

“Abba, zeh!” (“Daddy, that!”)

*Blessed be the name of the LORD from this time on and forevermore!
From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the LORD is to be praised!*
(Psalm 113:2-3)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on Thanksgiving Sunday, **November 18, 2018**
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Rabbi David Aaron tells of walking with his two year old son when, seeing something fly by and settle on the branch of a nearby tree, the little toddler excitedly exclaimed, “Abba, zeh!” (“Daddy, that!”). Seeing the bird his son was pointing to, he said, “Zeh tzipor,” meaning, “That is a bird.” As the boy repeated, “tzipor,” the rabbi felt good, having taught his son a new word.

A bit later another bird swooped by, this one much larger, much more colorful, and came to rest on the ground rather than up in the branches. The boy pointed, saying, “Abba, zeh! Abba, zeh!” (Daddy, that! Daddy, that!)

The rabbi smiled and replied, again, “Zeh tzipor,” “That is a bird.” But this time his son’s eyes registered confusion. How could these both be tzipor, these creatures so very different one from the other? Why do they have the same name?

The child’s instinctive disappointment, I think, says something about our adult way of knowing, that when we cluster things into categories we risk diminishing our wonder in the seeing of each individual thing. Genesis holds that central to our human intelligence is the capacity to name things. Adam was given the task of naming all the creatures in Eden, and we’re still at it! We are onomasiologists by nature, meaning, we are Namers. Having named each thing, we shuffle them into lists of like things, a simple Sesame Street exercise! “One of these things is not like the others!” Naming and categorizing sets us apart from the rest of creation.

Yet, there is peril if we lose the ability to see beyond the categories we set up, to stop looking at the “zeh” of each individual thing, the indescribable “That.” “Oh, that . . . well, THAT is just another bird.” “Oh, that . . . THAT is just another tree.” “Oh, that . . . THAT is just another church.” If everything becomes “just another” we lose the capacity for amazement and wonder, the catalysts for gratitude and thanksgiving.

Leading faith-based tours throughout the Holy Land, the Middle East, and Europe, we see a lot of churches. This morning I’ll describe Coventry Cathedral in England, one of many churches we visit on the Wesley Heritage tour. Seeing so many churches, how easy to say, “Oh, that? Well, THAT’S just another ancient church.” Our pilgrims can get home after a nearly two week trip to the Holy Land and look at their pictures and can’t remember which church they’re looking at, which is why it’s a good thing to keep a daily journal in sync with your photographs.

Here's Marc Chagall's colorful imagining of Moses experiencing an *Abba zeh!* (*Daddy, that!*) moment, the burning bush, which could not be clustered into any grouping of "like" things. I can imagine Moses saying to God, "*Abba, zeh!*" and God answering, "*That? Oh, my child. I am, that! I am THAT I am. I am zeh, I am THAT. This moment is wholly other, so remove the sandals from your feet, for you are standing on Holy Ground.*"



"Moses, you are on a Journey of Becoming. Still unknown is what you will become tomorrow. The green hues of your nativity became the golden promise of your youth. But, Nothing Gold Can Stay. Eventually you will feel the lengthening shadows of age and, one day, death.

"My child, you are always becoming Something Other. I am not becoming any thing. I am being, itself. I am, THAT I am. I am . . . beyond your labels, beyond your lists. Don't try to be the Namer of me! Let me reveal my Name to you, Yahweh. To Abraham I was El Shaddai, God Almighty, but I invite you to know me in a deeper way, as Yahweh. I am that I am.

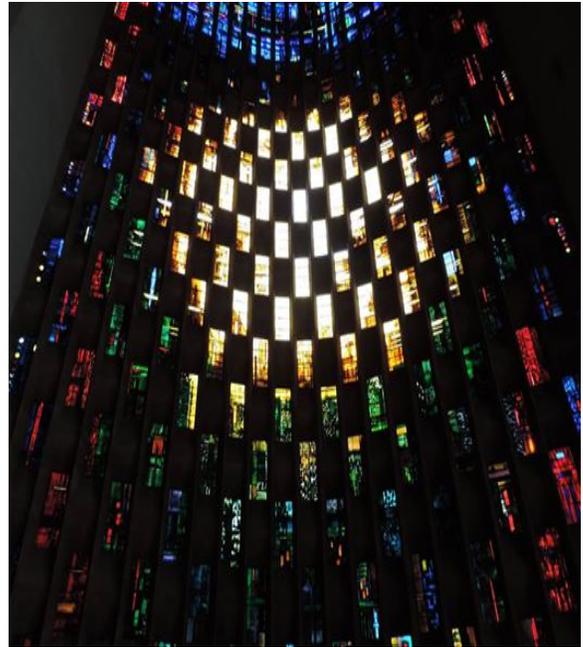
"Despite your education in Pharaoh's court, your experience of the world from palace to pyramid, from the fertile Nile to the dry desert, your language knows no categories by which to place me side-by-side as an equal. You can't fit me into any list of gods, for I am Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer! To whom, then, will you liken me? To whom will you make me equal?"

Children possess an eye for the daily epiphany, a capacity to see pure uniqueness where adults see bland sameness. Each new experience creates an openness to wonder. Children seem to go through each day with pupils fixed at fullest expansion, stuck at widest port. Perhaps this is why Jesus calls a child and says, "*Unless you become as this child, you will not experience the Kingdom of Heaven.*" The Kingdom of God is all around us, in each moment, in a succession of astonishments, but our eyes can become jaded to the wonder all around us.

