

Story and Meditation: On the Wings of the Morning

July 19, 2020

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

by Eric Anderson

The young noio had had, she thought, a pretty good life so far – granted, she was very young (by which I mean about eight weeks old), and had been flying for just a few days. She thought she was getting pretty good at it. Her parents, I should mention, seemed to agree.

Her good life consisted of settling comfortably into the nest, where one or both of her parents would keep her warm when the wind blew hard and dry when the rain fell. They'd spread their wings over her to shield her from the rain. They brought her food when she was hungry and they stayed right with her when she tried her first awkward wingbeats. They showed her how to find fish and they were right with her to help her feel safe. Yes. That is a good life when you're a noio.

By the way, the English name for a noio is a black noddy, which isn't nearly as good a name as a noio, so we'll stick with that.

Have you ever felt, though, that somebody was always watching you? Well, our young noio came to feel exactly that way. There she was, feeling a bit more grown up, stretching her wings, as it were, and there was always somebody about. There were her parents, of course, but there were also the other noio. There was a nest to the right and a nest to the left on their ledge of the cliff. There were ledges above, and they had noio nests. There were ledges below, and they had noio nests. There were other ledges along the cliffside, and they had noio nests, and the noio who nested in them kept flying along and calling back and forth to everyone.

Even when her parents were off fishing and she was left in the nest, there were always other noio, some of them in those nests, some of them swooping through the air, and some of them settled on her nest's ledge to rest for a moment or bore her with a long story or say something like, "My, aren't you getting big! Are you flying yet?"

It was so embarrassing.

Off the nest, if anything, it got worse. Now the skies would be filled with noio, all of them flying about over the same spot on the ocean if it had fish, or looking together for a better spot if they hadn't found fish.

“Can’t I get any privacy?” she asked her parents one day. They, frankly, were rather surprised. Privacy isn’t a common experience for a noio.

One morning, flying about with the other noio, a storm swept in quickly off the ocean. She could see the waves crashing against the shore, and the clouds blotted out the sun. Rain pelted down as it got darker, making it harder to see the land let alone her ledge and her nest. She flew in a fearful circle, wondering how to find home as the wind tossed her up and down and about. For the first time in her life, she felt utterly alone.

But someone was watching her. Other noio of the flock stayed with her, called to her, and got her attention at last. They led her toward the flock making its way to shore. They were above her and ahead of her and behind her and below her to make sure she didn’t get lost again. They brought her safely home.

All in all, she thought, back in her nest on that stormy morning with her parents’ wings spread over her against the rain, privacy is a nice thing from time to time, but it was really good that there were others watching her, watching over her, watching out for her, when the times got tough.

Psalm 139, observed Hans-Joachim Kraus in his commentary, is out of order. You may have missed that, because the editors of the Revised Common Lectionary, mostly in the interests of shortening the reading, left out the verses in which the author of Psalm 139 laments trials and hardships. Verse 19 reads, “O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me...” Clearly our ancient author felt threatened by somebody or rather some bodies, somebodies the Psalmist believed were also the enemies of God.

Most of the Psalms of lament and petition begin with a statement of the challenge, of the suffering, of the danger experienced by the author. This one, however, very nearly ends with it.

Which means that for this ancient poet, God’s relief had already come. “Search me, O God, and know my heart,” reads the first half of verse 23, at the end of the psalm. This is something that had already happened all the way back in verse one: “O LORD, you have searched me and known me.”

Those verses of the song contain a memory of hardship, a memory, though, that is experienced within the experience of preservation, of renewal, of deliverance from the fears, the risks, and the dangers. As Kraus wrote, “If the singer had proceeded with chronological precision, he would have had to place vv. 19-24 at the beginning. But for him the divine intervention stands at the beginning and at the midpoint of the whole song. As in the song of thanksgiving and the song of trust, the miracle of the helpful power of Yahweh is proclaimed in vv. 1-18.”

As an introvert, I have some sympathy with the noio who wanted some privacy. Seriously, God, can’t you leave me alone from time to time? The Psalmist seems to have felt some discomfort as well, asking: “Where can I flee from your presence?” The use of the word “flee” certainly

implies that sometimes God's presence feels heavy, even a little invasive. Not even thoughts are concealed, that most basic of human private places.

The discomfort, however, is a layer over a deep expression of thanksgiving, of gratitude for God's presence, of trust in God's benevolence. Augustine of Hippo, writing in the fifth century with his usual concern for sin and judgement, wrote, "The very same One whose face in wrath we wish to flee from. For what followeth? 'Even thither shall Thy hand conduct me, and Thy right hand lead me' (ver. 10). This let us meditate on, beloved brethren, let this be our hope, this our consolation."

Let this be our hope, this our consolation.

To be honest, I'm not sure how we're getting through these strange times. I don't say unprecedented, because this is **not** the first time human beings have suffered and died as a result of an uncontrolled pandemic. We mostly hear about the bubonic plague that devastated Central Asia and Europe in the 6th and the 14th centuries. Hawai'i, however, suffered a series of pandemics that, proportionately, were worse. The 14th century bubonic plague is estimated to have killed a third of the European population. In 1829, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission teacher Levi Chamberlain wrote, "There have been two seasons of destructive sickness, both within the period of thirty years, by which, according to the account of the natives, more than one half of the population of the island was swept away. The united testimony of all of whom I have ever made any inquiry respecting the sickness, has been that, 'Greater was the number of the dead, than of the living.'"

May we take steps to preserve ourselves, and may God guide and protect us, from any such thing happening again.

The time will come, I'm sure, when I'll get fidgety with God's presence. The time will come when I'll get tired of thinking carefully about my actions, when I'll want to let my thoughts run wild, when I'll want to test that assertion that there's nowhere I can go and be free of God's present, inspecting, and critical Spirit. Yes. That day will come.

Right now, though, I really want to be where that Psalmist was thousands of years ago. I want to be in that place where the stresses and the traumas and the suffering is behind me. I want to be ready to sing thanksgivings before I even mention what I'm singing thanksgivings about. I want to be so filled with gratitude that I nearly forget the struggles I've been through.

I am not there.

But I am aware that God's spirit is constantly with me and with us. I am aware that fleeing from God's Spirit not only won't work, it's something I don't want to do. I am aware that God's Spirit is so much of what has sustained me these last few months, and that God's Spirit will be so much of what sustains me in the months to come.

I am aware that I can take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, and there I will find God just the same as where I'd started. There I will find God's hand to lead me, and God's embrace to hold me fast. There I will find the comfort I've longed for, the hope I've clung to, the renewal I've prayed for.

There, remember, is everywhere. There is there. There is here.

These are the farthest limits of the sea, right here, right now, and God is here to care and to bless.

Amen.