One quilt was bordered with questions that the artist's mother had posed her; it was titled, "What if I can't remember that I loved you?"³ The viewers moved among them silently, fighting back tears. Together, they depicted a landscape of diminishing capacity, confusion, and loss.

Often, I think, that is how our culture sees old age: as the time that we lose the selves we have so painstakingly constructed. We often approach it with a great deal of fear: fear of illness, fear of confusion, fear of abandonment, fear of death. We live our lives looking backward, as it were, esteeming youth, athleticism, and energy. And so it can be surprising to realize that Christianity looks always forward, seeing age not as a time of diminishment, but as the era of our fulfillment.

In the very beginning of our relationship with God, God appears to Abraham and Sarah, when Abraham was ninety-nine years old and Sarah had already passed her time of bearing, and promises them, not the death they were surely expecting, but a son, a child -- and a child they would live to see have a son of his own. No wonder Sarah laughed! The idea that "from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants [could be] born" (Heb 11:12) is one that could only happen in a world whose ultimate framing is not death, but joy.

The poet Mark Strand writes,

Even this late it happens:
the coming of love, the coming of light.
You wake and the candles are lit as if by themselves,
stars gather, dreams pour into your pillows,
sending up bouquets of warm air.
Even this late the bones of the body shine
and tomorrow's dust flares into breath.⁴

That is the heart of our faith, "tomorrow's dust flar[ing] into breath," because that is the promise we receive in Christ Jesus: of dust we are made, and to dust we shall return, and yet that dust shall breathe and shine in the face of God. We aim our lives toward that "place of constant beginning... [and] to that place, to the keeper of that place," we commit ourselves.⁵

¹ On view at the Shelburne Museum in Shelburne, Vermont.

² Cheryl Lynch, "Leaving Us."

³ Susan Gourley, quilter.

⁴ Mark Strand, "The Coming of Light."

⁵ Mark Strand, "Poem After the Seven Last Words." The original ends, "I commit myself." Referenced also at end of sermon.

That forward gaze says something profound about the nature of faith. When the author of Hebrews writes that Abraham, who dwelt in tents, “looked forward to the city that has foundations,” he reminds us that faith is about growing *more* solid, not less (Heb 11:10). In this, our common images get it all wrong. When we speak of going forward in faith, we use phrases like: “I stepped out on a limb,” or “I stepped off a cliff.” The images suggest that, when we rely on faith, we let go of what is solid and tangible and cling, in sheer, dogged optimism, to a moonbeam. And yet, Abraham, who lived in tents, who traveled from one place to another, left one homeland after another, Abraham looked forward to a city with foundations, to a city built of stone.

When we live by faith, we do not so much step out on a limb as come in towards the tree. When we are born, we know nothing. Each sunrise is a miracle; each hungry cry a prayer that someone or something might meet our need. Gradually, we learn to trust; each time that milk is offered becomes a touchstone that it will be offered again. So it is with the life of faith: the first step is often the hardest, for it is the step we take when we do not yet know God. Gradually, over a lifetime, we gain what the ancients called “wisdom”: lived experience of the ways of God and of man. And so each step we make moves us from a tenuous position of ignorance into a place of greater certainty: that this loss will not kill us, that this move might take us to a good town, that there are people even in distant countries who will become our friends. Day by day, we find that the ground under our feet becomes more solid; that our faith in God survives the test of time and chance; that the path becomes more clear, and our courage is enough to suffice. For the foundations which are being laid under our feet are not just heaps of stone: the “architect and builder is God.” (Heb 11:10)

During my second year in seminary, the Divinity School began a much-needed restoration of its buildings. Daily, at 8:30 am, my classmates and I would gather to learn. Daily, while we learned, workers removed the walls underneath our classroom. For the first month or so, I kept reminding myself that these were experienced workers: that they must know what they were doing. Then I heard them telling one another how nervous the whole thing was making them: that this was not usually done in an inhabited building! After that, I found myself humming old hymns, a lot: “Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the head and cornerstone.” *You’d better be*, I’d think, *because there’s nothing else holding this floor up!*

I don’t think my turning to hymnody was random. Christian tradition is for the times when we are uncertain, when we struggle for faith; when our own experience fails us, tradition lets us borrow the experience of those who have gone before. That’s why it is so important that we know the great stories of our faith, those in the Bible and those of famous Christians and those of local heroes as well. Those stories, like cherished family memories, give us stepping-stones across the void; they thicken the branch so it can bear our weight. When the author of Hebrews begins to describe his cloud of witnesses, that is what he is doing: encouraging his listeners by reminding them of God’s faithfulness in the past. If God came through for Abraham, for Sarah, for Isaac and Jacob, for Moses, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, if God came through for Luther and Calvin, for Aquinas and Wesley, if God came through for Betty Heinlein and Frank DeMatteis and Edie DeVoe, then surely God will come through for us as well.

“Do not be afraid, little flock,” said Christ, “for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” (Luke 12: 32) His *good pleasure* -- not his duty, not his justice, but his *joy* is to bring us to that city not made with human hands. When Jesus says, “Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven,” he is not speaking only of money, but of the orientation of our heart. We who are learning the art of trust find that we become worthy of trust as well. We learn that we can live toward the future, letting go of the past with its glories and its bitterness, always throwing our heart a little ahead of where we are and running to catch it up again. In the light of that faith, our lives are a progression of becoming more trustworthy, more rooted, more real. We

live in trust that even our losses are redeemed, that even our scattered pieces are gathered together in the hands of God, waiting for us to come and claim them and sew them back into the fabric of our lives.

“What if I can’t remember that I loved you?” we ask. But God replies, “Can a woman forget her nursing-child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.” (Is 49:15-16) There is no love that is forgotten, but, like crumbs of bread scattered through a darkened forest, it leads us to

the sea of endless transparence, of utmost
calm, a place of constant beginning that has within it
what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, what no hand
has touched, what has not arisen in the human heart.
To that place, to the keeper of that place,⁶

let us commit ourselves. For where our treasure is, there will our heart be also. Amen.

⁶ Strand, *Ibid.*