

I want to start with a bit from our friend Mary Oliver's poem, Evidence, as these are helpful images to hold alongside our readings today.

Memory: a golden bowl, or a basement without light.

For which reason the nightmare comes with its

painful story and says: you need to know this.

...

There are many ways to perish, or to flourish.

How old pain, for example, can stall us at the threshold of function....

Still friends, consider stone, that is without the fret of gravity, and water that is without anxiety.

And the pine trees that never forget their recipe for renewal.

...

And, where are you, with your ears bagged down as if with packets of sand? Listen. We all have much more listening to do. Tear the sand away. And listen. The river is singing. ...

The first natural disaster on a national scale that I remember was the Mississippi River flooding on the early 90's. Since then I've learned that it is the largest scale, most expensive flood in modern US American history, Billions of dollars, some places submerged for over 200 days that year.

But at the time, I was 9 years old and all I knew was what I saw on the nightly news --scenes of frantic levy building, chains of people hefting sandbags along swollen riverside. Then shaky aerial footage of all that muddy brown water coursing through towns and houses dotting this alien landscape -- roofs become makeshift docks. The land swallowed up. So disorienting, even as hours turned into days into weeks, months. A new alien world. I just kept thinking where was all the water coming from, who had left on the faucet, what did it mean that everything could be swept away like that?

In our Old Testament reading we hear about the end of the Great Flood, a troubling story of immense violence and vengeance. and we hear the promise "that the waters will never again become a flood to destroy all flesh' And in the midst of a year like this, where we are flooded on so many deeply troubling levels, that is something to hold onto.

This summer, on our own Whitney Ave, corroded pipes collapsed and poured sewage into the Mill River, which empties into the Sound just next to one of the plots of land where I work as a farmer. A week of the smell of filth and dead fish at odds with the bright squash flowers and waving tomato branches flourishing green. I had a vision of threatening tides creeping over the berm along the riverside as they'd done 7 years ago. I thought about the richness of the ecosystem there where fresh water mixes with salt. I thought about all the fishermen each day

on the bridges and who walk the edge of the garden for a spot on the shore there. I thought about the white silos of the petroleum plant on the farther shore. The long-deferred clean up of the Mill River English Station power plant leaching heavy metals and other toxins for decades. Sewage competing now with lead on one side and oil on the other. How does the water win?

The Season of Creation calls us to question not only our place and function in the order of things, our relationship to the natural world, but also our right relationships among humanity . These degradations - racial, economic, environmental - all have the same roots underneath - colonialism, white supremacy, greed all intertwine.

Just like with the Mississippi River floods, preceded by a build up of rain, snow accumulation in the year before, or with the Mill River's long abuse leading to poisoned fish and diseased waters, there is another River swelling like a wide, ragged seam down the middle of the country as Black men and women are casually murdered and protest swallows up downtown streets, smashes businesses, in violent clashes amid air muddied with tear gas, wails, and the roar of our grief unstemmed.

The overflow of rage and heartbreak has deep sources, tributaries of pain, violence and injustice crisscrossing all our long histories, soaking the ground and swelling up. And some of us have put sandbags up, built the banks higher to hem it in and block it from view, We push off disruption with easier answers, bandaids. Make a donation. Protest "the right way." Wait for a new generation.

But the river is singing, and we are called to listen.

In the gospel reading, we see a pair of unexpected (maybe unwelcome) messengers, women both fearing and in great joy, carrying the message of death overcome. And we know it is rare to see women written as agents like this. Perhaps in carrying this information to the disciples, they are stepping out of their lane. And if so, would it be easy for the disciples to dismiss or cast doubt on the message because of how it was being delivered?

Echoing what I hear nowadays, what I myself have said, "Who are these women? Why can't they say it some other way? Some way more appropriate?" From kneeling during an empire's anthem to burning the empire's marketplaces - when we fail to act because of how the message is delivered or who is carrying it, we miss out on the revelation of God's Kingdom, we miss the call to follow the way of Jesus beyond the death wrought at the empire's hands into radical new life.

For white folk, for folk like me who have spent most of their lives insulated from the visceral knowledge of these injustices, and our role in perpetuating them, it is vital that we pay attention when those messengers come to us. (*the nightmare comes and says, you need to know this.*)

Diamond Reynolds is one of those messengers for me. 4 years ago, she went to the grocery store and was riding home with her 4-year-old and her partner, Philando Castile. And we have

all heard the rest of the story in a thousand different ways. They were stopped by police and within 40 seconds of approaching the vehicle, the officer had shot her partner 7 times point blank. Diamond started filming, and narrating what had happened, what was happening.

This, of all the other murders at the hands of police, this is the messenger who finally got me, who I allowed past my defenses and refusals to see, to feel, to comprehend. Floodgates smashed open for me, all the mental blocks swept away. A gun and a permit to carry it didn't save him; a 4-year-old in the backseat didn't save him; politeness and following the rules didn't save him. And Diamond bore witness and brought the message of this unjustified death and the bias and racism that fueled it. But state sanctioned violence and death is not the end of the story. Not in the gospel, and not today.

