

The Blue of Distance

November 13, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Isaiah 65: 17-25

I know what Isaiah is trying to say. That there's satisfaction in seeing something complete. Joy in witnessing the finished product. In a perfect world, God says, you'll have closure. Closure is good. Wrapped up. Complete. There's nothing worse than a story that ends ... with suspense, with not knowing. Or is there?

Last Sunday, as I was driving to church, I saw an amazing rainbow. I come from Dartmouth, about an hour south of here, a few blocks from the ocean. The weather often changes close to the coast, and that was the case last week. It was bright and dry at home, but as I drove north through Lakeville, it got quite grey, with blowing light rain. Suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, I saw a vivid 180-degree rainbow, just off the west side of the highway. As I drove further north, I got really close to the end of it. That's when I knew I had been way too focused on work, because my first thought was, "if there's really a pot of gold there, that would really help close the budget deficit." (Did any of you buy a lottery ticket last week?)

Rainbows are so interesting. Miraculous even. The colors always the same, Roy G. Biv as we learned in elementary school, in distinct stripes. You can see it, and others can see it, but only from certain directions. If you get too close, it dissipates as quickly as it had appeared. As I thought about that rainbow, I thought of what I had read about color – specifically the color blue -- in a book I picked up this summer at a museum in the Berkshires. Rebecca Solnit is a writer from California who I follow on social media. She is part Annie Dillard, part Heather Cox Richardson, part Bill McKibben. Writing about nature and climate, politics and feminism. It was her meditation about the color blue that intrigued me. Blue has always been my favorite color. My parents probably started it ... with wallpaper in our bedroom that had a blue pattern on a cream-colored background. A blue rug. Blue dishes, blue clothing, lots of blue Minnesota lakes, and of course, blue skies.

The world is blue at its edges and in its depths. This blue is the light that got lost. Light at the blue end of the spectrum does not travel the whole distance from the sun to us. ... This light that does not touch us, does not travel the whole distance, the light that gets lost, gives us the beauty of the world, so much of which is in the color blue.¹

— Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*

I remember climbing to the top of a mountain in New Hampshire and seeing, for the first time, ridges of mountains disappearing bluer and bluer, into the distance. The first valley was green and lush, but then next ridge was a different shade – a darker green that was a bit more blue, and the next, even bluer as they blended together into the distant horizon. Until I read Rebecca Solnit's essay, I hadn't thought about *why* the sky and the water are blue. Or appear to be blue to us.

She points out that water itself is clear. If we look in the baptismal font, we can see right through the water to the bottom of the bowl. Standing at the shore, with your feet in the ocean's waves, you can see your toes on the sandy bottom. But as you look out a bit, the water becomes a blue-green, and further still, it gets bluer and bluer. It's the same with the air. Invisible and transparent when it's close to us, but when there's not a cloud in the sky, and we can see forever, the sky is the deepest of blues.

Solnit suggests that the color blue teaches us that there is beauty and mystery in the distance between here and there. Can we look across the distance ... without going all the way there? Because if we go there, we'll lose the blue. The mountains will cease to be blue if we arrive among them, just as if we try to find the end of the rainbow, it will not be there.

We're not so good at keeping that distance, being patient with the gap between here and there, between now and forever. We're better at identifying a goal and making plans to get there. Goals, objectives, tasks. Success. Doing. Closure. Even God gets in on it. The way Isaiah writes, when God creates new heavens and a new earth, all will be well. Weeping and distress will vanish. Lives will be fulfilled. Everything will be complete.

But I got stuck on the 22nd verse. "They shall not build and another inhabit. They shall not plant and another eat." How many of you built the house that you live in? Not paid someone to build it for you. Not just designed it, but cut every

¹ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (Penguin Books, 2005), p.29.

piece of wood and hammered every nail? What did you have for breakfast this morning? Did you squeeze the orange juice from the fruit of a tree that you planted? Our lives are lived inhabiting houses that someone else built and eating food that others planted and harvested. What is Isaiah talking about?

