

Dialogue in a Desert

There are times when each of us feels adrift in some wasteland - alone, spiritually parched, aimless, nothing but a silent horizon all about us. Emily Dickinson, the nineteenth century American poet, often felt that way, growing up in a small, Puritan town in Massachusetts. All of her neighbors and friends seemed content with their lives. All the girls in her Mt. Holyoke College class, when invited to stand up for Jesus, literally did so at once. Not Emily. She alone remained seated because she just wasn't moved anymore by her Puritan creed, which had become pulpit platitudes. And she was desolate over it:

To lose one's faith - surpass
The loss of an Estate
Because Estates can be
Replenished - faith cannot.

Inherited with Life
Belief - but once - can be.
Annihilate a single clause
And Being's - Beggary.

Uncertain of what she believed, hurt and frightened by frequent deaths (the young as much as the old), she sensed she lived within a very fragile circle that could dissolve at any moment into nothingness. To survive this state of mind, she began to write poetry (which is a kind of prayer). To a friend she wrote: "I had a terror - I could tell to none - and so I sing, as the Boy does in the Burying Ground - because I am afraid." Many of her poems dealt almost despairingly with the death of a friend:

It tossed - and tossed
A little Brig I knew - o'ertook by Blast
It spun - and spun
And groped delirious, for Morn.

It slipped - and slipped.
As One that drunken - stept
Its white foot tripped
Then dropped from sight.

Ah, Brig - Good Night
To Crew and You
The Ocean's Heart too smooth - too Blue
To break for You.

And many dealt wearily with what she called the Blank, those ultimate questions about life that science cannot answer:

From Blank to Blank
A Threadless Way
I pushed Mechanic feet.
To stop - or perish - or advance
Alike indifferent.

But the more she wrote (or prayed), the more she felt the presence of Someone beyond the horizon. Her poems became less monologue and more a dialogue. Even Death became less a chilling event and more a tender visitor, come to escort her home:

Because I could not stop for Death
He kindly stopped for me.
The Carriage held but just Ourselves
And Immortality.

Since then - 'tis Centuries - and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' heads
Were toward Eternity.

Indeed, that Someone began to feel ever more like a Friend, no longer passive but magically, sacramentally reaching out to her:

He touched me, so I live to know
That such a day, permitted so
I groped upon his breast.
It was a boundless place to me
And silenced, as the awful sea
Puts minor springs to rest.

And now, I'm different from before
As if I breathed superior air
Or brushed a Royal Gown.
My feet, too, that had wandered so
My face - transfigured now
To tenderer Renown.

Jesus knew the desert Emily knew. Being fully human, he too was shaken by the frequent coldness of the world around him. He wept in Gethsemane, sweated blood. His cry from the cross has resounded down through the centuries. But ultimately he had the will to resist all seductions to despair, because he, like Emily, had the wisdom to savor every utterance, every signal, every clue that comes from the silent mouth of God. As a result he too, like Emily, experienced a transfiguration that you'll be reading about in next week's Gospel.

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