

Responding in Awe

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Isaiah 43: 1-3:

But now, says God-- the one who created you, Jacob, the one who formed you, Israel: Don't fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. 2When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when through the rivers, they won't sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you won't be scorched and flame won't burn you. 3 I am the LORD your God, the holy one of Israel, your savior.

Isaiah 43:19-21

19 Look! I'm doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it? I'm making a way in the desert, paths in the wilderness. 20The beasts of the field, the jackals and ostriches, will honor me, because I have put water in the desert and streams in the wilderness to give water to my people, my chosen ones, 21this people whom I formed for myself, who will recount my praise.

Romans 8:18-25:

I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us. 19The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God's sons and daughters. 20Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice--it was the choice of the one who subjected it-- but in the hope 21that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God's children. 22We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. 23And it's not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest

also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. 24We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn't hope. Who hopes for what they already see? 25But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it with patience.

Holy wisdom, holy words.

Responding in Awe

Over 40 years ago, a young Presbyterian clergy man who was about my age at the time stood on the floor of the General Assembly and held up a sign that read “Is Anyone Else Out There Gay?” Rev. David Sindt’s hand lettered sign sparked the first gathering of the Presbyterian Gay Caucus one of the original groups that formed what we now know as More Light Presbyterians. The first hopes of this group were simple, to confront the silence on the issue of homosexuality by getting together persons who identified as gay, or those who supported gay people participating in the life of the church to break through the isolation and create a sense of community which transcended mistreatment by congregations and presbyteries were gay and lesbian people were seeking to serve the

church. At first the dream was simple, but revolutionary, to gather together and form community, but then the dream grew.

On the day that the marriage amendment and authoritative interpretation allowing ministers to marry same sex couples passed at General Assembly, I had the chance to meet Rev. Hal Porter who had served a church that was one of the first churches to become More Light. He told me a story that in the 1980s the More Light Churches Network held a conference with all the churches that had already voted to become More Light, there were several dozen at that time. At the conference Rev. Porter told me that he spoke as part of a panel on the hopes for the budding LGBT faith movement, he remembered that at one point on the panel someone offered that perhaps the More Light group could work towards the affirmation of same-sex marriage by the denomination.

He told me that those gathered went completely silent with only a few people emitting some nervous laughter because in the mid-1980s, the idea seemed so far away from their reality that same sex marriage would not only be recognized but affirmed by the CHURCH that it almost seemed impossible. On the night that not one but TWO polity changes were passed by General Assembly by an overwhelming margin, Rev. Porter looked me

in the eye and said that he truly believed during that panel that this day in the denomination would never come.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, “if we see what we hope for, that isn’t hope. who hopes for what they already see?” The hopes and dreams that founded the movement for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender welcome in the PCUSA were so far beyond what was visible at the time that in some cases they wouldn’t be realized for 30 years or more.

Yet I would consider the progress made in the past forty years of the LGBT movement and broader social justice movement to be what Paul calls in his letter the “first fruits of the spirit,” the beginning signs of what is yet to come, but not the fullness of what God is calling for us to experience, which is for “our bodies to be set free.”

Friends, I believe that we are in a moment where the whole of creation is audibly groaning for further revelation about who God’s children are, and adoption into who God is. While we celebrate both the tangible and symbolic progress made towards LGBT welcome in our churches and in our communities, we know that the reality of physical and emotional abuse experienced by LGBT people is on going.

The continuing act of revelation of God's children at the beginning of this movement was towards further recognition of who was included in the umbrella of God's welcome. However I believe the Holy Spirit is calling the LGBTQ faith movement into a new understanding.

As I've traveled to More Light churches over the past four years since I stepped into the role of executive director, doing so as an openly transgender man called to serve the Presbyterian Church, I've come to see some of the challenges with focusing solely on welcome as the locus for change in the denomination. I remember a conversation with a member of a More Light church that was one of the early churches to declare that there was 'yet More Light to break forth on the scriptures around homosexuality' and as such they were not going to exclude anyone from membership or leadership in the church.

He recounted the history of the congregation's welcome and said, "well first we welcomed gay people, then lesbians, and then we learned about bisexual people and now transgender people?!" He threw up his hands in semi-exasperation and said "what's next?!"

With a sigh almost too deep for words, I suddenly saw how the founding hope of this movement had run its course. Allowing one identity at a time into who was included in the kin-dom of God could lead to this frustrated exasperation of who is next, what DON'T we know yet? I believe that the hope beyond our horizon requires us to refocus on who God is as a way to understand the fullness of what God is calling us to.

So who or what do we say God is? Naming and describing God has perhaps been the project of religion since the beginning. We as a people called to follow God have attempted for 5,000 years to describe who God is. In Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon "Three Hands Clapping" she quotes a colleague who says when "when human beings try to describe God we are like oysters trying to describe a ballerina, we simply do not have the equipment to understand something so utterly beyond us, but that has never stopped us from trying."

I was raised in a church that did its best to try and not limit who God was but still called God "He and Him" without much variation. While we are God's creation, and therefore by our virtue of being alive know something of who God is, the temptation we have to avoid is making God in the image of us, to assume that because we have legs, arms and a beating heart that

God does as well. I was watching the show called “The Cosmos” with Neal Degrass Tyson when it hit me.

In the very first episode of the show, which if you haven’t seen it was a science documentary on the nature of the universe, Neal Degrass Tyson demonstrates just how vast our universe truly is. He starts us on Earth and then zooms into our solar system, and then out into our galaxy, and then beyond our galaxy to other galaxies and then talks about how even with all this vastness the universe is STILL expanding even further. Suddenly I caught a glimpse of hope beyond our understanding, a hope that points towards just how vast, our universe yes, but how vast God, the creator of the universe is. My tiny oyster brain saw for a moment a twirling ballerina and my jaw dropped. It had never really hit me like this that God is much, much bigger than we can ever imagine. We are created in the image of a God of abundance, of limitless possibilities and expansion. Faced with this brief glimpse at semi-comprehension I saw what such an understanding of God might mean for the work towards LGBT inclusion in the church and world.

While one possible response to seeing a glimpse of an abundant God might cause some people to batten down the hatches in fear of the vastness. The other response, which I believe we are called towards is to

confront a God of abundance with awe and wonder, not just at who God is, but also who we are as God's creation. We are so much more than we can ever hope to name, that we only have symbols to describe who we are.

In the beginning of the welcoming church movement we only knew how to welcome one identity in at a time when we were just beginning to say out loud for the first time the words gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender. The trouble is, welcome started to be expressed as a series of "ORs" bisexual OR transgender, straight OR gay and not the fullness of "AND."

We are so much more than any one identity could possibly describe. We are abundant because our creator is abundant. We are waiting with hope for "our bodies to be set free." This doesn't just apply to LGBT people, this freedom is for all bodies. What we hope for then is not just a world where all are welcome, but for a world where all respond in awe and wonder to the fullness of God's abundance, and in turn welcome the abundance of who we are created to be. This is the hope that calls us forward towards more light. Amen.