That brings us to our second messenger, activist Kimberly Jones, who was filmed while documenting the Atlanta protests following George Floyd's murder in May, giving an insightful analysis. She lays out the connections between the economic disparities today and the way the US American system was built and has functioned to extract wealth at the cost of Black folk. How even now the system extracts wealth and undermines self-determination. Like the Mill River hemmed in and poisoned by greed, between racial discrimination and violence on one side, and economic exploitation on the other, she asks, "How can we win?" and puts the drive to disrupt and loot in a broader context of a broken social contract. She finishes by saying that "they are lucky that what black people are looking for equality, and not revenge."

And that is where I find the joy, that is where the turning point is for me. That distinction puts this all in a different light.

For folks of privilege, who the system has benefitted, this moment can feel threatening, It can feel like the revengeful devastation of the Flood in our Old Testament reading or the Mississippi out of its banks. It would be easy to let the threat overwhelm us and deafen us to what this moment is really about. (*there are many ways to perish, or to flourish*). Maybe rather than perishing, this moment is about how we can all ultimately flourish. It is a matter of perspective. The river is singing, and it is a song of equality, of death and violence overcome, of a new Kingdom come to life. Maybe we can come to see that rather than the threatening waters of the Flood, this is instead the River of the City of God we hear about in the book of Revelation, fertilizing the tree which ever-bears the fruit of equality and justice.

So what do we do? Hearing the messengers proclaim in the face of violence and death this invitation to new life, a new system of justice. What do we do now in this year when have all lost something? What do we do flooded by these griefs - from our personal losses, our deaths, human rights violations, authoritarian rise, and the economic, environmental and racial injustice that underpins all of it?

Don't put another sandbag on the levy. Don't resist or try to hide or flee when you feel pulled by the current. I grew up being warned that sin would "take you farther than you want to go, make you stay longer than you want to stay, make you pay more than you want to pay." But now, I

believe that is also true of the radical Way of Jesus, especially for the people who benefit from Empire as it is. Transformation, sanctification, discipleship have a true cost, a commitment that is not easy to maintain...or predictable. It takes us beyond the bounds. It makes us unexpected messengers of New Life beyond.

So if you find yourself in the river, follow the advice for when you fall into troubled waters - whether white water rapids or murky debris-strewn flood waters. Surrender and listen. In the panic, the instinct is to fight against the current, to get out by trying to get your footing, putting your feet down. But that resistance leads to drowning; it's too easy to get trapped in rocks or debris and the current will pin you under. Instead, they say, float. [Face to the sky and let the water carry you](#). And when there's calmer water, or an obstacle that you could climb up on, that's when you power forward, and swim.

Mary Oliver concludes the poem we started with, like this:

*For myself, I have walked in these woods for
More than forty years, and I am the only
thing, it seems, that is about to be used up....*

*First, though, I want to step out into some
fresh morning and look around and hear myself
crying out: "The house of money is falling! The house of money is falling! The weeds are rising!
The weeds are rising!"*

There is a comfort in knowing that the story is larger and longer lasting than us, especially in a year when we feel more than ever that we are about to be used up. I hope in this upheaval that the greed that feeds the systems perpetuating scarcity and inequality ("the house of money" as Mary Oliver calls it,) is swept of its foundations, and in that newly fertile soil, the weeds may rise up - like the delicious chickweed, amaranth, lamb's quarters, purslane, and wood sorrel I have in the gardens I tend here. The unlooked-for nourishment, messengers of a new kingdom beyond the bounds. I want to see this muddy swollen mess transform into the crystal clear ribbon that feeds life in God's Kingdom. That is where we find the promise of great joy of this news, beyond the terror.

In this moment and beyond, where do you need to soften, to float, to tear away the bags of sand and *listen*? Who are the unconventional, unexpected messengers trying to deliver you terrifying and yet joyful news? Where does that message call you to put your power to work, to pull for a new shore, to sweep away the fallen house of money and make room for a fertile land to rise?

References

River Sunday Readings

[Genesis 8:20-22; 9:12-17](#)

[Psalm 104:27-33](#)

[Revelation 22:1-5](#)

[Matthew 28:1-10](#)

Mary Oliver, Evidence:

<https://www.paulklenck.com/blog/2019/2/26/a-thousand-mornings-mary-oliver> and

<http://yearsrisingmaryoliver.blogspot.com/2011/02/evidence.html>

Mill River Sewage Spill, July 2020:

https://www.newhavenindependent.org/index.php/archives/entry/sewer_breakswage_into_mill_river/

Diamond Reynolds and Philando Castile

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/07/07/the-incredible-calm-of-diamond-lavish-reynolds/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting_of_Philando_Castile

Kimberly Jones, "How do we win?": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llci8MVh8J4>

<https://ctjournal.org/2020/06/29/the-social-contract-and-the-game-of-monopoly-listening-to-kimberly-jones-on-black-lives/>

Leon Bridges, The River, from the Coming Home album:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Hegd4xNfRo>

Denise Levertov, The Avowal <https://allpoetry.com/The-Avowal>