
Believing, is Seeing, is Believing: An Ecology of Faith

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2 Samuel 11:26-12:13A; Psalm 51:1-13; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

In the name of the God of Creation, who loves us all, Amen.

Good morning, and welcome to the Cathedral of St. Philip on this Ninth Sunday after Pentecost. It is August, and as we speak, in rivers and streams all along the Pacific coast, salmon are returning home to their native waters after journeys of up to 6 years and thousands of miles at sea. Not too long ago I took a sea-kayaking trip to Alaska, just about this time of year. Our group journeyed to Tebenkof Bay, deep into the wilderness of southeast Alaska for a week-long sojourn. One of the most memorable experiences for me was watching salmon return to their ancestral birthplaces to create new life. Very early one day, after our morning prayers, we set out in our boats across the bay. A gentle Alaskan summer rain was falling. Raven called out as seals and otters followed our small flotilla of kayaks. Ducks and loons eyed us curiously, and eagles flew overhead, framed by snow-capped coastal mountain ranges, their glaciers emptying into the bay.

Soon we found ourselves in the delta region of a small but fast-moving river as it tumbled out of the mountains into the sea. We paddled upriver as far as we could, sheltered now from the gently falling rain by fir and spruce scented forests. Beneath our boats, swimming upstream in numbers impossible to count, was a river of salmon within the river, coming home to spawn. Upstream a hundred yards or so, a solitary Alaskan Brown Bear expertly harvested fish as two cubs waited patiently nearby. Kurt, our wise and patient guide whose deep spirituality informed every phase of our trip, gave us an impromptu streamside lecture on the ecology and culture of salmon nation, and as he talked I remember thinking; "This is more than a story about a particular kind of fish, this is a parable about a deep ecology of connection and relatedness."

Kurt quietly explained that salmon are amazing members of God's creation, and this is especially true of Pacific salmon. Leaving their fresh-water birthplaces they journey out to sea where they roam the salt-water oceans of the world, returning, studies have confirmed, to spawn at or near the exact spot they were born years and thousands of miles earlier. How do they navigate their way home and why? We aren't completely sure. It may have to do with smell, or the stars, or some combination of these and other navigational cues about which we know little. Once they return to fresh water and spawn, their condition rapidly deteriorates, and they soon die. I'm sure most of you have seen the dramatic scenes of Chinook and Sockeye salmon making their way up roaring waterfalls to their native pools against tremendous odds, including foraging Alaskan Brown bears and other predators. At certain points in the season as many as 20 vertebrate species, including elk, deer, and bear, feed directly on salmon, re-cycling those ocean borne nutrients directly into the soil of the forest. Incredibly, some salmon born in central Idaho will make their way over 900 miles inland, and climb 7,000 feet from the Pacific Ocean as they return to spawn. Much more than food for bears, or ravens and eagles, or humans, salmon are in fact a metaphor, a parable of a deeply mysterious, complex, and life-giving set of inter-woven relationships. DNA from Pacific salmon has been found in groves of Aspen at the top of the continental divide. The trace minerals from their ocean journeys, such as nitrogen, feed salmonberry bushes miles inland and virtually every level of the food chain of the

ecosystem will reveal evidence of the gift of salmon. Over 137 species of animals in the Pacific Northwest rely on salmon as part of their diet. When salmon die they generate the most biologically diverse forests on earth, honoring future generations with the gift the journey that is at the heart of all they are. "They leave branches of streams no larger than a broomstick," the author Richard Manning has said, "and make their way to the ocean for years, returning weighing up to 60 pounds of biomass harvested from the sea. They bring this mass of nutrients back to the forest to feed it, and the generations to follow."

