

## As a Strong Mountain

Psalm 30 *Weeping may linger for the night,  
but joy comes with the morning.*

One of my favorite movies as a kid was “Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea,” Disney’s version of the H.G. Wells novel. James Mason, Peter Lorre, and a young Kirk Douglas singing...it didn’t get any better than that! My imagination was captured by Captain Nemo and his desire to live deep in the sea, away from all the storm and tumult on the surface--the insanity of war and nationalism and cruelty. He wanted to stay at the bottom of the sea where there was peace, tranquility, and all the wonders and beauty of life he had discovered there. Of course, by the end of the movie, though you had great sympathy for Nemo’s dream—or obsession—you realized that we cannot escape life on the surface. We cannot withdraw to a place above or below it all, where we are untouched by things that bring sorrow, hurt, disappointment, and loss.

To be a human being, as God created us, means to live fully the life God has given us, with all its joys and hurts, challenges and disappointments. It means to live as part of the human family, not apart from it. There is no escape from life and all its hard experiences, as well as things that bring us delight and joy. It is like the psalm says—sometimes we have tears that last all night long, and we wonder if they will ever dry up, if we will ever again feel joy or hope. And then joy returns, rising in our hearts like the sun in the morning. Or as the African American spiritual says it so simply: *Sometimes I’m up, sometimes I’m down.* When we are in the depths of distress, we wonder when healing will come, if God will ever touch us again with hope or comfort or peace. And when we feel happiness, joy, or delight, we want it to last forever. When the psalm says that weeping may linger through the night, but joy comes in the morning, this is in one way a simple statement of the way things are. Our painful experiences seem to last forever, but there is always the promise of a breakthrough into joy once again. Our experiences and feelings come and go, rise and fall.

What I have been learning, however, is that we can live in both the rising and falling of the waves, and deep beneath them in quiet peacefulness and solidity. Both dimensions are a part of our lives as spiritual human beings.

Three years ago, we went through with the L’Arche community the great sadness of Vince Dibattista’s sudden death. Vince was Home Life Coordinator, and he had brought much experience, energy, and love with him to the newly-formed community here. He collapsed at the L’Arche house on Superbowl Sunday, and was suddenly gone. I drove over to the L’Arche home feeling the way you feel when something like that has happened and you wonder what in the world you are going to say or do to be of some help. When I arrived, I found in the house a quiet atmosphere that was deep and rich with suffering and caring, both at the same time. Paul was there, simply sitting first here and then there, moving from one person to another as he felt there was a need. Others were doing the same. One who was weeping was being accompanied by one whose tears had ebbed for the moment. Mark was quietly going here and there, shock and grief keeping a constant wetness in his eyes, still giving himself to everyone. Others were in the kitchen just keeping things clean and orderly. It is helpful to have someone simply doing the ordinary things like that, the normal amidst the abnormal. Genevieve was sitting quietly at Jane’s bedside, a gentle yet firm presence for Jane in her grief. A candle burned with a steady, warm flame on a table in the living room, surrounded by a few chairs for those who might wish just to sit and let the light soothe them. There were these intense human emotions and yet underneath and within them something else, an unseen yet solid Presence.

We live on the surface where the waves of emotions rise and fall and sometimes feel as though they will overwhelm us. Yet we do also live below the surface, as it were, able to touch the quiet, peaceful deeps where we are grounded in God. To be fully human is to experience both dimensions of our spirit—the emotions and feelings that come with life’s experiences, and the deep, central part of us that opens to God, who Paul Tillich called the “Ground of Being.” The spiritual life has to do with both our tears and joys, and what the psalmist points to when he says that God had made him a strong mountain.

Now, I know that the psalmist was saying something a little different from what I want to say. The psalmist expresses a popular view that when your life is good in a material or physical way—economic abundance and sound health—God’s favor is upon you. However, when things do not go well, it means that God has somehow withdrawn divine presence and favor. That view of our relationship with God still persists. Nationalism says, “Look at all the blessings we have—wealth, prosperity, and so forth. God has surely blessed us and is on our side!” Wounded spirituality says, “I must be a terrible person for this to be happening to me. God must hate me!” Things had gone well for the psalmist, so in his prosperity he said, “I shall never be moved.” Life is good and it’s clear sailing. God had established him “as a strong mountain.” But then God’s face was hidden and things fell apart.

I am saying that God establishes us as a strong mountain at all times. The most common description of God in Hebrew Scriptures is *hesed*, steadfast love, love that never goes away. If God's love seems to have gone away, it is only because our experiences have become so overwhelming that we lose sight of God's love, get out of touch with it. In Jesus, we know of God's full and complete presence with us as human beings, never to be taken away. We call it Grace, the gift of God's unconditional love toward those whom God has made and seeks always to draw into an intimate relationship of faith, of trustful living.