Scholars suggest that there were three prophets who wrote as Isaiah over a period of about 200 years, before, during, and after a time of upheaval and exile. You might remember the pain of that exile from the Psalmist's words, and the beautiful mournful ballad about hanging their harps on the willows and when their captors tormented them, asking them to sing. How can we sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land?

By the waters of Babylon,
we sat down and wept for thee Zion.
We remember, we remember, we remember thee Zion.

The last eleven chapters of Isaiah were written after the Hebrew captives returned from their Babylonian exile. Our reading comes from the 65th of 66 chapters.

Coming back after that exile was relief and joy, and a chance to return to rebuild their houses and re-plant their fields. With *that* context, Isaiah's words make a different kind of sense. For Isaiah's audience, it was important to hear of the promise of security and justice and fairness. That they and their descendants will not labor in vain. They won't build, only to have another evict them and move in. They won't plant, only to have another take the harvest from them. They will long enjoy the work of their hands.

I'm very aware of context these days. Of how when we look at the same thing from a different perspective, we see it differently. Or when something looks good from our perspective, but we now realize the tremendous cost that someone else has endured. Our anti-racism work has done that time and time again for me, and perhaps for you as well. Learning about privilege. Challenging assumptions. Uncovering hidden history. Not jumping to a solution, but learning to sit in the unknowns. Learning to listen. From a distance, at times. Not assuming that our perspective is the only one, or a universal one. Can we look across the distance without going there?

Church, for me, is a safe place to do that. To learn to become comfortable with not knowing. To trust that the beauty of the color blue comes from being willing to sit where I am and look to the farthest horizons. Not all the time, of course. I'm not suggesting that we abandon our goals, or our problem-solving. Quite the opposite.

You know the feeling of a meeting, or a group discussion, where you arrive not knowing where the conversation might go, and then leaving with new ideas that are the result of the synergy in the room, building off of each other, and finding a new way into the future, together? Taking the time to dwell in the gap between here and there. Adding ideas that get us a part of the way there. That is church. Church, for me, is inhabiting a building that I didn't construct, and then, in turn, adding a part of it that others will inhabit. Being a part of the journey, and trusting that we then hand off the responsibility, the decision-making, the journey to those who come next.

Larry Bacow, Harvard's President, offered reflections at our Divinity School Alumni/ae Day gathering last week. He asked us: what does one generation owe the next? Whether it's climate change, or political systems, or infrastructure, or civil society, or religious dialogue, or technological change, what do we owe to those who come after us?

These last two weeks during worship, we have heard about those who were this church in the 1940s, and the 1970s, and the decades between then and now. They built this congregation for us. What are we building for those of the 2070s and the 22nd century? Have you yet realized that (as of last week) it's been a little over 77 years since the end of WWII, and if you add that amount of time to today, it will be the year 2100?

This week, as we prepare to pledge our support for this church that we love, I invite you to find a quiet place and look to the horizon. Appreciate the distance from here to there. Savor the blue. And know that God is with you, wherever you are on your journey of faith and life. If God's love has made a difference in your life, could your spending priorities reflect that? If you've been making occasional gifts to First Church, could you risk making a commitment to give monthly? If money is way too tight, as it is for some, could you make a small gift, planting a small seed of hope, claiming your place in the tally of First Church supporters? If you've been giving from what's left over at the end of the week, could you risk setting aside your giving from the first part of your paycheck?

Pledging in this way is trust. We give to add our part to the ongoing dialogue, the ongoing ministry, the never-ending mission. We give to next year, so that it can be a strong foundation for the following year. Each year, we make progress.

This year, as we make our pledges – of both of our time and of our finances -- we are committed to having our pledges and estimates of giving in hand so that we can put together a 2023 budget that is faithful to our past and to our future.

As we continue to recover from the odd and unique circumstances of recent years, we are excited about what is possible together. We are thankful for the gift of this community of faith, and we are grateful for you! Amen!