We were created to experience wonder, which is why, I think, we never outgrow the desire to experience moments of awe that transcend existing categories, to have our own *Abba, zeh!* moments. As we grow older, though, it takes more to be classified as extraordinary, which is why we seek out exotic destinations, hoping to experience something truly out of the ordinary, so that we might feel again the rush of our childhood's every day *Abba zeh!* moments.

Our best spiritual teachers help us to open our eyes to the *Abba zeh!* moments all around us. We can see them if we train our eyes to see beyond the ordinary, as the great preacher/poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, "*The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.*"

I thought of Hopkin's line when I first visited stepped inside the new Coventry Cathedral to see the baptismal window rising 81 feet from floor to ceiling with 195 brilliantly colored panes. This is Sherry's photograph of that moment, capturing the electricity of that window, flaming out, like shining from shook foil.



The colors were made even brighter in becoming acquainted with the story of Coventry and its cathedral. Coventry had been a target of the Luftwaffe for 17 air raids during October 1940. It was considered a key target because this city of 250,000 was an industrial center. 25% of British aircraft during the war were produced at Coventry, making it a bullseye on Hitler's map.

The October raids had killed nearly 200 people, but none equaled that which was codenamed *Moonlight Sonata* on the night of November 14, 1940,

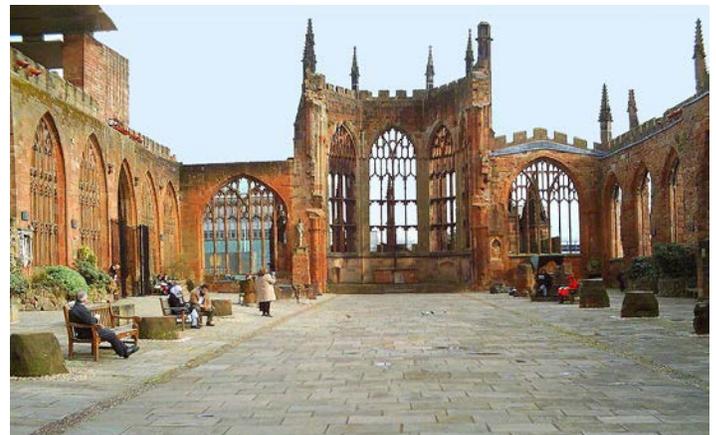


this past Wednesday being the 78th anniversary of that dark night when some 500 hundred German planes dropped their bombs, killing nearly 600 with double that number injured. The toll would have been much higher but the people were by now accustomed to bomb shelters and many left the town in the evenings for the countryside. Over 4000 homes were destroyed and 2/3 of the city's buildings were damaged. Only one German bomber was shot down.

cathedral was left smoldering in ruins. Here's a photograph of the visit to the now roofless ruins by Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

Perhaps the most startling loss was Coventry Cathedral. The beautiful 14th century

After the war the city made a decision to keep the now roofless cathedral as a Garden of Remembrance, shown here, building the new cathedral adjacent to it. This Garden of Remembrance gathers 700 years in which their ancestors had gathered in that space for worship.

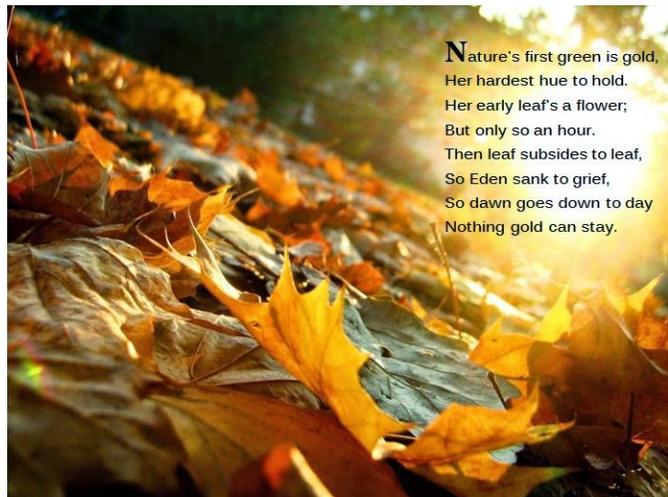


The foundation stone of the new cathedral was laid by the Queen on March 23, 1956 and the new church was dedicated on May 25, 1962, with Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*, composed for that occasion, performed.

After visiting the ruins, we walked into the new cathedral to enter the back of the nave where, above the baptismal font towered the amazing baptismal window.

It was an *Abba zeh!* moment as brightness illumined the drear, each of the 195 panes like an outlet into which our senses were plugged. As my eye scanned upward, the greens of nativity and baptism emerged into the golden promise of youth, drawing eyes into the golden heart of the window. Seeing these brilliant greens and golds, on a loop in my brain began to play the forty words of Robert Frost, written in 1923, *Nothing Gold Can Stay*.

*Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower,
But only so an hour.
Then leaf **subsides** to leaf,
So Eden **sank** to grief,
So dawn **goes down** to day,
Nothing gold can stay.*



I've taught that poem in many settings, its steady 3-3 waltz taking us from birth to death. Its simplicity is powerful, only forty words and 32 of those words being one syllable. The other eight are two syllables.

I've highlighted for you in red print the middle words of the last quatrain – **Subsides, sank, goes down**. Does the dropping of the once green leaves in the poem remind you just now of your decks and yards in Hot Springs Village? Nothing Gold Can Stay, indeed.



But hope rises from the ruins. This is a cross made of two charred beams from the roof of the ancient cathedral which, in the cleanup after the bombing, were discovered fallen in the shape of a cross. They were erected in precisely that form with the priest writing, *Father forgive*.

I see that cross as a reminder that for every dusk in the human cycle, a new day will shine. *Blessed be the name of the LORD from this time on and forevermore! From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the LORD is to be praised!*