

Across the Desert

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD November 13, 2022

There is an ancient Sufi story about a stream's journey across a desert. Throughout its existence, this stream had traversed terrain of all sorts and thought it could cross the desert just as it had negotiated mountains and fields. And yet it found that when it began to pass through the parched land, it dissolved into the earth and disappeared – for the first time, crossing seemed impossible. And then a voice arose as if from the desert itself, saying “The wind crosses the desert, and so can the stream.” “Well,” said the stream, “that’s because the wind can fly!” The desert responded, “in journeying your accustomed way, you will never cross this desert. You must allow the wind to help – you must allow yourself to be absorbed by the wind.” The stream was aghast! In all of its travels it had never been absorbed before – it did not want to lose its individuality. Also, would it ever regain its own identity? The desert explained to the stream the task of the wind – it would carry the water into itself, hold on to it as it crossed the desert, and release it again on the other side. The desert offered a warning – if the stream did not follow this course of action, it would disintegrate into a bog. The stream was taken aback, and asked, “Can I not remain the same stream I am today?” The desert replied, “You cannot remain so in either chase.” And so, the stream raised as vapor into the wind who welcomed it, gently carried it across the desert, and allowed it to fall again on the other side – many, many miles away, where it became a river.¹

We are each presented with obstacles that we can only traverse if we courageously face change. Like the stream, we can disintegrate into a bog, or we can recreate and become something new and life giving. Life will offer us hardships akin to a parched desert. Last week, we explored that which we need to accept, and the change felt within us as we do so. This week, we explore that which, through our intentional actions, we can proactively change – as a stream becomes vapor becomes a river.

¹ <https://www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/stream-sufi-story/>

In introducing us to this idea, I want to begin by exploring intentional changes in the theologies of particular groups of people – retold stories that crafted meaning. Today, we explore the changed theology of groups of women, African Americans, and Latinos. These groups were confronted with a destructive version of the Christian faith and changed their theology to respond to this and make the faith, instead, life-giving. Today, we use the term “God” because that is the term for the sacred in the Christian faith. I encourage you to interpret this word in whatever way feels sacred to you.

Let us begin by exploring women’s theology. Crafted predominantly by women who were searching for life-giving answers to the challenges of patriarchy, this theology shapes the perceived image of the Christian God from one of male dominance to a gentler entity who lovingly cares for us – a being often devoid of gender, but sometimes referred to as “mother.” The sacred figure, which is historically and commonly understood through the metaphors of “father, lord, and king” instead releases this all-powerful identity and becomes one who passionately cares for our well-being.² That patriarchal entity which demanded obedience is replaced by an entity of love which does not seek to dominate us but to tenderly care for us, a being sometimes held within the image of a doting mother figure. Latina theologian Maria Pilar Aquino who studied this shift in feminine theology noted that these changes in the understanding of God liberated women and freed them from layers of oppression – they were newly offered life-giving and freeing “compassion and mercy” from their sacred.³ This theology understands God as a figure who gave life to this world, who nurtures her creations who are so very “precious and vulnerable,” who desires for each one of us “growth and flourishing” – with a preferential love for those who are oppressed and struggling, just as a doting mother figure focuses her attention on the child most in need.⁴ Again, in this theology, God’s relationship with the world shifts – the relationship fosters divine

² *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* by Elizabeth A. Johnson pg. 96

³ *Ibid* pg. 96

⁴ *Ibid* pg. 103

and mortal bonding, mutual compassion, an imminence which is all-embracing.⁵ Women were faced with a patriarchal God which led to oppression. In response, they changed this dominating, all-powerful, male king and lord into an entity who held her beloved children in her womb and acted to tend to them as would an adoring mother figure. They created a life-giving change.

Let us explore another group – African Americans. Africans were forced to this country as slaves. Once they were here, slave owners hired Christian preachers to profess a theology of obedience. Once slaves were able to experience the words of the Bible firsthand, they reinterpreted it. Since the time of chattel slavery, Jesus has been a crucial figure in interpreting the Christian faith. A Jesus who “died and rose again” for people of all identities – including those who were black, enslaved, or impoverished.⁶ Within their own identity, Jesus - always on the side of the marginalized - set them free. They were freed spiritually and had a hope to escape bondage.⁷

Within the liberation theology crafted by African Americans, the reinterpretation of two fundamental stories of the bible became paramount: the tale of Exodus, and of the narrative of the enslaved woman, Hagar. In the story of Exodus, Moses, urged by divine will, freed the enslaved Jews from their captors, embarking on a long and difficult journey towards their ultimate freedom. The divine prevailed as the Israelites arrived at the promised land. American slaves identified in a powerful way with the ancient Israelites held in bondage. Just as the slaves in Egypt cried for freedom with a yearning for deliverance, so too did the enslaved Africans. The outcome of this story proved to the modern-day slaves that God was on the side of the oppressed, and that God would free them, delivering them to their own promised land. This story provided meaning and purpose and hope and a belief that God would “break their chains.”⁸

⁵ *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* by Elizabeth A. Johnson pg. 107

⁶ *Ibid* pg. 114

⁷ *Ibid* pg. 123

⁸ *Ibid* pg. 116

Enslaved Africans also found meaning and purpose in the story of Hagar – a woman who served as a maid to Abraham’s wife, Sarah. In this tale, Sarah was unable to conceive. Abraham intentionally impregnated Hagar as a surrogate mother, and Sarah ultimately treated her so harshly once the child was born that Hagar fled to the wilderness twice with her infant – where she faced her God. In meeting Hagar in the woods, God instructs her not to continue her flight, but to return to the home of Abraham and Sarah so that her baby – who could not survive in the harsh wilderness – could live a healthy life with the necessary food and shelter. God offered a way for Hagar and her child to simply survive. Heard by enslaved women facing unimaginable adversity, this story offers divine guidance and encouragement to live and serve as a mother and persevere no matter what. Black women facing sexism and racism and poverty today continue to relate to this story in a similar way. The story of Exodus becomes a tale of liberation. Hagar becomes an example of survival.⁹ Both offer the sentiment and faith that God is on the side of the enslaved and oppressed. African Americans reimagined a repressive faith to be one that instead offered life-giving guidance.

