

FCCH – “HOLY GROUND” – October 13, 2024

Earlier this week, a friend sent me an email that accurately captures what many of us have been experiencing: “Hey Western North Carolina,” it read, “New Orleans native here. I see you.”

This was my experience after Katrina: The first few days and weeks are mostly shock. Sometimes what you worried about two days ago is now completely irrelevant. The shock may come and go. You’ll feel like a zombie at times or think you’re totally fine and five minutes later wondering what’s wrong with you. You might find yourself being furious with people or having a short temper.

Emotion will overwhelm you, and everyone you know, at any given moment, and everyone will understand. It will not be normal for a long time, maybe years. Your life will be measured in before and after.

Every conversation will be about Helene until you are tired of hearing it. You’ll find yourself desperate to talk about anything else.

The whole thing is as horrible as you think, the email concluded, but just keep going, one day, and one breath at a time.

Last Sunday, Karla gave three suggestions that I think are worth repeating today as we continue to process what has happened in our region and what is happening in our world.

1. Stay away from bad theology, like “Why did God do this?” or “God did these because of the liberals in Asheville.” Or “I’m thankful that God protected me or my house” which implies that God didn’t do the same for other people and other homes. The fact is that terrible things happen. No one is immune.
2. Regardless of how we fared in the storm, we are all exhausted. Everyone has experienced trauma. You, and every person in this room and every person you will encounter this week, is weary.
3. Comparable suffering is dangerous. Just because someone’s situation is much worse doesn’t mean your pain and struggle isn’t valid. You don’t need to minimize what you are going through or feeling just because you perceive it’s worse for someone else.

Karla also reminded us that two seemingly conflicting feelings can both be true at the same time.

Rev. Darlene Strickland at Unity of the Blue Ridge wrote this week about experiencing the two feelings of gratitude and guilt simultaneously, which she called guiltatude. Darlene expressed gratitude for electricity, water and safety, and guilt knowing that so many people are still suffering from so much loss.

For me, those two simultaneous conflicting feelings are gratitude and grief. So following Darlene's lead, I'll call it griefatude.

We all have so much to be grateful for. I chose the story of the burning bush as our scripture for today because it is a powerful story of the unmistakable presence of God, and because even in the tragedy of the past two weeks we have seen the unmistakable presence of the Spirit. And we can look at our lives and acknowledge the presence of the Spirit in big and small ways throughout the years and be grateful.

I asked on social media this week for people to share their experiences with this burning bush kind of presence of God. Karla wrote "For me, when Liz and I were finally able to leave the house after the storm, we went to First Presbyterian Church in Asheville where Liz works, since they had power and internet. I was sitting on the floor charging my phone. One of the staff members walked in, looked at me with tears in her eyes, and just hugged me tight. It was so simple, so ordinary, so reflexive, and yet it was exactly what I needed."

Bruce Mills wrote about he and Jim's recent return flight from their amazing anniversary trip. Bruce wrote: "When we got to New York we found that our afternoon flight to Atlanta was canceled. Two wheel chair attendants helped us off the plane, helped us get our bags, and took us to the re-booking desk. Then they took us outside to wait for the van that would take us to a hotel. After we were outside, the other attendant turned around to go back inside. The gentleman who had been assisting me looked at him and said "You can go back in, but I'm not leaving until their van gets here." I have always believed, Bruce wrote, that God puts angels in our path whenever we need them, and this gentleman was our angel."

I also experienced the presence of the spirit in the days after the storm. When most of us had no electricity, our friend Virginia Teagle, who works with our children's Sunday school, and lives a couple of blocks from the church, hosted breakfast and lunch each day for anyone who wanted some hot coffee or a hot meal. Virginia's house has a generator, so she was able to provide nourishing food and a welcoming spirit to anyone and everyone who walked or drove by her house. It was a beautiful place of community, day after day.

All of us, I suspect, have also been moved by the massive number of linemen who have been here restoring power all over the city, as well as for so many others who have been here to help in a variety of ways. Our friend Tim Jones wrote a poem of gratitude for these special people titled "Visitation."

