

Sheltering on the Shore

Sermon by Rev. Art Lester - Sunday 26 April, 2020

If I was where you are now, the first thing I'd do is look around at all your faces. Try to see everyone. Then I'd say what sounds like an ordinary greeting, but has now taken on a new depth and meaning: "How are you doing?"

Some of you might be brave and answer. But I'm guessing you wouldn't be saying, "Fine, thank you," the way we usually do. Because the things we usually do don't seem to apply at the moment. Something has shifted in our private and common life. Something has happened that it will take a long time to fully understand.

We have become vulnerable.

Do you remember the Road Runner cartoons? Wile E. Coyote spends his life chasing the mad bird, who constantly outwits him. Picture the scene where, just at the point of catching up with the road runner, Wile E misjudges a turn and winds up running off a cliff. But he is so fixated on his errand that he doesn't notice that he is running in thin air. It is only when he looks down that he sees reality, and it is only then that he falls.

Something like that is what has happened to us. It has happened to culture stars and prime ministers, tycoons and peasants. We thought our feet were on terra firma, but we've found that we were walking in air. The world we had constructed for ourselves—comfortable for some, less so for others—has changed beyond recognition.

We have become vulnerable.

As shocking as it all is, we should remember that we have always been vulnerable. Think about it: we are born helpless, without fins or scales or claws. We have the longest period of helplessness of any species. Without near total support, we die. And we sense that. When our nurturing parent leaves our side, even for a moment, we scream in what is nothing less than existential terror.

Then, throughout the longest spell of maturing of any species, we gradually evolve coping mechanisms. We build little nests of relationships and create stories that give us comfort and security. We buy insurance policies, invent antibiotics, store up mementoes and trophies on the mantelpiece, and seal ourselves into a coherent world view, reinforced by religion. If we are

lucky, we may traverse an entire lifetime without having to see that we are walking in air. Or, perhaps if we are even luckier, we might have the opportunity to see clearly what this pandemic is urging us to see.

We have become vulnerable. We ARE vulnerable.

Not so long ago, when such things were still possible, I conducted a funeral for someone I didn't know. It was an elderly woman, a friend of a friend of a friend. As always, I had someone write a short bio so that I could make the occasion less abstract. As I read the words, I felt that I was learning about an "ordinary" life, and yet finding it much more than ordinary. The piece was warm in my hands. It was shot through with love.

It rained buckets outside. The family wept. My own voice broke as I pressed the button for the final curtain, something I have done many, many times before. And, as always, I wished I could find the words, some magic charm that would clear the air of the grief, anger and guilt that so often hangs around funeral services.

After the service, the daughter of the dead woman grabbed my sleeve and said, "You make me feel so much better about all this." And, as always, I knew that there was really nothing you could say that would change things profoundly. But that—maybe—standing next to people in extreme circumstances was better than any great words you might utter.

Later, on the way home, I remembered a story from the Sufi tradition. A little wave is rolling across the sea when a scary thought occurs to him. He turns and says to a big wave, "I think I see a beach ahead. I'm scared. What will happen to me?" The big wave answers, "That will always be how you feel until you remember that you are really the ocean."

It made me think of a statement by Friedrich Nietzsche. He said that the world contained just three kinds of people. There are those who build sandcastles on the beach, unaware that the sea will dissolve and reclaim them. There are those who, knowing that the life of a sandcastle is fleeting and insecure, decide not to even try. And a third type: those who, knowing that the sandcastle cannot possibly survive the tide, do it anyway.

We all know people of each type. In fact, we might say we have been all three kinds of people at various times in our lives. As a young person, when the world seems easy and fun, and time is not an issue, we hatch great plans and attack the world with enthusiasm. We know intellectually that nothing is forever, but we can brandish the words like a magic charm: "Not yet."

But sometimes life affronts us. A pandemic ceases to be a sci-fi concept and becomes a hard reality. People who are just like us die. Our cherished hopes seem to eke away in the slow drip of days, and the comforting spell of the ordinary—the world of mortgages, vacations and pension funds—are chipped away. Then it may seem that the best thing to do is say, “What’s the use, anyway?” So, we turn away from our sandcastle projects and march to the droning beat of the necessary and the next.

