

God's Dhabarh, the creative word

Isaiah 55, Psalm 119:97-112, Mark 4: 26-34

I've been wondering why I agreed to preach on creativity in the middle of January, which is my least favourite month of the year and a time when I struggle to get up in the morning, my energy is very low, and all I want to do is hibernate! Hardly a time for being creative or even thinking about creativity.

But then I realised that this is precisely a good time to be thinking about God's creative word and our own creativity - in my case, the creativity of poetry in particular, which has been enormously important to me throughout my whole life. Why do I say that the middle of winter is a good time to be thinking about creativity? Because winter is a time of dormancy, of darkness, of rest and hibernation - or at least, it is a time when we frequently yearn for these things, even if we may be denied them, or deny them to ourselves.

I want to suggest that dormancy, darkness and not-doing are essential ingredients of creativity, and indeed also of prayer and of discerning God's call on our lives. The darkness and the winter, the dormancy and the not-doing, are as much God's gifts to us as the light and the spring, the activity and the doing that are very obviously aspects of creativity. It's taken me a long time to recognise this. Like many academics and Christians, I can be driven by a strong sense of duty and perfectionism that makes it difficult for me to accept my own, as well as others', limitations. I am frequently unrealistic about the time and energy writing projects will take, and tend to overcommit myself, so that I'm often scrambling to catch up with the many things I've taken on. I am not good at listening to my body and living gently with myself or with others. In the past, I would have regarded times away from my desk, or times when I am tired and hibernating, watching old movies or reading my novel, as a concession to the weakness of the body rather than an essential part of the creative rhythm of my life, as I now understand them. I've finally come to realise that the gaps in between working, the apparently 'dead' times of boredom, listlessness, even illness, are an essential part of the creativity, when the underground work of waiting and resting is going on, beneath our conscious minds and beyond our own control.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, God creates the world out of God's dhabar, or word. God speaks - 'let there be light' - and the sun and moon come into being. God's word is so much more than speech or the written word on a page. God's

word is a dynamic, active, creative force that brings things into being from nothing - or from apparent nothing. The Bible starts with the Spirit of God brooding over the chaos before anything comes into being, and this rings true to my own experience of creativity. Poems come out of the deep places of the unconscious, rather like dreams do; and because they come out of the unconscious, they often take the poet by surprise as much as anyone else. I often say that my poems know something that I don't know, my poems can reveal truths to me about my own life that I would not otherwise know - and it can take the conscious mind a long time, perhaps even years, to catch up with the truth of my poems; to live the poem rather than merely write it.

And this is how the scriptures speak of the mysterious word of God. There is a beautiful part of the Christmas liturgy - an antiphon to the Magnificat - from the Wisdom of Solomon - which says: 'When peaceful silence lay over all, and night was in the midst of her swift course; from your royal throne O God, down from the heavens, leapt your almighty Word'. The word is born out of silence and the darkness of night, and no human being witnesses the miraculous creativity of God. This reminds me of the French poet and essayist, Charles Peguy's, wonderful meditation on night and sleep, in which he has God say, 'I don't like the man who does not sleep... Sleep may be my most beautiful creation... for sleep accomplishes what reason cannot, the surrender of man.'

And Thomas Merton says, 'Love winter, when the plant says nothing'. Winter, like the sleep of night, is the time when human beings must surrender to nothingness - and this is, paradoxically, the time when the Spirit of God works within us, stirring life in our hidden places to bring newness to birth, so that we wake in the morning and find that the thing we'd been struggling with the day before as we tried to write has resolved itself and come clear. Our readings from Isaiah and the gospel of Mark both offer the image of God's creative work as akin to the mysterious underground growth of a plant that is sown by human effort but grows largely through the action of rain, snow and weather. Jesus' parable gives us the picture of a farmer or gardener scattering seed on the ground, and then sleeping and rising, day after day, night after night, trusting the earth to bring forth that new growth. The seed sprouts, he does not know how. The parable of the mustard seed gives us the image of the smallest seed which grows into the greatest of shrubs, putting forth branches in which the birds of the air make their nests. This speaks to us of the way in which God's creative word generates life in abundance, far beyond our own little labours - even though those labours are essential to the process. The seed will not grow unless it is planted; the ground has to be prepared. Our

own creativity will not flourish without the ground work of reading, wrestling, writing, working - and yet, when it comes, the creative life is born out of the interplay of our work and the mysterious resting and waiting in winter and darkness.

Sometimes, this waiting and yearning for our own birthing can go on for a very long time - months, if not years. Looking back on my own life, I am aware of a decade in my late twenties and thirties when my own creativity went underground, I lost my way, I could not find or claim my voice. It was an extremely painful time in which I lost a great deal of academic confidence and could not see how to overcome my fear; yet throughout that time, the Spirit of God - and my own poetic muse - never gave up on me. From time to time, poems grew up out of the darkness; poems that offered the hope, even the certainty, that my creative life would emerge and flourish - though, at that point, I had no idea how or when. Like the star that led the magi through the dark journey towards the Christchild, our own creative depths - perhaps another word for the Spirit of God - will lead us through the dark night towards our own birthing if we can but trust the nighttime work of the Spirit.

I finish with one of my poems, 'Winter', which I hope is simple enough to need no explanation or introduction:

WINTER

Where the wood is dry
Where no green things lie
Where the wild things fly
 There am I

Where the stream is still
Where the wind is shrill
Where the ice forms chill
 There am I

Where the ground is hard
Where the earth is scarred
Where the path is barred
 There am I

Where no leaf is seen
Where the year is lean
Where the grief is keen
 There am I

Where the blood runs slow
Where no waters flow
Where the hope is low
 There am I

Where the dark is strong
Where the night is long
Through the winter's song
 There am I

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