

20 0712 Sermon Personal Dark
By Carolyn West

I'd like to begin something today: A sermon in two parts. Today we begin with part one. Next week, on July 19, we'll move ahead into part two.

As Above, So Below: 1. Personal Dark

Let me start with a few visuals:

Wile E. Coyote is laying yet another trap for the Road Runner in desert landscape. He's on top of one of the mesas round about the desert, because from the mesa he can see much farther. In fact, Wile E. Coyote even has a pair of binoculars handy to scope out his prey. And through the binoculars, what he's after looks like it's right next to him.

He carefully lays his trap there on the mesa. As he is doing so, he realizes that in fact the Road Runner is even closer than he imagined! He hears the familiar "Beep! Beep!" and feels the wheel wind of breeze as Road Runner whizzes past him.

Darn it! Trap not yet set and there he goes! Wile E. Coyote takes off at a run. Road Runner is heading straight for the edge of the cliff, but Wile E. Coyote only has eyes for Road Runner. But when Road Runner takes a hard-left turn just before the edge of the Mesa, Coyote's eyes follow the bird, but the momentum of his body keeps running straight off the Mesa into empty air.

Coyote turns and looks at us, the viewer, just before gravity ...

Created decades later, another anti-hero, Indiana Jones, is trying to save not only the Holy Grail from the clutches of the Nazis, but also his father's life. The dastardly enemy leader knows Indy will risk anything to save his father. Armed with his peculiar combination of bravado and archaeology, as well as his father's book of cryptic symbols and clues, Indiana climbs the rough stone wall towards his goal. The vicious Nazis are gaining on him from behind.

He comes to a window in the solid rock cliff. When he steps through the window, he finds himself on a narrow ledge—narrower than his boot soles—far, far above a steep ravine. Just ahead of him is the door he must enter to succeed in his quest, but to get there, he must leap across a deep chasm that is far too easy to fall into. It's all rock, and the fall will kill him.

Indy looks at the cartoon pictures in his father's book. He looks down at the chasm. "It's a leap of faith," he says to himself. Then carefully, he puts a foot forward and steps down into the chasm. But rather than falling, his foot finds a bridge; a narrow—but sturdy—stone bridge that was invisible until he stepped onto it.

And now a story written centuries before either of the first two, and thousands of miles away, in Japan.

A man is running, running for his life from a hungry tiger. It seems that the harder the man tries to escape, the faster the tiger runs. Soon the man comes to the edge of a cliff. He can't go any farther

without falling into the valley below, where two other tigers have sensed the chase above. The man sees them circle below, while the first tiger is gaining on him.

Under his feet, the clumps of earth he stands on give way, and the man starts to fall. But his loose shirt has snagged on an old, dry tree root that will only hold him for a minute or two before breaking with his weight.

Hanging there, tigers below; tigers behind him the man sees one red, ripe strawberry growing from a stem beside him. He picks it and pops it in his mouth. How sweet it tastes.

Quick hint: Don't try to interpret these vignettes. They are like the pictures in Indiana Jones' book. They don't instruct. They suggest. Allow yourself to be suspended.

Of course we are suspended in our own time. Coronavirus. The domino fall of the economy. The politics of hate coming from people in high office, and low morals. The truth about brutal inequity in our society, that too many of us could not really see fully.

We are all of us three steps off the cliffside. What will catch us? Tigers? A bridge? Or the laws of gravity, that, like rain fall, tug equally on the righteous and the unrighteous? Yeah, probably gravity.

I go round and around with my speculation about what is to come in the next few months, but the world changes, as the weeks unfold before us. I have vivid dreams about falling—falling down, falling ill, falling forever. I don't know when, where, how.

Two weeks ago, a number of civic institutions were issuing guidelines for reopening, our churches, schools, and businesses. Northbrae got guidelines from our health department for reopening the chapel and Haver Hall. We are hearing from schools, universities, and businesses around California. We hear them from our doctors and bank officials about how to enter, do our business, and leave safely. It looked like many parts of our communities were going to reopen. Then began a stuttered halt when we realized — the hard way — that we are not even out of the first wave of infection.

It's not just our pandemic response that is slow and full of backward steps. Just yesterday I read about a family with children biking home on Sacramento Street in Berkeley who were berated by racial slurs from a passing car. In Berkeley! By now we should know that this is not new. Most of us have not been paying attention

Our society is suspended between now and the November election—Oh! and the stress of knowing that the election is being hacked again. Still. Yeah, you might say we're still in the first wave of Russian interference. We can't even be sure that everyone will get to cast their vote, fair and free. We are suspended between now and a vaccine, not knowing if enough citizens will accept it to make for herd immunity.

