

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY**  
**First Sunday After Epiphany - January 11, 2004**

Anne G. Cohen

Psalm 29

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

**For Our Reflection:**

I am a Rim Roamer, Walker of the world's weird wall.

- John Gardener, Grendel

I came like Water, and like Wind I go.

- Edward Fitzgerald, English poet (1809-1883)

**Wind Walking**

Now when all the people were baptized,  
and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying,  
the heaven was opened,  
and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.  
And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved;  
with you I am well pleased."

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(Other versions of this text read:)

"You are my Son; today I have begotten you."

God's voice.

God's voice thunders over mighty waters.

One hundred foot waves gather, roll and destroy themselves upon the  
rocks. The earth quakes. The air is overcome with salt and heavy  
spray.

God's voice.

God's voice breaks the cedars and moves mountains.

Two hundred mile per hour winds level everything in their path.

The mountainside is carried away by invisible forces.

Nothing is flexible enough to bend without breaking.

God's voice.

God's voice whirls the oaks and strips the forest bare.  
When God speaks nothing can withstand the power of the word.  
We are stripped to the bone, naked before God, without secrets.

God's voice.

God's voice rips open the sky and heads toward a crowd of baptized people still wet from their walk in the Jordan River.  
The force of the wind is modified - reduced to the stirrings of bird wings - as it focuses on one man and claims him. "You, you're mine. You represent me in the world. go from here and be my Voice."

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A professor from Princeton Seminary was speaking to a group of school children. He chose as his topic the Baptism of Jesus as a moment in time when God was revealed in Jesus. Most of the children took up their usual poses of staring at the walls or the floor.

At the conclusion of his talk one student, who had been slouching on his seat all through the talk staring mainly at his feet, looked up and muttered, "Don't think that's what it's saying."

The professor was keen to have a conversation, pleased that at least someone had been listening. "what do you suggest it is saying then?" he asked the student.

"Well the passage tells us that heaven opened up, yes?"

"Yes."

"And when heaven opened the Holy spirit came down, yes?"

"Yes."

The student lifted his whole body to an upright position and stared at the professor. "It's saying that God is on the loose in the world. And it's dangerous." (Seasons of the Spirit, Epiphany 2004 p. 82)

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God is on the loose in the world. And it's dangerous.

It's dangerous like tsunamis and hurricanes, it's dangerous like earthquakes and landslides. It's dangerous - even when the only perceptible effect is the slow erosion of a stone or a coastal cedar tree growing sideways over time.

God may have ripped open the sky that day and picked Jesus to do some of the damage. But the truth is, Jesus wasn't the only one who got baptized. And he wasn't the only one who heard those words.

The truth is, God picked ALL of us to be God's voice in the world.

Jesus was one who showed us some good techniques and moved a few mountains and put words in our mouths. But each one of US is God's tsunami, God's slow erosion of granite outcroppings. Every single one of us is dangerous, if we choose to be chosen and walk the talk and pay

extremely close attention to what God is asking of us.

If God is loose in the world and it's dangerous, why do we want to be involved with this project at all? Perhaps because it is safer to align oneself with God than to get in God's way? Surely self-interest would be one very human guiding motivation.

But what does it mean to be dangerous in this way? A song lyric says that "To live Dangerously is not to live Recklessly but to live Righteously." If we live dangerously in the sense of righteously, surely that is to embody God's voice in the world. Surely we mortals made in God's image might carry a Divine message - because it's RIGHT? Surely we are capable of being motivated by a sense of RIGHTNESS...

If God is loose in the world and it's dangerous - if we are participating in this project as messengers - what is the real danger and who should be afraid?

Those of us who violate the Laws of Nature might want to be afraid. We who build on earthquake faults WILL have our buildings brought down around us sooner or later. We who corrupt the water and soil will reap poison and malnutrition, cancer and famine sooner or later. We who destroy the ozone layer will burn to dust sooner or later. We who steal and hoard natural resources and cause harm to others through greed and thoughtless selfishness will receive retribution - sooner or later.

Those of us who see the diversity of the world as a threat rather than a mysterious matrix of sustaining beauty and bio-necessity - are already afraid. And we will draw the fear and defensive actions of those different from ourselves in equal measure.

Those of us who use our power, limited or unlimited, for personal gain causing the personal loss - even dismemberment - of the lives of others - might have reason to be afraid of what is coming - sooner or later.

God is loose in the world - always has been - always will be.  
And God chooses us until we choose God or die.

And if we choose God,  
if we choose to be wind walkers and God talkers,  
if we choose to subject ourselves to the Laws of Nature  
and the Grace of our Maker -  
if we choose God, we choose to live dangerously  
which is to live righteously - which can be dangerous.

Healers get diseases from those they are healing.

Social change agents get the usual reactions to change.  
Artists starve and are usually misunderstood until they are dead.  
Teachers and their books get banned.  
Environmentalists get ignored and discredited if they disturb the GNP.  
Prophets are put in mental institutions.  
Truth-tellers are assassinated.

But these facts only prove the nature of Reality -  
God is loose in the world - in and around and through us.  
And nothing is flexible enough to withstand the voice of God without  
breaking, humbled by the consequences of our actions, reduced to the act  
of listening - and hoping for that word of Grace at the eye of the  
storm.

If we choose to align ourselves with God, we choose to be dangerous  
too. And we have to decide how dangerous we are willing to be and what  
situations we are willing to take on.

