

Why Fish Jump

Psalm 65:1, 9-13 *The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy....*

1 Peter 1:3-9 *...and even though you do not see him now,
you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable
and glorious joy....*

One morning while we were at Holden Beach, N.C., on vacation, I was finishing my devotions when Kaye alerted me to the action in the canal behind our rented house. The fish were jumping like crazy, she said, so maybe I should grab my fishing pole and head out there. Soon I was out on the dock, casting out into the smooth and quiet water of the canal. Now and then fish would leap out of the water, their sides flashing white in the morning sunlight, then hit the water with a flop and splash. I have watched fish jump for many years. In the mornings or evenings, they rise from the ponds or rivers or lakes, softly breaking the quietness with their flopping and splashing. It is so ordinary a thing that one doesn't give it much thought. On this particular morning, however, the thing caught the attention of my soul.

Why do fish leap out of the water? I am sure that some scientist or weathered old angler has a reasonable explanation. However, that doesn't interest me, for I have my understanding, a meaning that opened up for me that morning. Maybe this is how "myth" is born, for "myth" has more to do with meaning than explanation. For my money, we have too much "explanation" these days and too little meaning. We seem to know how everything "works," what makes everything tick. But we are bored and empty and destructive for all this so-called knowledge. Give me mystery. Give me meaning and wonder. Take the moon, for instance. It is the wonder-filled subject of countless *haiku* poems and a central image for what the Buddhist wants to teach about inner stillness and the experience of "emptiness" that reveals our connectedness to everything in the universe. You can explain that the light of the moon is not its own, how the sun's light interacts with the peculiar kind of dust on the moon's surface. You can map and name the crevasses and mountain ranges that give the moon its "face." You can land a machine on the moon, get out of it, and bounce around. You can absurdly stick a nation's flag in the moon's dust, as though the moon or the endless universe cares a whit about our petty nationalism. But once you've done all that, the moon has a way of snapping right back into mystery. In the end, its "myth" is more real, more meaningful than its explanation. That's the way it was for me that morning of the jumping fish.

Western philosophers, theologians, and spiritual experts have never attributed to non-human creatures anything like a "soul," with the exception of Francis of Assisi, perhaps. We humans assume that we alone have consciousness or awareness, that fish, rocks, trees, and such are just there, living without knowing that they are living, doing what they are programmed to do by God or nature. Psalm 8 says that humans are created a "little lower than God" and are given "dominion" over the rest of creation. But this doesn't mean that we are better than or separate from the rest of creation. Genesis 1 gives a fuller view, that there is this unfolding fabric of creation. The human creature is not created first but last, and set within the context of the rest of creation. We humans live in a shared creational reality. There is more in-commonness and interconnection than separateness. In fact, there is no separateness.

The psalms picture the whole creation responding to God, the Creator.

*The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,*

*the meadows clothes themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy. (Ps.65.12-13)*

*Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
before the Lord. (Ps. 96.12)*

*Praise the Lord from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling God's command! (Ps. 148.7-8)*

Isaiah 55 shows us all creation rejoicing right along with human beings at the life-giving bounty of God's redeeming love:

*For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. (55:12)*

We, in unison with all the creation, are made to respond to God. Not at the surface level, but deep in our souls. There is in the depths of all creatures, human and non-human, awareness of life and of the source of life. On that morning, I knew that the fish were jumping for joy. Their thrusts out of their watery world and into the morning air were the impulses of joy. They leaped for no other reason than some rush of life's adrenaline, a surge of energy coming from the mere joy of being alive.

What about joy in my own life? I've experienced moments of joy and the kind of joy that persists even in the midst of joyless circumstances. Not always but enough to know now that joy is crucial to life and faith. Looking back through the years, joy was never a hallmark of the particular strain of Protestant Christianity in which I grew up. Oh, the right words were said about joy that comes from our faith in Christ or from God's unconditional love for us. But somehow the words seldom rang true, never seemed authentic. And the more "evangelical" expressions of joy through emotionalism never had any appeal for me. There seemed to be something contrived about them.