But if we are lucky, and blessed with the right kind of temperament, we can shrug off the dread of the inevitable and get stuck in again. Get out the pail and shovel, squat in the sand and begin to build again. Turrets and moats and a flag on top fashioned from an ice cream wrapper. The best and bravest among us may even stay till sundown, and watch as the waves reclaim the sand and the project is dissolved. That’s when we have the opportunity to see that nothing is destroyed except an idea, a small mirage that comes and goes. The sand remains, each grain rearranged in accordance with another, grander plan.

The whole of the mystical literature of virtually all religious traditions has the same simple truths to offer. Put in easy language, it goes like this: we are not who we think we are. The reality we have forged for ourselves is a kind of temporary nest, like those made by migratory birds. Because we have forgotten our true selves, we cling to the straws and sticks we forage from the landscape around us. We strive to make the nest as strong and solid as possible. We reinforce it with things that seem to be permanent, shore up our positions with institutions and relationships, and set about to weather the storms of confusion.

The teacher Meher Baba put it this way (and I have to paraphrase): “Humanity will forever build illusory shelters on the shore of truth, until wave after wave of reality destroys them to drive their occupants onward.”

Does that mean that even a thing as shocking as a pandemic might harbour benefits that we don’t see—cannot see—when our shoreline shelters are intact? Is there some gift in the knowledge that we are vulnerable?

What is the dominant emotion shared by nearly everyone now? What motivates the bankers to leave New York City for the Hamptons in their droves? What turns the blessings one one’s “golden years” into a blueprint of risk and withdrawal? What makes the heroic workers in refugee camps present grim faces to the TV cameras every night?

The answer can be expressed in one word: *fear*. That fear that makes the infant scream when its mother leaves the room. The fear that drives us to build sandcastles of security, ringed in by relationships and guarded by opinions. Put baldly, the fear of non-existence, the fear of death.

Along with our clinging to worldly things, we have evolved other ruses to prevent the worst. We create religions in which we can accumulate merit like vouchers we can redeem for an unlikely extension of our earthly lives after death. We imagine that we can stay the same forever, as if we could pick up the sandcastle and move it to a place where there is no tide.

But even in these poor places of dogma, voices have often emerged that sing us a different sort of song. They say that before we took birth and after we have gone, we have always been. That while we live, our true existence is not arrested, only hidden. And that the way back is through the only force that can overcome fear: love.

It is love that appears when the misty mountain sunrise or the transporting strain of music breaks through the walls of the ordinary. It is love that is both joy and longing, mixed. And finally, it is love that makes you remember who you are.

We are never so vulnerable as when we love. When we dare to risk rejection, and ignore the ultimate inevitability of bereavement and loss. And it may be that the obverse is true: that when we are aware of our vulnerability, our capacity to love is enhanced. That may be why we have seen so many touching examples of generosity of spirit during this time of trouble. Why the health workers are able to go to work in overburdened wards, and the neighbours queue up to bring supplies to the elderly. It may just be that, knowing directly how fleeting life can be energises our capacity to care.

I'll let you in on a secret. When people like me write sermons, what they say is meant not just for the listener, but for themselves. So, do I wake up at five am and let the monsters of doubt and confusion, the ogres of small terrors overtake me? You bet I do. But as I get older, the demons seem to get a bit weaker. Do I fear death? Of course I do, but, then I fear leaping into cold water, too.

What heartens and sustains me is that I have no deadline. Something has spoken to *me* in the night, saying that whether or not I see through the curtain before my little wave hits the beach, that it really doesn't matter. If I am able to see through the sham reality I have so carefully constructed, fine. But if not, in time all that will be clear to me. Like the words of I Corinthians say, now I see through a glass darkly, but then face to face.

Because there is something else that the mystics say, something that never fails to bring me peace. Best expressed by Mother Julian of Norwich in these lines: “All is well, all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well.”

So, I guess that means that whether we grasp the truth or not, everything is all right. Yes, really: nothing is broken; everything is accounted for. So lighten up, little wave: everything IS all right.