

## Crocuses and Creeks in the Desert

Joyce Hollyday

Isaiah 35:1-2, 5-7, & 43:19

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A fisherman named Pablo pulled his small boat up to the pier in his village on the coast of Mexico. Joe, a retired businessman from the United States, happened to be there. He looked at the small catch in the bottom of Pablo's boat and asked him how long he had fished that day.

"A couple of hours," answered Pablo.

Joe said, "You know, if you worked harder, you could catch a lot more fish."

"I caught what I need to feed and support my family," responded Pablo.

"But what do you do with all the rest of your time?" Joe wanted to know.

Pablo said, "Well, I visit with my neighbors, play with my kids, take siestas with my wife. Every evening I walk into the village to play my guitar and have a drink with my friends. It's a good life."

Joe shook his head and said, "But if you caught more fish, then could buy a bigger boat and catch even more fish. Eventually you could buy your own fleet, and have your own company, and manage lots of people. If you work hard and stick with it, in about fifteen, twenty years, you'd be so rich, you could move to the United States and live in a big city. And—here's the best part—when you're ready, you could announce an IPO of your company's stock, sell it, and make millions!"

"And then what?" asked Pablo.

"Well," said Joe, "then you could afford to retire on the coast of Mexico, where you could spend your time visiting with your neighbors, playing with your grandkids, taking siestas with your wife, and walking to the village in the evenings to play your guitar and have a drink with your friends."

I share that story because I'm a little envious of the Pablos of the world—the ones who know that deep peace comes from living simply and enjoying what you have; who understand that their financial and social security in old age rests in the loving community of family and friends they've gathered around them through the years. Most of all, maybe, I envy their possession of clarity about what they can offer to the world.

This week I got my first "wisdom discount" at Earthfare. Turning sixty has prompted me to do some reviewing of my vocational choices over my lifetime. I've had the opportunity to reinvent my life a number of times—as journalist, activist, teacher, preacher, pastor, retreat leader, author.

My story mirrors somewhat the story of Circle of Mercy. We began in the living room of Kim Christman and Stan Dotson as a house church—which is actually what I thought when we started this thing that we would always be. Ken and Nancy apparently knew better.

Soon, we outgrew that space and moved to the parish hall at All Souls Cathedral. More people came, and children began to appear with their parents, and before long those children were teenagers. As we grew, we added more tasks and structures typically associated with churches—a Sunday school program and youth group, a church council and board of trustees, a mission partnership group and pastoral care team. We outgrew our space again and moved here to St. George's.

Nancy, Ken, and I began Circle of Mercy in Advent of 2001 as an experiment in church—with team leadership and very active lay participation; a strong calling to mission; a dual denominational affiliation with the Alliance of Baptists and the United Church of Christ. We embraced being a peace church, chose consciously to be open and affirming. Many of our members gravitated to the Circle bearing wounds from previous church experiences, and we

worked to create a space of welcome and healing. We've been committed from the beginning to being both Christ-centered and socially engaged with the world's hurts and injustices, offering support for the many endeavors of our members on behalf of transformation. We see the gospel as a good-news story.

We've wanted, since the beginning, to be a "different" sort of church. And to a large degree I think we've succeeded. But about a year and a half ago, a sense began to emerge among us that we were losing some vitality. We launched our "Imagining Mercy" process, ably shepherded by Mark Siler. We held a series of conversations—several, by design, without us pastors. For the past few months, the church council and the pastoral team have been pondering the many things that bubbled up in that process.

I wish I could say that clarity emerged and an obvious and well-marked path opened before us. But, honestly, it was a lot like our surveys on potlucks and Taize services. Some people feel strongly this way, and others feel equally strongly that way. And some aren't sure why we needed the process at all. But there seems to be a significant desire for some sort of change, and we're listening and trying to respond to that. All we can do at this juncture is make our best effort to move forward, in trust and hope.