Many of us chose to support the United Food and Commercial Workers'  
strike that began in the fall. The strike is going badly right now.  
Strike pay has been cut in half, health benefits were terminated January  
1, and the grocery store empire is fixed on breaking the Union. If we  
choose to be God's voice loose in the world - do we plan to say or do  
anything about this? How dangerous can we be?

A number of us protested the U.S. wars on Afghanistan and then Iraq.  
Those wars aren't over and there are plans to continue to build toward  
conflict along a so-called "Axis of Evil." These plans are being made  
by people who profit financially and politically from warfare and the  
acquisition of oil producing territories. Soldiers and civilians are  
being murdered daily so others can drive hummers and live in beautiful  
fortresses - believing that there are no consequences - sooner OR  
later. If we choose God as God has chosen us - what do we plan to do  
about this? How dangerous can we really be?

The nationwide unemployment figures dropped last month - which was  
celebrated as a sign of economic recovery in this country. But those  
figures dropped because 300,000 people previously seeking work gave up  
and stopped looking. They technically withdrew from the work force. If  
God is loose in the world - how dangerous can it get and what are we  
going to do about it before the consequences of increasing domestic  
poverty reach our doorsteps - sooner or later?

We have built, at some fairly steep personal cost, a new building in  
which we hope to create sacred space, hold worship, teach children, do  
programming and "take our mission to the street." We are understandably

protective of this building - especially since we have yet to be allowed to finish it or use it - especially since some of the contractors have done some shoddy cutting of corners and have yet to make it right - especially since skateboarders have already damaged the concrete at the front entrance - especially since this congregation will need about 10 years to pay off the cost of construction and has a hard time imagining repair and maintenance costs piling up already.

The mission of this church currently includes feeding homeless people within its walls - hosting Narcotics Anonymous meetings which include many court-ordered attendees who are sick enough not to possibly care less about being here let alone caring for their surroundings - and hosting court-ordered anger-management therapy groups who have yet to prove themselves.

We want to be good stewards of this church. We have also chosen to be a CHURCH which has a mission. And we have chosen to take that mission to the street - which often means bringing the street into the sanctuary. What is the righteous thing to do here?

If God is loose in the world and it's dangerous - are we willing to live dangerously?

Are we willing to accept the consequences of participating in a healing or prophetic or transformative profession?

Are we willing to be present while these mission projects are going on and do some teaching about stewardship as we learn from others about the difficulties of healing from being broken by the world?

Are we willing to sustain some losses, live with stained carpets, repair broken windows, and do it gladly knowing that God got a chance to talk with some folks here and help them take some responsibility for their own lives - move in a healing direction - maybe get dangerous and righteous themselves?

God's voice thunders over mighty waters.

God's voice breaks the cedars and moves mountains.

God's voice whirls the oaks and strips the forest bare.

God's voice rips open the sky and heads toward a crowd of baptized people... and claims us.

God is on the loose in the world. And it's dangerous.

What do you choose?

Can you bring yourself to be a Wind Walker, a God Talker?

How Dangerous are you willing to be?

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**Bulletin**

**WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION**

Music for Gathering

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

Musical Preparation for Worship - A Time for Centering

+ Call to Worship

We come together this morning to remind one another  
To rest for a moment on the forming edge of our lives,  
To resist the headlong tumble into the next moment,  
Until we claim for ourselves awareness and gratitude,  
Taking the time to look into one another's faces  
And see there communion, the reflection of our own eyes.  
This house of laughter and silence, memory and hope,  
is hallowed by our presence together  
and the restless stirring of the Eternal.

+ Hymn of the Spirit          Spirit          Hymnal # 286

+ Our Common Prayer (unison)

Creator God who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,  
on Earth as it is in Heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
And forgive us our debts  
As we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil,  
For Thine is the kingdom and the power  
And the glory forever. Amen.

Psalm 29

Time for Silent Reflection

One:          My soul waits in silence.

All:    God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at peace.

Silent Reflection

The Assurance of Good News (unison)

In the Wind is the Voice, in the Voice is the Presence.

In the Presence is Wholeness, thanks be to God!

Sung Response    Mary, Did You Know          by M. Lowry and B. Greene  
Bob Erickson and Billie Dierking, vocals    Arr. by L. Larson

Rebecca Dekker, piano

**WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM**

Conversation with Our Children

When the Wind Stops by Charlotte Zolotow

Reading from the Christian Gospels

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Sermon Wind Walking

**WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION**

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements

Call to Prayer Be still and know that I am God

Hymnal # 743

Time for Silence

Our Joys and Concerns and an Offering of Prayer

Sung Response In Solitude

Hymnal #521 vv. 1 & 2

We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer

Offertory

Prayer of Dedication (unison)

All gifts have their origin in You, O God, the source of all creative and healing energy. We rejoice when Your love finds a faint echo in our lives. We sense our destiny when Your grace moves through us to touch another. Help us to learn to be open and vulnerable to the needs of Your world and to respond with the generous spirit of Christ. Amen.

+ Sending Hymn I Sing the Mighty Power of God Hymnal # 12

+ Benediction (unison)

May the great Ruler of all high places,  
God of many names,  
touch you with a wind that keeps you strong,  
for all the days to come. Amen.

+ Sung Response (we gather in some semblance of a circle)

Song from Ghana

+ Postlude

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**WORSHIP NOTES**

Call to Worship is from Singing the Living Tradition #435

(last phrase added)

Benediction is from the New Century Hymnal #877