

Vortex

Preached FCCW, August 25, 2019

Jeremiah 1:4-10 and Luke 13:10-17

What would a sermon series that was inspired by Sedona be without any mention of vortexes? Ever since the 70's and 80's Sedona has been a Mecca for spiritual seekers. One of the prime reasons has been the existence of places--called vortexes--where one is said to be able to encounter concentrated metaphysical energy and heightened spiritual experiences. Vortexes differ from most of Sedona's other charms in that they are not appreciated with the eyes or ears. At one time, the Sedona Chamber of Commerce even created a slogan that said, "Isn't it ironic that the most beautiful place on earth is famous for what you can't see."

The popularity of vortexes is a New Age phenomenon, but Christianity also has its parallel of sacred places and shrines where the presence and power of God is more keenly felt, and where pilgrims travel in search of spiritual awakenings or physical wellness.

Many years ago, I visited St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal, which has a reputation for being a place of miraculous healings. There was a long special stairway leading to the building's entrance which was reserved for pilgrims who came to experience some kind of healing. Maybe like the healing of the woman who was bent over for 18 years, but was freed from her bondage when Jesus laid hands on her. Those seeking healing at St. Joseph's, ascend that long stairway, pausing to pray on every step as they go. When you get to the top of those stairs, you enter a vestibule where the walls are adorned with a display of crutches and braces that were left behind by people who were miraculously healed of their ailments.

Celtic Christianity has a different name than "vortexes" for those kinds of places of spiritual intensity. They are called "thin places." As in, places where the separation between the natural and the supernatural are thin enough to permit a crossover. Like the way thin apartment walls allow you to overhear your neighbor's TV or smell what they're cooking for dinner.

Along one hike, a member of our group asked our guide, Cherlita, which vortexes she most recommended visiting. She obliged with a suggestion or two. Then she added, "But the most important vortex isn't found in this place or that place. The most important vortex is the one that is within you." That is actually what the Apostle Paul had to say in 1 Corinthians 3:16. "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"

Temples, shrines, thin places, vortexes—or whatever name you want to give them—are all well and good, as settings for helping us to discover transcendental moments with God. But the most accessible means of connecting with God is right inside you. God doesn't demand that we come to Him. God has come to us and made his home in us. But that very familiarity can cause us to overlook the miraculous intimacy of God's relationship to us.

An old friend of mine and his wife were driving through the countryside of Vermont's Northeast Kingdom many years ago, looking for a piece of land on which to build their future retirement

home. On an isolated backroad they pulled their car to the shoulder to walk up a green hill on the far edge of a farm. Once they reached the hilltop and saw the magnificent view available there, they knew they had found the place where they wanted to live out the rest of their lives together. They went right to the owner of the farm to ask if he would sell the portion of his land that gave such a majestic view. The farmer appeared to be puzzled by their making so much about a remote corner of his land that he must've seen a thousand times. But when they brought him to the hilltop to show him the plot they wanted to buy, he looked around as if he was taking in the splendor of the view for the very first time, and said, "Tis pretty isn't it?"

We can go to the ends of the earth hoping for some mystical communion with God that takes us out of ourselves, without realizing that the most direct way to reach that destination is through an inward journey. Interestingly, the vortexes of Sedona are classified along the lines of inward and outward dynamics. So called upflow vortexes are associated with high places, like mountains or mesa tops. Upflow vortexes channel spiritual energy from earth to the heavens, or emanate outwards from within us to the universe around us.

Inflow vortexes are found in low places like canyons, valleys and caves. Inflow vortexes are where spiritual energy is channeled from above and outside us to within us. The Bible describes something of an inflow/upflow pattern to the way God's Spirit works within us, too.

The story of Jeremiah's call to be a prophet is a good illustration. God came to Jeremiah and said, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Jeremiah doesn't feel that he is qualified for the job. He thinks that he is too young to speak authoritatively on God's behalf. God solves that problem by touching his lips and telling Jeremiah, "Now I have put *my* words in *your* mouth." Because God's Spirit would dwell in Jeremiah, it was not a question of Jeremiah speaking *for* God. It would be God speaking *through* Jeremiah.

When God calls anyone to a mission, it is not often because they already possess the qualities necessary to carry it out. But the gift of God's Spirit compensates for whatever we lack. So, the Holy Spirit coming to dwell within us is like the Inflow. The upflow is the results of that indwelling Spirit. It is the works that are produced through us as a result of the Spirit's presence and power within us. In Jeremiah's case, it was the way a boy who was unsure of himself was transformed into a great prophet who spoke God's word to the leaders of nations and kingdoms.

The Bible describes the work of the Holy Spirit in terms of **Gifts** of the Spirit and **Fruits** of the Spirit, that conform to that inward/outward pattern. The Gifts of the Holy Spirit are unique skills and abilities given by the Holy Spirit for the accomplishment of what He has called us to do.

The Gifts of the Spirit are *wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, speaking in tongues, and interpretation of tongues*. These spiritual gifts are the Inflow of the Christian spiritual life because, like with Jeremiah, they are not intrinsic to us. They come

from outside of us, their source being God. But they are incorporated into who we are and what we are equipped to do.

The outflow of the spiritual life is called the Fruits of the Spirit. The Fruits of the Spirit are *love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*. The Greek word for fruit in this context refers to deeds, actions or results. Fruits of the Spirit are outward behaviors and actions in our lives that result from the Spirit's transformative presence within us and through which our faith flows out of us to bring about God's kingdom.

The Gifts and Fruits of the Spirit combine to make us capable of doing on God's behalf, what is beyond our own capacity. The way that the words of God placed in Jeremiah's mouth enabled and encouraged him to authoritatively proclaim compassion and justice to kings and rulers. And the way, the Holy Spirit within Jesus empowered him liberate a frail, bent over woman from 18 years of bondage to her physical infirmity; and to liberate religious leaders from their bondage to narrow interpretations of their faith.

Who knows what works of justice and healing are waiting to be released by the spiritual vortex within you?

This brings to a conclusion the Sermon Series on "Stuff I Learned from my Summer Vacation in Sedona." The source of the learning that led to these sermons did not originate from books or professors, but from the lessons embedded in God's marvelous creation.

As the 19th Psalm reminds us:

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.

The place that speaks to you of God's glory may be far off, or as near as your backyard. But the place where your eyes behold God's glory within what he has created; and where your ears are graced by the speech that pours forth from nature, is in that vortex of your soul, where the Holy Spirit dwells.

And so, I close these sermons with this quote by the prolific Native American writer Ohiyesa, of the Santee Dakota people. A quote that captures the ways in which the Spirit who dwells within us is the primary sense through which the visual and audible wonders of Creation are translated so as to complement our understanding the written and spoken Word of God:

Whenever, in the course of the daily hunt, the hunter comes upon a scene that is strikingly beautiful, or sublime – a black thundercloud with the rainbow's glowing arch above the mountain, a white waterfall in the heart of a green gorge, a vast prairie tinged with the blood-red of the sunset – he pauses for an instant in the attitude of worship.