Next Sunday afternoon at 3:30, there will be a time for the Circle to hear from the church council and the pastoral team about our vision for moving forward. But, with their encouragement, I want to share tonight one detail here, so that everyone can hear it together, sooner rather than later. On January 1<sup>st</sup>, Ken and I will step off of the pastoral team and no longer be employed by all of you. Ken will share more about his decision at the meeting next Sunday.

Circle of Mercy's "Imagining Mercy" process has coincided with my own process of discernment about how I want to spend this last leg of my earthly journey—whether it be ten years or thirty. For now, I'm taking a leave of absence from January through June 2015, re-evaluating then about whether to make this a permanent step.

I feel some deep sadness about this change for me, mixed with a bit of relief and a dose of anticipation about new things ahead. I helped to give birth to this church, and I intend to see it through and beyond its adolescence—just not as a paid pastor for now. All I ask is that, when I die, you affix a plaque to the barn out at Swan Mountain Farm with my name on it. I consider my best contribution to this faith community to be the moment I walked past that barn and wondered if we could have our Christmas Eve service there. And then I wrote the script for it.

The relief I feel about taking this step comes when I think about the enormous amount of work it takes to keep this church going, most of which happens quietly and behind the scenes: worship planning, preparation, and leadership; supporting the various endeavors of Circle members, including the many activities of our children and youth; liaison work with St. George's and our searches for new space; council meetings and retreat planning; soliciting and distributing our mission grants; responding to financial, personal, and health crises that arise among our members; overseeing volunteers; writing Sunday school curriculum; facilitating spiritual formation related to baptisms, ordinations, and the receiving of new members; organizing seasonal book and scripture studies; budgeting and financial administration; maintaining a website and dispersing MercyNotes; fostering our denominational ties and our partnership with Cuban Christians; communicating with our members in other places; providing recognition and gifts for births, graduations, weddings, and other life transitions; keeping up with our living-wage certification and safe-church policy; listening to and negotiating diverse opinions about everything from our worship space and potlucks, to childcare and music, to Taize services and communion; nurturing connections with other local clergy and churches, as well as organizations such as Christians for a United Community and Just Economics, the Campaign for Southern Equality and the Moral Mondays movement. And I'm sure I've missed something.

So, friends, I believe that in the months ahead, we'll all need to step forward with renewed intention to help support and carry the vision and work of Circle of Mercy. Or—I think

we'll need to open space for a new vision, and new forms of faithfulness, to emerge among us. Otherwise, I fear that we'll exhaust some people we love very much.

My anticipation about my transition is rooted in a few things that I want to share with you all briefly. One has to do with giving more attention to creating a home with Bill that is a haven of hospitality and retreat. We feel deeply the gift of an open and gracious space that, through a convergence of circumstances, became affordable and available to us.

A second anticipation is related to a new group of folks I've been meeting with for a few months. As a result of my experience with my sisters of caring for our mother at Swan Mountain Farm in her last weeks of life, I was invited to facilitate a visioning retreat in July with a group of medical professionals, artists, and activists who want to help people die well—particularly people with limited financial resources.

The mission of this endeavor, which we're now calling Dying to Live, is to “celebrate the joy and sacredness of the human spirit through the creation of an intergenerational living, learning, healing and dying village.” We're an interfaith, ethnically and age-diverse group, involved in an unfolding effort that makes my heart sing.

And lastly I carry great anticipation around my writing of a historical novel for young adults. I shared some about it here after I returned from a research trip to Belgium in May. The novel is rooted in the life of the Beguines, a group of extraordinary women of the Middle Ages who wanted a path other than to be wives or nuns—who lived together in empowered communities, kept daily rhythms of prayer, tended lepers and the dying, and educated girls, providing safe haven for them from forced marriages. The Beguines also boldly took on the corruption and hierarchy of the church, which led to their persecution, including burning at the stake for some. They lived in an era remarkably similar to ours—with growing disparities of wealth, prevalent war, and high anti-Muslim sentiment related to the Crusades. I believe they have some things to teach all of us—especially young women—about living faithfully and courageously, and I'd like to share those.

