

“Standing on Shaky Ground”

Sermon given by Molly Housh

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Last week I was sitting in the car with my mom, stopped at a light, when somehow the conversation turned to the state of the world. I think the conversation started with the supreme court, moved on into the war, through the tanking economy to the energy crisis, on to environmental destruction, and food and clean water shortages in many parts of the world. The conversation then progressed on to the rise of extremisms of all sorts, the cruelties done in the name of various Gods and ideals, and to the terror exacted upon us and exacted upon others by us. And I started to feel real panic rise to the surface from wherever in me I usually keep it suppressed. And I thought, this is just too much. There is just too much going wrong. The flood waters are rising, and I don't know what I can hold on to.

And then the light turned green, and I squashed all my panic and despair back where it came from, and I drove on. But a song lingered stuck in my head. It's a song I remember from my childhood, based on a poem by Shel Silverstein. If you can imagine the economy and the war and the energy crisis and environmental destruction and injustice as a giant, hungry snake, I think you'll see why I got stuck on this particular song. It goes...

Oh, I'm being swallowed

By a boa constrictor,
I'm being swallowed by a boa constrictor,
I'm being swallowed by a boa constrictor,
And I don't like it very much.

Oh, gee,

It's up to my knee.

Oh my,

It's up to my thigh.

Oh, fiddle,

It's up to my middle.

Oh, heck,

It's up to my neck.

Oh, dread,

It's upmmmmmmmmmmffffffffff...

You can probably see how I got there... flood waters rising, being slowly consumed by a giant snake.... all these metaphors work in expressing the same point. There is a bunch of terrible and overwhelming stuff happening in the world right now. And whenever the life-saving powers of psychological repression fail us for a moment, it can feel consuming, like the world, and all of us with it, are spinning madly out of control. A panic attack seems a reasonable response.

The thing is... there's nothing terribly new about this feeling. Even in the days of the Old Testament, enough people thought the world had become terrible and unsalvageable that they interpreted a huge flood as a necessary divine tool for wiping it all clean and starting over again. And every generation since the ancient Hebrews has had a similar response. The Christian tradition obviously has a rich

history of predicting the end of the world through a series of terrible events.

Secularly, writers and poets have concerned themselves with the same feeling.

William Butler Yeats wrote: "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." And then of course there is the colloquial lamentation: "This world's just goin to hell in a handbasket!" Yes indeed, there is nothing at all new about finding the world to be irretrievably damaged, and broken.

And if there is nothing new about feeling overwhelmed by state of the world and the problems surrounding you, there is certainly nothing new about feeling that you and the world around you are spinning out of control. Because, here's a hot tip; you are not in control. In fact, if you can name me one time in your life that you have been absolutely and 100% in control of yourself and your circumstances, I will eat... a boa constrictor. Life doesn't pause long enough for us to take complete control. It is already rushing forward to the next problem or triumph, the next failure or success. The ground is always shifting a little beneath us.

Speaking of shifting ground, I want to insert here a little factoid that you might not know. I spent my college years living in Arkansas, and I found out right before I moved away that a good chunk of the state, as well as portions of Missouri and Tennessee, lie directly on top of a huge fault line called the New Madrid fault, which is due, like a time bomb, for another giant quake in the next 10 to 100 years. When I found this out I thought, "My God! there could have been an earthquake at any minute, and I never even knew about this!"

But then of course, there could always be an earthquake of some sort. Every tiny aspect of our fragile lives is built on top of fault lines. In the life of our society, the fault lines of injustice, intolerance, and cruelty are constantly quaking, damaging or destroying the lives of the least fortunate among us. In our personal and emotional lives, every rumbling has the potential to tip us over the edge of a crevasse into the darkness of despair. Even in our physical lives, each tremor could be the one that sends us into helplessness and pain.

Truly we stand on shaky ground. And even in those rare times when the ground beneath us feels solid and sure, there are always shifts taking place far below. Even when our lives are moving slowly and surely in what we think is the right direction, their course might change at any moment. The poet Jane Kenyon captures this in her poem, "Otherwise"

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.

At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.

We always live with the specter of “Otherwise” hovering over us, in the midst of uncertainty. It’s not always the most comfortable way to exist. But look at it this way. The flip side of uncertainty is possibility. One cannot happen without the other. Nothing new could ever arise if everything remained eternally certain and always the same.