I have come to think of this narrative as evidence of the creativity of God delighting in God's own creation—a sort of cosmic playfulness at the level of ecological communion, connection, and transformation. The grace that I find in the story of the salmon is evidence to me of deep, sacred connections of life-sustaining nourishment at multiple levels. It is no wonder that cultures as diverse and far-flung as Pacific Northwest Indians, Norse, and Celtic mythology found in the story of the salmon symbolic and religious power. I see God watching all the permutations and combinations of salmon connections, and I imagine God laughing with joy. The gift of their lives—and the cycle of living, and dying, and rebirth in myriad forms is moving, and powerful. Make no mistake, a salmon is not simply a fish—but a metaphor of the deep ecological mystery of God's creation—a timeless reminder that in the cycle of life and death lies the deep, abiding connections of all living things, and of transformation, and renewal.

It is fascinating to me, then, that on another shore, this time near the village of Capernaum, Jesus gives a sea-side homily on the nature of bread, and living, and a metaphorical lesson on what really nurtures and sustains our souls, and the mystery of those connections. On this day following the feeding of the 5,000, the impromptu picnic was over, and Jesus and the disciples were looking for a quiet place to rest, and recover. The people, however, had other ideas. They were not inclined to let him fade back into the Capernaum hills without finding out more about what he could do for them. They had been hungry, and they had been fed—more than enough—we are told, and yet they did not know the depth or sources of their hunger. He had given them bread, and they had their fill, but perhaps he could do more in the way of fulfilling basic needs of shelter, clothing, and the ambiguities and uncertainties of daily life. The possibilities were unlimited.

And somewhat disingenuously, when they find him they say, in essence, "What a surprise! Imagine finding you here! When did you come here?" Jesus will have none of it. "You worked hard to find me, and I know why. But I am more than a free lunch, and moreover, that is not what you really need. You ate your fill, and now you want more, but you are missing the point. The bread you seek won't last. I am the bread that endures, and addresses a deeper hunger. All you have to do is believe." "Prove it," they say, invoking Moses and the manna in the wilderness; "Give us a sign." "You don't get it," Jesus says to them, "Remember where the bread Moses gave you came from." It is not always easy, dear friends, to see beneath the literal to the metaphorical and symbolic, especially when our basic needs and fears often determine what we see, and how. Jesus knows we are hungry on many levels, and we are often scared, and wilderness can take so many forms.

The psychologist Carl Jung, himself deeply interested in religion, once said:

"I have seen people remain unhappy when they content themselves with inadequate or wrong answers to the questions of life. They seek position, reputation, outward success, money, and remain unhappy even when they attain what they have been seeking. Such people are usually confined within too narrow a spiritual horizon."

My Alaskan guide said to us, "Broaden your horizons. Think creatively. The Salmon is much more than a fish—it is a sign of something mysterious, complex, and life-giving in the ways of the connectedness of God's creation. They live their lives, and they give themselves away." Jesus says to us, "Broaden your spiritual horizons. I want to be more than a provider of physical bread. I want to fill the hunger of your hearts. I want to fill the emptiness you try to fill up with lesser things, to satisfy the Holy longings you often attempt to quiet with substances and material goods; to quiet the anxiety that finally comes to possess you, rather than allowing yourselves to be placed in God's outstretched, open arms. I want you to remember where that bread in the desert really comes from. And then I want you to feed one another, in love."

My sisters and brothers, like the salmon that journey so far to come home to their native streams, Jesus is to be broken, blessed, and shared with the world. He gives himself away, each moment, and like the Eucharist we will celebrate momentarily he is more than a provider of physical sustenance. Our river guide said, in essence, "Pay attention; look around you at the connections; see, and you will believe." Conversely, Jesus says to us, "Seeing is not always the same as believing; Sometimes you have to believe, in order to really see." Paradoxically, both of them are correct. And both point to a similar truth: Salmon may be signs of a first principal of an ecological paradigm of altruism and gratitude. The only way

to have a full life, and keep it, is to give it away. Jesus embodied this in the sharing of his life, in which we are invited to be creatively compassionate, in deep gratitude. "Every day," Wendell Berry says, "you have less reason not to give yourself away." Jesus said, "I am the Bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry."

Amen.

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