There were no threads of light or silky wings. The children of the stars arrived in mostly denim with coffee stains, Just to rise in bucket lifts, or back trailers full of manna in the wilderness. I watched them smash off globs of wet sheetrock. I saw them cutting clots of saw dust so thick you could almost walk uphill on it. What we can know about the source of all things holy, holy, holy and merciful was right in front of us. Its illumination intense and simple: kindness from people we'll probably never see again."

They were, in many ways, the burning bush, showing us in unmistakable ways, the presence of the Spirit, for which we are all grateful.

But then there's the other feeling – the feeling of grief. The minister Nadia Bolz Webber wrote an article that I've shared before, but it too is worth revisiting.

She wrote: "I used to live in a very old apartment building with super sketchy electrical wiring. Were I to assume my hair drier could run while my stereo was on, I would often find myself opening the grey metal fuse box and flipping the breaker.

I think of that fuse box often these days, because friends, I just do not think our psyches were meant to hold, feel and respond to everything coming at them right now; every tragedy, injustice, sorrow and natural disaster happening to every human across the entire planet. My emotional circuit breaker keeps overloading because it was not created to hold everything.

So I want to share something with you, Nadia wrote. Every day of my life I ask myself three discernment questions:

What's mine to do, and what's not mine to do?

What's mine to say and what's not mine to say?

And the third is harder: What's mine to care about and what's not mine to care about? Or I might phrase it: What's mine to let go of at this moment? I only have a limited amount of water in my bucket to help with the fires. I tell myself that it's ok to focus on one fire.

So, dear friends, what are you and I called to do right now? For some of us the answer is to volunteer, for some it's to take care of our personal health and family issues, and for all of us it is to practice self-care so that we can offer our best selves to the world.

In addition to this important self-care, however, I want to suggest that we can all offer other people two gifts. The first is the gift of listening. Offering a safe space in which people can share their story allows people to process their feelings and experience connection. One of my favorite quotes says: "Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person they are almost indistinguishable."

The second gift we can offer others is the gift of a blessing. To offer a blessing is to say words whose only intention is to remind a person that they are good, loved, appreciated and they are not alone. The blessing that we offer others can be through positive statements, a written note, a prayer for the person, or maybe it's a couple of cookies that we give with the words "I've been thinking of you." Everyone needs to be blessed from time to time because most of us have a blessing deficit.

I don't think it is too simplistic to suggest that a part of the answer to the grief, guilt and negativity in our world is for each of us to begin a listening and blessing revolution through which we can affirm the worthiness of everyone we meet.

Every sermon that I offer is the result of what I'm struggling with in my own life. In the past few days as I've thought about this sermon, I've found it helpful to ask myself each morning "Who do I need to bless today?" and at

night to ask myself "Who did I bless today. Intentionality helps me, and maybe it will help you also.

And so, my friends. as we go into a new week, I encourage you to be on the look-out for the burning bushes that remind you of the presence of Christ, to be ok with doing only what is yours to do, to listen well, and to give generously the words of blessing to everyone we encounter. When we do these things, we will find ourselves, and others, standing on holy ground. Amen.

Exodus 3:1-⁵~~10~~ The Message

3 ¹⁻² Moses was shepherding the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. He led the flock to the west end of the wilderness and came to the mountain of God, Horeb. The angel of God appeared to him in flames of fire blazing out of the middle of a bush. He looked. The bush was blazing away but it didn't burn up.

³ Moses said, "What's going on here? I can't believe this! Amazing! Why doesn't the bush burn up?"

⁴ God saw that he had stopped to look. God called to him from out of the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

He said, "Yes? I'm right here!"

⁵ God said, "Don't come any closer. Remove your sandals from your feet. You're standing on holy ground."

“Blessings in the Chaos”

by Jan Richardson

To all that is chaotic in you,
let there come silence.

Let there be a calming
of the clamoring,
a stilling
of the voices that
have laid their claim on you,
that have made their home in you,
that go with you
even to the holy places
but will not
let you rest,
will not let you
hear your life with wholeness
or feel the grace
that fashioned you.

Let what distracts you cease.
Let what divides you cease.
Let there come an end
to what diminishes
and demeans,
and let depart
all that keeps you
in its cage.

Let there be
an opening
into the quiet
that lies beneath the chaos,
where you find the peace
you did not think possible
and see what shimmers
within the storm.