The stress of this not knowing is getting to me. It's causing me to relive other times in my life, when I felt uncertain. You too? Each of us has been in situations that leave us up in the air. Between jobs, or waiting for college acceptance letters. After a hip replacement or a rotator cuff surgery. Waiting through the necessary assault of chemo when a cancer is found. Or caring for a loved one in hospice.

If we go deeper into our beings, we all have known times when the darkness of uncertainty peels away any sense of joy or hope. Sometimes an event drives us off the mesa. Sometimes it's doubt. Doubt in someone we love. Doubt in our own goodness. Doubt in God. Doubt that there is God. Or that what we call God would bother with us in the first place.

Many Western tradition call this the dark night of the soul, the wrenching uncertainty about how and why we are living. Eastern traditions sometimes call it awaking from samsara, the infinite attachment and rebirth into our worlds of sorrows. Sometimes this experience is called the void, an emptiness that is not just dark but also hollow.

(Mystics and saints from all traditions are cheering for us, you know, like a parent smiles when they see adolescence pimples break out on their son or daughter. This is a stage in growth towards maturity. This is our spiritual growing up. Let's awaken to our role in bringing about the Beloved Community.

The three sayings from the Gospel of Thomas which Ron read as our scripture this morning are not the most hope-filled inspiring verses I could have chosen. But they are honest. These ancient sayings are decidedly lacking in symbolic language, and instead teach us with immediacy.

38. Jesus said, "Often you have desired to hear these sayings that I am speaking to you, and you have no one else from whom to hear them. There will be days when you will seek me and you will not find me.

There is no religion that is without doubt. Not Judaism or Christianity, or Hinduism or Buddhism, or any faith at any time that human beings have held deep in their heart and soul. Doubt is not the opposite of faith, but a door into something deeper.

These days and years we share that tugs at the protecting veil at almost every part of our world. We can't go on ignoring the open truth of our fragility. With the coronavirus, we can no longer believe that we are completely independent from our neighbors. We grapple every day with the fact that we are mortal, and that our loved ones are vulnerable and that if we don't act with care, our actions can cause calamity. With the economy tanking we must acknowledge that we have allowed social safety nets to erode; we have allowed some people to prosper while others can't make ends meet. With the fact of weaponized white privilege broadcast, we must open our eyes and hearts to what our black and brown kin have been pointing at for too long. With our federal government, and the partnerships we have with governments around the world frayed to the point of breaking; with our climate in crisis, how can we be sure of the world we are passing on to our children's children's children?

What we are seeing is not new. It is new that we don't turn away from it. Truth is, we reside in a world that is always shifting, and we don't know what's to come. Each thing revealed is part of the truth: it is all a dark night. Everything.

Can you see this as a relief? Let them drop, the delusions we carried for so long. Because when delusions drop, our inner strength and commitment to creating goodness can emerge.

91. They said to him, "Tell us who you are so that we may believe in you." He said to them, "You examine the face of heaven and earth, but you have not come to know the one who is in your presence, and you do not know how to examine this moment."

I find the Gospel of Thomas and today's three sayings to be transformative in a way that is too easily lost when the story gets carried along by miracles. Jesus' response to his disciples' wish to be caught up in belief is a call to attention: "Hey guys, belief carries you away. Look at me right here. Look at the moment we share, right now."

So is this true when we look at something as small as epidemiology, or as huge as international relationships. Something as small as the smile of a child, or as huge as the loss of a parent. We don't save the world through belief, but rather through a willingness to be at work in *this* world in *this* time with *these* companions. This is our time to restore, to heal, to create.

113. His disciples said to him, "When will the kingdom come?" "It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, 'Look, here it is,' or 'Look, there it is.' Rather, the father's kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it."

Thomas 113 is as if instead of teaching "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," he taught "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is." Full stop there. On Earth as it is.

There is nowhere else to go. This is where God's kingdom needs to be created. No supernatural being is on the way to save us. It's up to us. Each of us.

There has been an idea in philosophy for eons: As above, so below. Behind this idea is the drive to recreate the heavenly realm on earth. There is only one thing that Jesus describes as the kingdom: Love. Love for God and love for each other. This is not just a phrase in a prayer. It is action. How do we learn it?