I don’t know the science about all this, so none of you go out hunting for fault lines on which to plan your gardens, but metaphorically, shaky ground is fertile ground. It is in the cracks that possibilities arise. In my imagination, a metaphorical

earthquake is kind of like a big plow. It stirs up the ground and releases all the nutrients that a plant will need to flourish. It's exactly the upheaval of the soil that makes new growth possible. Indeed, when things in our lives or our societies are all getting turned around and upside down, that is the time when we have the most opportunity for change, for trying out new options, for imagining new possibilities.

The last earthquake along the New Madrid fault occurred in 1812. It destroyed houses and trees. It drained some lakes, but it created new ones elsewhere. It actually managed to permanently change the course of the Mississippi River. If you go looking for it along the Tennessee/Arkansas state line, you can see where the Mississippi used to flow. With uncertainty comes possibility, and with that particular earthquake came a major shift in the landscape. The thing about standing on shaky ground is that the landscape around you always has potential for change, that you always have potential to change.

For every once and a while, from the quaking ground of poverty and intolerance and cruelty, justice can rise up. From the fault lines of our relationships with each other, love and compassion can and do rise up. In our personal lives, somehow still the rivers of sorrow can change course, and hope can bubble up like a spring, where there was none before.

Yes, hope can bubble up, and we need to be sure that it does, because possibility needs us to make it real. The world is overwhelming, and things are going wrong, and really, we have little to no control over it all. But still, we have no time for despair. We can be discouraged, sure, and disheartened. We will sometimes be tired

and weak and worn, and wondering whether we can take even another step. But despair keeps us from turning possibility into actual change, and we can't stay there. The earth doesn't have time for our despair. People crushed by injustice don't have time for our despair. Despair is a luxury that is not afforded to those doggedly working to survive.

It is a moral imperative, then, for us to find the faith and hope to keep us going, because boy is there a lot of work to be done. We need faith that the small things we are able to do will add up. We need faith that, if we start down a road with the intention to be whole in ourselves, and to be of service to the world, that road will lead us just where we need to be.

In a Newsweek interview about faith, senator Barack Obama said, "The more seriously you take the world and the more you find yourself struggling with good and evil and war and the great moral questions of the day, the more you have to fall back on some sort of north star. Or you get lost." To my eyes, that north star is faith; whether it be faith in God or some other divine force or faith in the guiding love that moves your own heart. And that north star is also hope; the wild and improbable hope that it's not too late. That it's never too late. It's the hope that we won't need to begin again, that the highest floodwaters will remain at bay, and we will recognize the humanity in each other all the same.

As a group of religious people with many beliefs, we share at least two things, and they are the will to work for change in the world and faith and hope in the guiding light of love. Love is the spirit that sustains our congregations. And the contribution

we have for the world is not only our hands and feet active in working for justice. It is also our voices, calling out for the spirit of love to prevail, even in the darkest hours. The contribution we have for the world is our resounding and lived hymn of love. And if we have songs of hope and love ringing in our hearts to share with the world, then how can we keep from singing?

But hope is not enough, and might not even be possible at all, without our deep connections to each other. We need each other for comfort in our own struggles and in our struggles together. We can't wait for things to get worse before we become generous with our kind words. We need each other for critical mass in shifting possibility to reality. We need each other to feed the hope that is hard to sustain alone. If we are to hold on to hope, then we must hold on to each other. Unitarian Universalist minister Wayne Arnason has often been known to leave his congregation with these words:

Take courage friends.

The way is often hard, the path is never clear,

And the stakes are very high.

Take courage.

For deep down there is another truth:

You are not alone.

Indeed, we are not alone, and we cannot afford to pretend that we are. Because as the flood waters rise, and believe me they will always rise, what can we do but stand together against the waves, and cling to each other, so that none are swept away?

The way is often hard, my friends, and the path is never clear. There will be tremors and mudslides and flashfloods and snakes waiting just around the bend to swallow you whole. But as the ground shifts beneath us, and the water swirls around us, let us still rise up, grab onto each other, and wade out into the world, carrying between us the incredible possibility for change in our songs of love.