

2 Lent

**Bowing to the Mystery**  
Feb. 26, 2010

Rev. Julia A. Fritts

*“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?” (Psalm 27)* In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:  
Amen.

We gather today to find sanctuary and community as we find our balance after another big week of life on earth, with all its changes and challenges. Our parish family has received the news, both happy and sad, that I have been called as rector of a church in Oregon, where my beloved Michael lives, and will be moving on from my wonderful St. John’s family at the end of April. We woke yesterday to find that the world has been shaken again with a huge earthquake in Chile, with tsunami warnings and all the terrors that those images provoke. And, in perhaps the most personally devastating event of this week, we received the heartbreaking news that our own Sheelagh and Gos Schlegel have suffered the loss of their tiny baby girl, Amelia Elizabeth. It has been a bewildering week, and we are stunned.

It seems that wherever we turn, we’re faced with the same big question. Where is the God of love and power and wisdom in this? Everywhere we look, we are reminded that we are each of us mortal, finite, and subject to all the changes and chances of living on a planet subject to its own natural laws of tectonic plates and forces of gravity. Being natural created beings, we each have a beginning, a middle, and an end. We’ve pondered together several times about this circle of life, and how it goes around sometimes in a long full circle, and other times in a circle that’s heartbreakingly not nearly long enough. How do we “be” with this? Where is God in this?

There are times when we are so overwhelmed by sadness that there are almost no words. It is not for nothing that the most automatic phrase we say when we are shocked is “Oh, God.” Oh God, make speed to save us. Oh Lord, make haste to help us. Oh God, all I can really *say* is that I love you, and I do not understand. All we can really *do* is to bow to the mystery, in grief and in trust, and to do this together, in community.

There’s so much we don’t know. I don’t believe that God wills any of us to suffer. I believe that suffering is nonnegotiable; it goes with the territory of being finite created beings, born onto a planet subject to its’ own natural laws and shifts. We bear the changes and chances of life on earth as fragile humans, and in every trajectory from life into death, there is at least some degree of what we name as suffering. Our Lord Jesus gave himself to full human incarnation, so that he could be totally with us – Emmanuel, *God With Us*, in this most graphic way – fully present in our human suffering. It helps to remember that Jesus never said he came to take away our suffering, but to be present with us, right in the midst of it.

Jesus came to be God With Us in all our troubles, all our traumas. He came to remind us that this earthly life, as precious as it is, is only temporary. He turns us to face God, to remind us that God is real and present, bidden or unbidden. And he came to forgive us with a wideness of mercy that sweeps us all back into his arms, back full circle to where we started from.

We bow deeply to these mysteries, in grief and in trust, and we do it together. The strength of the prayers lifted up for the family of man in these times is extraordinary. The help and concern that we give each other is our way of incarnating love: we walk together in the mystery, trusting God, and we walk it together. We do everything we can to partner one another in our grief and our healing. And we continue to look for God's mysterious hand in all our lives.

Challenges certainly surround us: they are everywhere we turn. But there are blessings around every corner, whether we can see them or not. The hand of God, all knowing, all loving, all powerful, is at work in all of our lives. It can be hard to discern – especially in times of heartbreak and devastation. But it can be clear as day too – I shake my head in wonder at the the miracles in my own life. I was sure I had been blessed enough in my life, and had given up, almost, on the hope of ever experiencing the joy of true loving partnership in my life. But I still prayed to God about it: I prayed that I would have the strength to do what I was called to do without support, if that was my charge. I prayed that my trust in God would not waver, that God knew my heart and my hopes. I prayed that I would have the endurance to wait on God's timing.

I prayed silently and aloud, and in tears and discouragement, as the years unfolded. And miracle of miracles, God saw fit that the timing was finally right: that my most trusted friend of 39 years would become the love of my life, and that my call to serve as a priest in God's church would manifest itself in a new altar and a new community to serve, in a parish right near my new home. My heart is so full of gratitude for all that you have been to me, and now I pray that God will give me the strength to let you go. I've long believed that we are meant to take our good experiences of what it is to be the Family of God, and take those ways like good seeds to plant out in the wider world. Your goodness and strength and generosity will be recognizable in the church that grows in Oregon!

Life on earth is full of miracles, but it is also, without question, sometimes too hard to bear. We think we've born enough sadness, only to wake up to a new disaster – another earthquake, another tsunami. How do we bear it? We bear it by joining our hearts to all those who have cried out to the God of love, and wisdom, and power, throughout the ages like our Psalmist, who says to us today, "*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?*" (Psalm 27.) We cry to God, we talk to God, we rant and rave and whisper our hearts to God. We bow to the mystery, in grief and in trust, and we do all of this together.

Amen.

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