

“Space of a River”

Sermon by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

December 5, 2021

I might have missed it, the chance to reconnect with God, eternity, goodness.

We had just arrived at the Grand Canyon and checked in to our dormitory-style room. We walked into the modest, aging space, my partner pulling our canvas luggage and I carrying water and other snacks good for hiking.

I walked up to the screened window with its less than perfect glass behind it and paused. Leaning my forehead against the window, the rest of my body began to let go. I allowed myself to begin to slide down the wall and involuntarily fell to my knees.

“Are you all right? Should I still go get the rest of the luggage?” Bart asked as he quietly left the room. He already knew the answer. He knows me too well, and he knows when I’ve been summoned.

The canyon was so beautiful that it took my breath away. It had been 33 years since we were last together, the canyon and I. It seemed her majestic presence had grown over the years, and yet, I knew it was I who had grown deeper. Thirty-three years is but a drop in the ocean in the life of a canyon, formed by the flow of a river over a timeline ranging from 4 to 70 million years ago. My life was, and is, part of that water droplet, as is yours.

We belong, my friends, not only to ourselves and each other, but to this earth, to life, and to death. We are part of the mystery, whether we remember it or not. In that moment, I knew it. And knowing it made all the difference.

Oh, I had spent many years largely forgetting. I had been busy, bore and raised children, dealt with adversity, and embraced challenges and change. I had been living, and loving most of it, as hard as it was at times. And, I had forgotten my connection to this beautiful space that reminded of my goodness. There are two other places on Earth for me that do this reminding, that serve as tangible reminders of truth: the lands of Tanzania, particularly Mt. Kilimanjaro, and a small lake in Orleans, Massachusetts, where my grandparents spent their last years. A mountain, a lake, and a canyon, these spaces of

truth call me home to Universal love and belonging.

It was the pause that did it. I allowed myself to pause and listen to my inner knowing, calling me to that scene through the window. It was a moment not to be missed, and I knew it. Thank God I listened.

The poet David Whyte describes such a moment this way:

*Sometimes
if you move carefully . . .*

*breathing
like the ones
in the old stories,*

*you come to a place
whose only task*

*is to trouble you
with tiny
but frightening requests,*

*conceived out of nowhere
but in this place
beginning to lead everywhere . . .*

*Requests to stop what
you are doing right now,
and . . .*

*to stop what you
are becoming
while you do it . . .*

My tears started as soon as I surrendered to what was happening. The Grand Canyon swept before me in all her grandeur, even as I could see only a small portion of her 1,904 square miles. As I said, it had been 33 years since my only other trip there, yet I was even more taken this time than the first. I began speaking, talking with the canyon as though she were a wise woman, as I believe she is.

“So much has happened . . .” I said through my tears. “Babies, losses, addiction, degrees, achievements, and joy . . .” It felt so good to be back in her presence, palpable though separated by a long distance and a little glass.

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Two weeks later, after further reflection, I was able to articulate what had happened for me in this spiritual and mystical experience. I had experienced the Holy. Not studied it, debated it, or tried to define it or defend it. I had simply allowed it and thus had been held.

Through all that happened from when I was young and perhaps naive until now when I am older, more experienced, and aware of all I don't know, the Grand Canyon had been there waiting. I went away. She never left. She remained – a loving, beautiful, holding space – her layers revealing truths, of nature and of time gone by. The space is still ever changing, even as that change is invisible to the naked eye. *That*, to me, is an expression of God: truth, change, consistency, and space, each affected by the laws of nature and the choices humans make.

All of that would have been lost to me had I not taken the time or made the space to listen to what my heart was telling me: “Stop. Kneel. Connect. Share your Soul's truth.” I would have lost access to a vital spiritual experience had I done what I often do: be efficient, bring in the luggage, finish the proverbial to-do list. That I had to make space to experience the divine is not lost on me.

Spaciousness is our ministry theme this month. Spaciousness is deeply relevant for this time of year. For one thing, we are in the darkest time of year when space in the night sky is most visible. Dark night skies on cold winter nights remind us to look up, see the stars, connect to the truth that we are part of the universal story, both in its tragedies and its joys and mystery.

On a more down-to-earth level, the demands of the season can seduce us into more activity, spending, and busyness, leaving less space than we want and need. The cultural myths of how things “should be” often become even stronger. We may question what family means, how a holiday should look, and whether we are where we want to be in life. All these questions can strip us of peace and gratitude and leave us feeling lonely or diminished. Creating space can be an antidote.

Space, whether it be in our physical surrounding, our schedules, or our minds, is necessary for the

winds of change and the experiences of gratitude and inspiration. Creating space in our hearts by dropping expectations and resentments and extending forgiveness to ourselves or others make room for love and joy.

Many of us avoid making space because we forget its gifts and fear what we may find there. Space, my friends, literally and metaphorically can feel scary, even overwhelming; and it is certainly not championed by mainstream culture. And yet, the most intimate, revelatory, healing, and necessary encounters generally require space.

The poet John O'Donohue reminds us that the absence encountered in space is not lifeless, rather it is “*alive with hidden presence...*” where “*nothing is ever lost or forgotten.*”

May you create that space and know that spaciousness, and may you make way to meet its presence.

Amen and blessed be.