As I make this transition, I give thanks for Bill, who's sharing the financial vulnerability, and who believes—even when I sometimes doubt—that my novel *will* get finished, and published—and will generate some income before we run out of money. I give thanks for all of you who believe in what you're doing and offer your passion and your talent in the many ways that you are called to live faithfully. You inspire me.

I'm grateful to be part of a Circle with someone who believes in accompaniment enough to venture to Palestine for a couple of years, and others who feel called to engage in civil disobedience over cruel budgets and climate change. I celebrate those of you who know that your best offering is to help form our young people through teaching, or to be listeners or artists or healers in the world. God bless those of you who raise children, who try to end war and dismantle racism, who show up when needed with meals and rides and prayers, who stand on the margins with those who are undocumented or imprisoned or alone. We all need to be about doing what God has given us to do.

In April of 2006, I was living in a house among the trees in North Asheville. Just shy of 4 a.m. one night, I was awakened by the frenzied barking of my dogs. I had been asleep for only two hours, having driven home that night from Birmingham, Alabama, with Ken and some others, where I was the storyteller at the national conference of the Alliance of Baptists. I'd often been invited to preach and teach and lead retreats—but this had been my first request to be an official storyteller.

As it happened, I was working on embracing that as a new vocation. I was just weeks away from leaving nine years of regional ministry with the United Church of Christ, feeling some anxiety about giving up the only job I've ever had in my life with a regular salary and benefits—

but knowing that I needed to take that leap of faith to write the stories and the novel that are living in me.

I opened the sliding glass door and walked out onto my upper deck, where I came face to face with a medium-sized black bear, clinging to a tree trunk and staring me in the eyes. I was close enough to feel the musky heaviness of the bear smell and to hear its breathing. After a while, it began snorting at me, blowing air in sustained puffs that made its lips flap in and out.

I suppose I should have been scared. But I was too fascinated to feel any fear. Even more so when I looked up and spied two small cubs in the upper branches of the tree. And then I gazed down. At the base of the trunk was a huge bear. A family, I thought. Mama and Papa bear with their cubs, on a little nocturnal outing to my beech tree. I sat down on the deck, transfixed by the wonder of their visitation.

Three days later, I was part of an interfaith panel on spirituality and healing at MAHEC, along with a Jewish rabbi, a Sufi Muslim, a Native American elder, and a self-described practitioner of Appalachian folk medicine—all of whom I was meeting for the first time and none of whom knew about the vocational transition I was about to undertake. Over lunch that day, I shared with them the appearance of the bears. The Native American, a gracious Lumbee woman, said to me, “You know about bears, don’t you?”

I knew nothing about bears.

“In our tradition,” she said, “the bear is the only animal that cannot be summoned. You can call a deer or an eagle, but you cannot call a bear. When a bear comes to you, it’s because it has a message for you.”

The Appalachian woman chimed in, “And do you know how incredibly rare it is to see four of them at once?”

I had no idea. I told her that they seemed like a pretty traditional bear family to me. But she explained that the male bears don’t stay with their families. “What you were likely seeing,” she said, “were two newborn cubs, their yearling older sister, and their mother.” She paused and then added, “You know about the number four, don’t you?”

I knew as much about the number four as I knew about bears.

“The number four stands for completion,” she explained. “Those bears were coming to tell you that something in your life is being completed, and that’s a good thing. You can be at peace about it.” Amazing.

That fall, I gathered with some friends to learn about the Medicine Wheel, a Native American healing ritual based on symbols and seasons. With the mountains around us draped in a light mist, and the leaves arrayed in peak hues of red and gold, we stood together in a field. Each of us was invited to position ourselves on the edge of the large wheel, which was outlined in rocks, according to our date of birth. My birthday, September 21<sup>st</sup>, is one of the four touchstones of the wheel, the westernmost point, marking the autumnal equinox. The symbol for this point is the bear.