I want to explore the theological change imparted by another group – Latinos. Latinos were likewise faced with a God that was not life-giving. Latinos and Latinas re-created a distant, ruling God figure as one who resembled a cherished companion, intimately interwoven with everyday living in a joyous and life-giving way.¹⁰ This was a theology crafted by the people – by the laity. It is the people’s way of reinterpreting Christianity and God.¹¹ In the midst of daily suffering – God is present and available. Latin American culture is deeply communal; Latinos and Latinas finding strength in one another. In the same way, they shifted this traditional understanding of God as Lord to the understanding of a God who was one of companionship – offering Latinos strength, life, and happiness. God became a friend to every person of faith. God is not a “distant deity” but a piece of a sacred community, engaging with all through

⁹ *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* by Elizabeth A. Johnson pgs. 127-128

¹⁰ *Ibid* pg. 139

¹¹ *Ibid* pg. 137

divine compassion.¹² Again, as with the idea of women's theology, God becomes love. Again, as with each of these theological shifts, God becomes a life-giving entity.

And so, we have explored how three different groups of people have shifted their theologies to become life-giving. The Christianity they were presented with was akin to the parched desert our stream faced. They could perish and suffer, or they could intentionally change with the breath of the wind and survive, grow, endure, and find joy. This is how struggling peoples embraced change to thrive. This is not a strategy found only in crafting life-giving theology, but in recreating so much of the hardship we are faced with in life. The harm we are presented with is shaped and molded into something new and life-giving. Even in despair, women and Latinos found divine love and companionship. Even steeped in oppression, African Americans reinterpreted tales into those of liberation and survival. What can we each re-create?

I want to again reflect on the poetry offered by Sue Ludwig. Ludwig writes, "I am in search of my life. Not the one I was dealt, but the one I want to have."¹³ Leaving the womb, we have no power over the life we are birthed into – the one we were dealt. And, sometimes, as we explored last week, we are faced with hardships we can do nothing with but accept. Sometimes, however, a change is within our grasp. We can create the life we want to have.

Perhaps we feel that in some ways our lives are devoid of meaning. Changing our daily practices and outlook on life is comparable to a change in theology – both alter our connection to ourselves and our worldviews, which changes how we interact with the world. It may feel that facing this void within is akin to trying to traverse a parched desert – life-taking and daunting. Perhaps we feel that what we do with our days is shallow and meaningless and by simply accepting this we shrink into a murky bog. What activities provide good to this world we all call home? Grounding ourselves in service creates that communal love that many hold

¹² *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* by Elizabeth A. Johnson pg. 143

¹³ "Sprout," by Sue Ludwig

sacred. We create and maintain community and in doing so create heaven here, in this realm. Or we engage in those things that bring us to life within – hobbies of art or sports or baking – and incorporate this into each of our days – altering our routines. Perhaps we change the dynamics of a relationship with a beloved or muster the courage to let it go all together – whether a parent, a partner, or a friend. Is that not a story of liberation? We can work to survive by going to therapy or support groups; we can mend relationships and rebuild community through that sacred act of asking for forgiveness. Maybe, upon reflection, we are called to change our own theologies – our own understanding of the sacred and make this life-giving within us.

I think of another possible sojourn through the desert – aligning our outer selves with our inner selves. What do we need to change to make this so? Does what we present to the world remain true to all we hold within? How can we be who we are – not who we are expected to be? I encourage us to love ourselves and bring just who we are to the world around us, vulnerabilities, imperfections, and all. You. Maybe this is a coming out story, bringing your true gender or sexuality to the world. Maybe you attend an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, connecting to your true, sober self and letting that addict go. Perhaps it simply means telling jokes and bringing your humor to the world, or treating each person with compassion, connecting to the love for humanity you feel within. We craft life-giving narratives from a place of pain.

I remember being on the edge of a desert many times while serving as a hospital chaplain – people on the border of great change – sacred, holy times and places. And while these stories sound specific, to protect the privacy of everyone involved they are compilations of many experiences I had as a chaplain. I remember praying with the family of a teenager undergoing surgery to remove a malignant brain tumor – holding in that space the tangible love of that family for one another and their sacred that could guide them through anything. They chose to fill the room with love. I remember theological conversations with an ill and lonely woman simply working to make sense of the life she had been dealt. She chose powerful spiritual and

self-exploration. I remember holding the hand of a man so emotionally broken he could not even share with us his name – this man known in our charts simply as John Doe who was working to heal broken bones and, I intuited, his inner being – he chose to silently make a connection with me and others and built a small community in that hospital room. All of these patients and family members were held in pain on the edge of a change – and each worked to create something life giving. Presented with an expanse of hardship akin to miles of sand so tough and dry it could soak them up they rose instead and flew across – choosing change, choosing life giving change. This sacred journey towards meaning making and wholeness is available to any of us. Let us only seek it.

May it be so, and Amen.