There is a wonderful story from Buddhism about the night of Siddhartha Gautama's enlightenment. The former prince, now spiritual seeker, after years of trying one severe practice after another, had vowed to sit beneath the bodhi tree near what is now Benares, India, until he achieved full awakening. As Siddhartha struggled with all the things we struggle with in our spirits, Mara, the Buddhist counterpart to Satan the tempter, shows up. Mara begins to try and eat away at the Buddha's confidence and effort with some spiritual trash talk. "Who do you think you are to think you can achieve enlightenment?" "You will give it up, you'll see." "You're just kidding yourself." During the worst of Mara's assaults, the Buddha-to-be simply reached down his hand and touched the earth. He touched the earth as a sign and a source of his strength and solidity. With this, Mara was defeated, and soon, as the morning star arose, Siddhartha became a fully awakened human being, a *buddha*.

This story is remarkably similar to the story of Jesus' testing in the wilderness. God's spirit drives Jesus out into the desert to be tested. Satan shows up and tries to shake Jesus' confidence and faith in God. "IF you are God's son, turn these stones into bread." "IF you have this relationship with God, jump off this high pinnacle of the temple and see if God will send angels to save you." "Look at the world of power and wealth. I can give it all to you if you will worship me instead of God." Jesus in each case touches his relationship with God, as Siddhartha touched the earth, and finds the solidity and strength to resist what is false.

Our emotional life, the tears and joys, are part of our essence as human beings. It is the way we are made. These are our responses to life, responses that teach us sympathy, compassion, a desire for just relationships, and forgiveness. These are the waves on the sea, sometimes rising to the heights, sometimes plunging down, and yet part of the ocean deeps, the untroubled and peaceful waters below. We are also made to be strong mountains. This is not the kind of strength promoted in our macho, militaristic, and competition-addicted culture. It is the strength that comes from touching our connectedness to God, the Source or Ground of our Being, the steadfast love of God.

Our inward journey involves working at both levels. Embracing, not rejecting or fearing, our emotions and feelings. Accepting them non-judgmentally and looking into them to gain self-understanding and awareness of what our responses to life are teaching us, about ourselves and the world. Such embracing, accepting, and understanding of our emotions and responses can happen because we are also made to be strong mountains. We can sit in prayer, meditation, and reflection, looking at our inner life without fear, because we participate at the core of our being in God, in steadfast love itself. Growth in our spiritual lives comes as we find, each in our own way, how to do this. It takes practice or discipline. Here is where I prefer the word practice over discipline. It simply means we keep trying it, keep working at it, until little by little our capacity to sit quietly and look compassionately and insightfully at ourselves and our inner life becomes more developed. It is not something foreign to us that we have to achieve. It is who we really are but have neglected or avoided for a long time. It just takes practice and a willingness to make it important in our lives for the sake of ourselves and others.

When I first began to work with silence, contemplation, meditation, and prayer, my inner self felt very small and cramped. The world around me, including people, seemed at times overwhelming. My responses of fear or anger or anxiety were quite significant and sometimes debilitating. Over time, as I gradually learned for myself this way of what we call the inward journey, I noticed that the balance had begun to shift. There was more room, you might say, in my spirit, my soul, whatever you call that central or core part of us. And the world was losing its fearfulness. I still, of course, felt anger or fear or anxiousness, but I had begun to know how to accept these feelings without trying to drive them away or ignore them or berate myself for having them. I was getting better able to look into them in order to gain insight and understanding. This was happening because I was, at the same time, learning how to sit or walk peacefully, breathing mindfully, and looking at myself and the world with calmer eyes. I was learning how to be both the waves and the mountain.

All of this has to do with how we are able to live, truly live, in this world as real human beings the way God made us to live. We are made up of hope and fear, healing and hurting, peacefulness and anger. The spiritual life is not to eradicate these but to accept them and discover in them openings to compassion, justice, and love. We are also made to be strong mountains, even in the midst of the tears that last all night and the joys that rise like the sun in the morning. I saw all of this that night in the L'Arche community. Tears flowing through the night. Glimpses of joy here and there, hints of a sunrise to come. And yet in all of that, people being like strong mountains within themselves and for one another. God was in the tears and the dawning joys, and in the strength like mountains. And I think that is what that old spiritual was saying, too, arising as it did out of unbearable suffering of an enslaved people, yet a people whose souls were like mountains. *Sometimes I up, sometimes I'm down. Oh yes, Lord! But still my soul feels heavenly bound. Oh yes, Lord!*