On the Medicine Wheel, the bear invites us into fall, a time of slowing down and introspection. The bear leaves “real time” for a while and hibernates in a cave, pacing its breathing while the creation creeps through a cycle of dying. The invitation for this season is to slow down and go deeper, to let go of what’s extraneous, to examine the soul and be at peace. I’m working on it.

Early last week I took three days in the mountain cabin of some friends to steep myself in the mysticism of the Beguines. I’d been postponing that part of my research. There’s so much weird religious stuff from the Middle Ages, but I was relieved to find as I read the three extant books written by Beguines that there’s none of that—only stunningly beautiful visions of the love of God and the majesty of creation.

Last Tuesday night, on the side of a mountain and under a lunar eclipse, I received a vision during a time of meditation, which in my novel will be given by God to the main character. I want to close by sharing a part of it with you:

*I was in a meadow, its grass tall and lush. A stream, whose babbling noises sounded like joyful hymns, flowed through its center. Around it was an orchard, which bore a tree of every variety on the earth. Behind the trees towered a ring of majestic, blue mountains, sanctuary for birds and gentle beasts. And I knew that I was in Paradise.*

*But then the sun began to grow, and it swallowed up the sky. Its searing heat became so intense that it burned up every tree, and shriveled every blade of grass, and dried up the stream. And I was in a vast desert, with nothing but gravel and sand as far as I could see. I searched for something to slake my deadly thirst, my throat so parched that I could not swallow. In the distance I saw children, sick and crippled, naked and crying for water, and I wanted to greet them and help them. But my tongue was like a rock in my mouth, and I could not speak. And I had nothing to give them.*

*I fell to my knees, and I began to weep fervently, my body wracked with sobs for the suffering of the children, and my powerlessness, and the endlessness of the desert. A drop at a time, my tears fell to the earth, where they collected in a puddle.*

*I looked up and saw the ragged children coming toward me. They stooped next to me and began to scoop my tears from the puddle, drinking feverishly, being revived by the nourishment. My tears became those of joy and began to spill even more profusely out of my eyes and onto the ground. The puddle grew to a stream, and the stream began to flow through the sand.*

*From atop a distant mountain came the voice of the prophet Isaiah, echoing like a thunderclap:*

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
The desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
Like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,  
And rejoice with joy and singing...  
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
And the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
Then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
And the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.  
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
And streams in the desert;  
The burning sand shall become a pool,  
And the thirsty ground springs of water...  
I am about to do a new thing;  
Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness  
And rivers in the desert.*

*I looked around me and saw people everywhere, on their knees, weeping with compassion for the anguish of the world. They were of all ages and human hues, women and children and men, dressed in the garb of many countries and faiths. Their tears mingled together in the sand and formed more streams of water. These grew and grew, until they flowed into one great rushing river.*

*The children jumped in first, laughing, and then beckoned the adults to follow. One by one, the whole throng leapt into the water, as the heavens opened and poured forth more. A child, grinning, extended her hand to me. Surrendering to her invitation, I reached for it, and she pulled me into the great rushing river of humanity, as the rain baptized us in joy.*

*We bobbed in the water, singing and laughing, until the river carried us to a great sea. And in that sea, we felt as one with each other, floating in the endless ocean of God's merciful, miraculous, magnificent love.*

I believe that those of us who were born into security and privilege need to enter the nothingness of the desert again and again, to be reminded that happiness doesn't come from the things we possess, or consume, or control. We need to keep meeting Jesus in his poverty, in his suffering, in his emptying of himself on the cross for the sake of the world's transformation. I know this good news, but I too often escape back to the old fears and comforts and securities. I need you good sisters and brothers to remind me, as we keep trying to figure out this journey together.

Whatever else happens, we can trust that God is at work, even in the desert times—*especially* in the desert times—when the signposts are absent, and the way doesn't seem so clear; when we're thirsting for something new.

God is *always* doing something new. It may take a while for us to see it, but it's there: crocuses and streams in dry places; healing of every injustice and affliction; songs of delirious joy. What do you say we try to get there together?