

“In the Boat”

Two isolated events from the news this month. First, the University of Toronto fired up their new super computer. It can perform more than 300 trillion calculations a second, simulate the Earth's climate 100 years into the future in four days and help researchers study cosmic background radiation, a calculation-intensive task that offers a glimpse into what the universe looked like 13 billion years ago. That 13 billion years being the very beginning of the universe itself.

This month the environmentalist theologian Thomas Berry died. Dr. Berry believed that humankind, and everything else in the universe, was witnessing the end of the 65-million-year Cenozoic Era with its explosive diversification of life forms, and the beginning of what he termed the Ecozoic Era, in which it will be humanity's task to manage as a participating member of the Earth community, not as the controller of Earth's destiny.

What Thomas Berry called his great work as a cultural and religious historian was to rid Western society of its man-centred notion of creation and replace it with the story of a new cosmology in which humankind was an integrated yet subservient part of a sacred, living and evolving universe.

The formative moment of his life occurred when he was 11 and one day roaming the red hills near his home on the edge of town he skipped across a creek and found a meadow.

He later wrote: “The field was covered with white lilies rising above the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something that seems to explain my thinking at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember.

“It was not only the lilies. It was the singing of the crickets and the woodlands in the distance and the clouds in a clear sky. ... This early experience, it seems, has become normative for me throughout the entire range of my thinking. Whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in the natural cycles of its transformation is good; whatever opposes this meadow or negates it is not good. My life orientation is that simple ... that pervasive. It applies in economics and political orientation as well as in education and religion.”

But it was this quote from his writings that has intrigued me for a long time, “in every phrase of our imaginative, aesthetic and emotional lives, we are profoundly dependent on a larger context of the surrounding world. There is no inner life without outer experience and the tragedy of the ecological crisis is as much a soul tragedy as anything else, because our imaginations require diversity and we have been gifted with so much on this planet.”

So for me, true spirituality is when the inner life and the outer life are one. When we read scripture this way it comes alive. Scripture is not dead text written long ago. Scripture is a living story that enables us to connect our inner lives with the very fabric of the universe.

So the story of Jesus and the disciples out on the stormy Sea of Galilee is told, not as one story in the life of Jesus, but a story that brings together many other stories. It is a story that combines our story with our community story, with the universe's story.

And the story begins this way, “First this: God created the Heavens and Earth—all you see, all you don't see. Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God's Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss. God spoke: “Light!” And light appeared.” (Genesis 1:1-3 MESSAGE)

And the storyteller, whose memory was as long as time remembered being in a watery soup and suddenly the waters broke, the head emerged and there was light and there was new life—birth and breathe. And the story of the one life was one with the story of the universe, with the story of God.

But there was always the thought that perhaps the waters of chaos would flood the earth once again, that it would return to darkness, a soup of nothingness. So there was in the stories of the community an ancient primal fear—the fear of water.

Long before the Bible was written the ancient “Epic of Gilgamesh” gave voice to this primordial fear. “The evening came, the rider of the storm sent down the rain. I looked out at the weather and it was terrible... With the first light

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of dawn a black cloud came from the horizon; it thundered within where Adad, lord of the storm, was riding. . . Then the Gods of the Abyss rose up; Hergal pulled out the dams of the nether waters, Ninurta the warlord threw down the dykes, and . . . the god of the storm turned daylight into darkness.”

The Bible retells this story with the flood of Noah. The other Biblical story that directly reflects this story of the disciples on the Sea of Galilee is the story of Jonah.

Jonah is asked by God to go to Nineveh, the land of the gentiles – the others. He jumps off onto a boat and sails in the opposite direction. While he is asleep a storm comes up. The sailors decide that God is obviously angry at someone onboard. Jonah confesses that he was the one God was angry with and offers to be thrown overboard. The sailors throw him into the deep and the sea immediately becomes still. “The sailors were impressed, no longer terrified by the sea, but in awe of God. They worshiped God, offered a sacrifice, and made vows.”

So both stories have a departure by boat, a violent storm at sea, a sleeping main character, badly frightened sailors, a miraculous stilling of the waters related to the main character and a marvellous response by the sailors.

Four times in Mark’s gospel the disciples were afraid. The first is this sea story, the second is after the man who was possessed by a legion of demons (code word for the Roman occupying force), the third is when they see Jesus walking on the water and the fourth is at the very end of the gospel when the empty tomb is discovered. “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Now something very interesting is happening here. The disciples are not so much afraid of the storm, the Roman Army, being alone in the boat without Jesus—fear of abandonment, or Jesus being crucified and buried. They are afraid when the fear is removed, the chaos of water, death itself.

When Jesus says to the disciples “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” this is not in the middle of the storm, this is when the sea is calm.

Likewise they are afraid after the demoniac is healed, they are afraid when Jesus walks across the water and joins them, and they are afraid when they know that Jesus has been raised from the dead.

Today’s gospel suggests that God is not the solution to our fears, but the God named Jesus the Christ is the beginning of our fear, the source of our fear. If God was a mere projection of our need to feel secure, to feel comfort, to be protected from the reality of life, then how in the world do we explain how we got Jesus?

Jesus is more disturbing than comforting. We are afraid of Jesus because he shows us what it means to be truly human and alive. To have our souls joined with the essence of the universe.

Saint Augustine, when the Roman Army was being decimated, was in a community that lived in fear. He said to them in a sermon “When you have to listen to abuse, that means you are being buffeted by the wind. When your anger is aroused, you are being tossed by the waves. So when the winds blow and the waves mount high, the boat is in danger, your heart is imperilled, your heart is taking a battering. On hearing yourself insulted, you long to retaliate; but the joy of revenge brings with it another kind of misfortune shipwreck. Why is this? Because Christ is asleep in you. What do I mean? I mean you have forgotten his presence. Rouse him, then; remember him, let him keep watch within you, pay heed to him . . . A temptation arises: it is the wind. It disturbs you: it is the surging of the sea. This is the moment to awaken Christ and let him remind you of these words: “Who can this be? Even the winds and the sea obey him.”

Bill Willimon tells this story. I know a church, a declining inner city sort of church. They were just about to call it quits. “Lost their neighbourhood,” the bishop told the young pastor as he appointed her there.

She soon found that, though almost none of their members still lived nearby, they did actually have a neighbourhood—poor families, a few street people, people like that. So at the pastor’s urging, the church opened its doors to its neighbourhood. Some of the members began a soup kitchen for the poor, serving nearly 50 meals every weekday at noon. A health care cooperative took up residence in some of the church’s unused Sunday school rooms, turning them into a health clinic for the poor.

Now, on Sundays, that once declining, mostly empty church is nearly half full of people. That congregation has been resurrected. People from six, seven blocks away are coming to the church that does so much for the neighbourhood.

As the pastor told me this story, it was one of the most inspiring pieces of good news I’ve heard lately. Then she said, “Trouble is, many of our best, long-time members just couldn’t take it. They were all prepared for our last days as a church and then, wonder of wonders, our church was raised, given a new mission, a reason for living. And it scared them to death.”

We have a choice: live fear or live resurrection. And we always have the living question, “Who can this be? Even the winds and the sea obey him.”