My sense of joy developed largely through music and certain writers, most of them non-Christian or peripherally Christian. Like Thoreau. Or the poet Jane Kenyon. I came to prefer the atheist Albert Camus' passion for life, even with its counterpoint of despair, to the tepid stabs at joy by the church and its spokespersons. The sense I got was that we mustn't take joy too seriously because it might lead to all sorts of uncontrollable things! We should only be concerned with moral and ethical decision-making. There was a spiritual heaviness that resulted from an overemphasis on doing the right things, thinking the right thoughts, and becoming the right sorts of people. Not much room for joy in that! I often find this same gloominess these days in all sectors of Christianity, whether conservative or liberal, mainstream or radical. There seems to be something suspect about joy, that experiences of joy are best kept to oneself. Otherwise one will not be taken seriously, and will be seen as drifting into escapism, irrelevance, and superficiality.

Joy is at the heart of Christian faith and life. Not a joy that ignores evil or avoids looking at the suffering of the world. But a joy that comes from a deeper place, where we know our relatedness to all creation, where we know that our lives are rooted in what is eternal. It is the joy of discovering the kingdom of God so very near to us and even within us, prompting us to go and sell everything to possess it (Matt. 13:44). We have the joy of living life as it is truly meant to be, in a loving relationship with God, others, and ourselves, in spite of the mess the world is in. In John's gospel, Jesus asks his

disciples to dwell with each other in the very love of God. “I have said these things to you,” says Jesus, “so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete (Jn. 15:10-11).” The deep, unshakable joy of dwelling in the love of God, with Christ and with one another.

Without this joy in us, individually and together as Christ’s community, there is something essential missing. We may do great things. We may speak great truth. We may excel in spiritual practices. But if we are not touching the wellspring of joy that comes from God’s creating, sustaining, and saving love, then we will come across only as morose moralists. Worse, we will plod through life, day after day, coming to the end of our days never having touched and cherished the joy of life, the joy of being part of God’s creation, and the joy of tasting moment by moment the goodness of God that runs deeper than the trials, pains, and evils of life.

This kind of joy is not superficial happiness. It is simply not tied to circumstances. It does not depend upon everything going right or smoothly or successfully. This kind of joy is given us even as we increase our awareness of and response to the tremendous suffering, injustice, and evil in the world. It is not an escape or avoidance. It is the very connection with God that keeps us vital and hopeful as we confront the tremendous needs of the world and the struggles of our own lives.

How can I be joyful when there is such great suffering and injustice? The better question is how can I NOT be joyful? Jesus was the manifestation of the power of a love that overcomes the world. “Fear not,” says Jesus in John’s gospel, “I have overcome the world.” If we are responding to the great needs and untruths in the world only out of our guilt or outrage, we offer nothing of help and will only get lost in our own anger, frustration, and despair. But if we are responding to Christ’s call to give our lives for the sake of the world, with the joy of God’s salvation in our souls, then we share with others something far more life giving than our own little efforts and energies.

I have seen this joy from time to time in the lives of others. People in Botswana, Lesotho, and South Africa, themselves living with HIV/AIDS, working against overwhelming odds to bring comfort, relief, and hope. Able to burst into song and dance, able to laugh and praise. People struggling with in poverty and deprivation, yet whose eyes sparkle and whose spirits are somehow bright and unshrivelled by the circumstances of their lives. People living through the devastation of illness or the increasing debilitations of aging, yet are in touch with something so deep and real that they can yet say, “God is so good.” They bear witness to the truth of Paul’s words: “Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day (2 Cor. 4:16).” People who are able to take joy in the smallest of things—a flower, a drink of water, a breath, a poem, a song, a child’s wonder—and hold that joy up against every destructive thing the world can dish out.

Why do fish jump? For the same reason that the creation itself claps, dances, and sings praises. There is a deep current of life that runs through all creation and our own lives, coming from and connecting us to God. When we touch it, nothing on the surface can touch us. The circumstances of life are seen as waves that rise and fall on the surface of the sea. The waves may seem and may well be fearful. The psalms are also full of such references. The psalmist cries out to God out of fear that the waters will obliterate and wash away. But always there is that seeking of trust in God, a touching of the depths of life beneath the present peril and turmoil. When we touch those depths in awareness of God, we become more peaceful, more grateful, and better instruments of God’s loving purposes.

Why do fish jump? For joy.