

Last Year's Nest

Yale ISM Conference

June 2018

The Other Half of the Sky

“See? That’s the Big Dipper.
And the Little Dipper is over there.”

We watched the night sky together, Dad and I.
I longed to see what he saw—

Stories in the stars. Fiery folktales of
kings, queens and chameleons;

a lizard, a lynx, and a lion.
Celestial chronicles scripted onto

a black velvet picture book.
I longed to read the stars where

a deranged dragonfish hurtles
toward the earth from two million

miles away. Which superhero
will save us? I asked

my dad as he tucked me and
my beagle Hunter into our bed:

“And what is a ‘lesser dog’ by the way?”
Even now the astronomical plot eludes

me. Eludes us—if we are wise to
perceive: star-storying? A singular distillation

of collective imagination. Parabolic patterns
premised on where our lives are planted.

Forever made mystical, magical even,
by remembering—when on a clear night

we think we can see forever? The star
so blazing brilliant to our naked eye

burned out yesterday, and always—always—
half the sky is hidden away beneath our feet.

I think the problems we face today are anamnestic problems—from anamnesis—“in remembrance.” Anamnestic thinking isn’t just about nostalgic remembering of past events. In fact, anamnestic thinking isn’t thinking at all. Anamnesis involves a kind of wrinkle in time. When we “do remembrance” at the communion table, past, present and future merge and mingle together in the breaking and eating of the bread and the pouring and drinking of the wine. This is a powerful and prophetic reality—that through table anamnesis, we lean into the past to hear all of its voices and stories, even those that over the years have been silenced or struck down. We also lean toward the future to imagine the stories and truths that are unfolding as we move toward each new moment. What can happen, I wonder, when the stories of our ancestors speak their wisdom in all of its full-voiced and full-bodied truth to our future children?

Indeed, this kind of remembering—anamnesis—lives in our bones—in the marrow of our existence—in our lifeblood. And a lot of times we forget to remember—we are dust—we will return to dust. Or is it that we are stardust—to stardust we shall return? While we are here—our bones and muscles walking and working on this good earth? We have to find a way to be brave—to create brave spaces for people encounter their deepest fears and the grace of God and each other. We have to find a way for people to do anamnesis in all of its terrifying and hope-inspiring fullness.

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I rescued an empty nest the other day. In the rain. I don’t know why I rescued the nest. No bird lives in it. It was last year’s nest.

I was in my car, pulling out of the driveway to head somewhere when I saw the nest in the middle of the road in front of my house. Instead of driving by or driving over it, I stopped the car, stepped out into the springtime deluge, and hurried over to it, looking up and down the street for other cars (and for the eyes of curious neighbors) as I went.

The nest was beautiful, perfect in its construction, with a singular strand of sapphire yarn woven into its middle. I picked up the nest. It was fragile and soggy. And since I was now dripping from the rain and late for where I was headed, I laid the nest at the base of a tree in the sidewalk buffer and dashed back to my car.

Sometimes I think I spend far too much time rescuing last year’s nests. Perhaps we all do. How do we decide, after all, how much energy to give to preserving last year’s architectural delights, and how much to use building for this year and the future?

The nest reminded me of how, in Christian traditions, we are discovering again the ways in which early believers became community and worshiped together. Some of these discoveries serve as powerful evidence of the grace-filled power of God's gospel. But we still have work to do. Last year's nests were not always hospitable places. Much about the Gospel's justice-making still eludes us as we hold on with too much caution and fear to nests that are emptying if not already abandoned.

I photographed my rescued nest. I noticed a bright piece of sapphire yarn woven into the twigs. The next day I decided to take a few more photos of it. But the nest was no longer where I had left it. Perhaps another critter took it. Then I spotted the nest about halfway up the sidewalk toward my house. Perhaps the wind had blown it there.

The next day the nest was even closer to the house. I noticed that it was smaller, too.

That's when I realized that this year's birds were using bits and pieces of last year's nest to build for this spring season.

Verses from an ancient text, Ezekiel 17, came to mind as I reflected on last year's nest: "Under that tree every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind."

I like the idea of a tree full of every kind of nest. Doesn't God invite all of us to nest in God's tree? Isn't this invitation the way God sustains the earth and communities of faith? And, if that is true, might it not also be true that a bit of sapphire yarn, and a few choice twigs from last year's nest, are just what are needed to remind present and future nestlings of the gifts and challenges of the past, and to make the nests we are now building places we can call home?

I gathered some "twigs" from our days together here—some words and wisdom and images—to create an ephemeral poem, a nest of words (if you will) to help us do anamnesis about our time together. May we find wisdom in what we have shared and carry it with us as we go.

we live on a tiny rock
in a
grave
situation

a ghost river in the desert
a sentence trailing off
or maybe just a
word
made flesh—
fleeting flesh
made

matter

why don't we see
hear
believe

it's as plain as the nose on your face
but who can see her own face
except in a glass--dimly—
in the image of
the face of the earth
can see the man in the moon
who is really a woman I am sure
but all of us—except children
--the ones who are still free--
we have lost our vision--
does the face of the earth
have ears too
to hear the groaning?
a mouth?
dimples even
like my niece?
i buy her teddy bears
ice cream
roller coaster rides
do anything
for a smile
does the face of the earth
smile?

we are a tiny rock
in a grave situation

let's plow the earth and scatter
the seeds upon the ground

why don't we see
hear
believe
look under the hood
turn our earth-plowing
into politics plowing
disturb
disrupt

disintegrate
the ground
of the powers
that come in the dead
of night
shall we kill them, Father?
shall we?
no
make dinner for them instead
for you see

why don't we see

past present and future meet
in the pentachromatic
eyes of a dove
its wings splitting the air
in its mouth
a twisted myrrh branch
weeping hardened tears
she has double helix vision
the laughing
singing
mourning
dove

the soil of the planet
needs our roots
even if we cannot stay
very long—
we are a tiny rock
in a grave
situation

who will roll away the rock for us?

but---
we know—if we remember—
about a grave that
could not
cannot hold back
life
that arises
in spite of it all

between a rock and hard place

God, open our eyes to see
our ears to hear
our hearts to believe