

February 12, 2012 / Season after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

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,” Walt Disney’s 1954 version of the Jules Verne novel. James Mason, Peter Lorre, and a young Kirk Douglas singing and playing the ukulele ... it doesn't get much better than that! I was fascinated by Captain Nemo(Mason) and his armored, monster-like submarine *Nautilus*. I identified with Nemo's 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. At the bottom of the sea there was peace, tranquility, and all the wonders and beauty of life he alone had discovered there. By the end of the movie, though, you realized that Nemo’s dream had become a destructive obsession, and 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 true human being means living fully the life God has given us, with its joys and hurts, challenges and disappointments, gains and losses. As Psalm 30 says, sometimes we have tears that last all night long, and we wonder if we will ever again know joy or hope. And then joy returns, rising in our hearts like the sun in the morning. 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 if God will ever touch us again with hope or comfort or peace. When we feel happiness, joy, or delight, we want it to last forever. 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. I

think this is what Jesus meant in John's gospel when he told the disciples he was leaving them with a peace that would enable them to remain in the world as his community. Working with our spiritual lives has to do with growing in our capacity to be deeply at peace even in the midst of the turmoils of life around us and within us.

Six years ago, we shared 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.

Entering the house, I found a quiet atmosphere that was deep and rich with suffering and caring, both at the same time. I remember Paul Henderson and Mark Russell moving quietly from one person to another as they felt there was a need. Genevieve Starbuck was at Jane Tatom's bedside, a gentle, faithful presence for Jane in her grief. Other assistants and core members were doing the same. One who was weeping was accompanied by one whose tears had ebbed for the moment. Others were in the kitchen just keeping things clean and orderly, the normal amidst the abnormal. A candle burned steady and warm on a table in the living room, a few chairs placed nearby for those who might wish to sit and let the light comfort them. There were these intense emotions of sadness, shock, and grief, and yet underneath and within them something else, an unseen yet solid Presence manifesting in the lives of persons.

We live on the surface where the waves rise and fall, and sometimes feel overwhelming. Yet we also live below the surface, able to touch the depths, the center, where we are grounded in God. To be fully human is to know both dimensions—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 the solidity that comes from touching our relationship with God.

We can be like a strong mountain, an image the palmist uses. The psalmist was saying something a little different from what I want to say. The psalmist shared a view that when your life is good in a material or physical way, God's favor is upon you. However, when things do not go well, it means that God has somehow withdrawn divine presence and favor, has "hidden his face". That view still persists in places. 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!" When the psalmist had prosperity, he said, "God had established me 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, whenever we open ourselves to it. 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 because our experiences have so overwhelmed us that we lose touch with it. Being established as a strong mountain, or having solidity, comes from rooting and grounding ourselves daily in God, who is steadfast love.

There is a wonderful story from Buddhism about Siddhartha Gautama's enlightenment. The former prince, now spiritual seeker, after years of trying one severe practice after another, vowed to sit beneath a *bodhi* tree until he achieved full awakening. Through the night Siddhartha struggled with all the things we struggle with in our spirits. Mara, the Buddhist counterpart to Satan the tempter, shows up. Mara tries to undermine Siddhartha's confidence and effort with some spiritual trash talk. "Who are you 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 reached down his hand and touched the earth, calling upon the earth to bear witness to his right to be a fully awakened human being. Touching the earth was a sign and a source of his solidity. With this, Mara was defeated, and, as the morning star

arose, Siddhartha became fully awakened, a *buddha*.

This story is remarkably similar to that of Jesus' testing in the wilderness. God's spirit drives Jesus out into the desert to be tested. Satan shows up with some trash talk of his own. "IF you are God's son, turn these stones into bread." "IF you have this relationship with God, jump off this 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 and distracting.

Our inward journey involves working at both levels. We embrace our emotions, our responses to our experiences. We accept them non-judgmentally and look into them with compassion to gain self-understanding and awareness. We open ourselves to what our experiences are teaching us. We can embrace, accept, and understand 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, who is steadfast love. Growth in our spiritual lives comes as we find, each in our own way, how to do this. It takes practice or discipline, and a commitment to work prayerfully each day with our own lives.

Our personal inward journey work is crucial to our desire to be in, and our commitment to, community. Just as we can experience and practice solidity personally, we can do so as a community. Our inward journey work helps us grow in real self-understanding and awareness, which creates in us the kind of humility that nourishes our ability to be in community. We are less judgmental, less prone to blame or lash out, more inclined to listen, to honor others and ourselves, to be open to God's spirit and less attached to our own opinions and ideas. And working with our own spiritual life on a daily basis enables us to be with others when they are suffering and struggling in a way that does not try to fix their problems but simply offers our solid, caring presence. We are able to support others in a way that helps them find their

own strength.

Being a community of God's steadfast love asks of us a willingness to be in community. This means we grow beyond seeing the community through the lens of what we want or need. Instead, we begin to see through the new lens of mutuality, of discovering and sharing our gifts as we acknowledge and affirm the gifts of others. It means a willingness to work through difficult experiences instead of creating divisions or withdrawing when we do not get our way. This willingness to be in community contributes to solidity. And in a community that is rooted in God's steadfast love, we can each find the freedom and support to grow fully into the persons God created us to be.

If we are to be a community of real peace, strength, healing, and right relationships, we must be committed to working with these things individually and together. Out of my experience with churches for forty years, and from observing other spiritual communities, I have seen that the amount and degree of distress and turmoil within a community is in direct proportion to the spiritual work going on or not going on in each member's life. When we are each doing the best we can working honestly and faithfully with our own lives and spirits, we grow and deepen in self-awareness and awareness of our life in God and with others. In this way, we contribute to the solidity of the community, and indeed the world. Our inward journey work is not just for our own sake, but for the sake of God's world.

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!*