

“And Slowness . . .”

(#3 in the “*Only This and Nothing More?*” Lenten series)

“I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it.”
(1 Corinthians 3:10b)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Third Sunday in Lent, **March 4, 2018**
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My Lenten series has focused on a short question posed twice in the Hebrew Bible, a question summing up our human search for meaning. The psalmist in Psalm 8, and Job in Job 7 ask the very same question (*Mah enosh?*) meaning literally, “*What is man?*” Better, and properly understood as referring to humankind, “*What are human beings?*”

We’ve seen how the psalmist is gazing at the heavens in a context of wonder at humankind’s lofty position in the created order. Quite the opposite is Job’s asking of the question, his eyes lowered to the grave and cracking upon his lips the grit of the earth’s dust. Behold, then, the Lenten paradox – both the littleness and the greatness of humankind.

The forty days of Lent began on Ash Wednesday with Job’s perspective, ashes proclaiming the dark truth with each smudge, “*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*” Yes, but as the title of this series asks, are we *Only This and Nothing More?* Do we inhabit these lodgings of flesh trapped to a fate determined by the limitations of our molecular structure? Are we only what we can see, weigh, measure, analyze? Are we fated to live out the characteristics bequeathed to us through genetics? Are we *Only This and Nothing More?*

Something there is within us which cannot accept that fate as the sum of our Being, sensing that *Something More* is compounded within the human molecule. Liturgically speaking, at the end of these forty days of Lent in which Job’s perspective dominates our reflections, we will at last arrive at the psalmist’s perspective – one of adoration, wonder, and praise as our faith reaches its apogee, its pinnacle, at Easter. Jesus’ resurrection declares a destiny for humankind transcending our dust-to-dust reality. Easter shouts back at Ash Wednesday to declare that we are not *Only This and Nothing More.*

I’ve pointed out how the Apostle Paul described this *More* within our human being, calling our bodies “clay jars,” which is to say fragile and breakable. Yet, he says, we possess within these clay jars of our physicality a treasure, a light created by the God. Let me paraphrase Paul’s words to the church at Corinth with a dash of Edgar Allan Poe: “*When we face death, this much is very clear. Hope is not lost! For as these lodgings of flesh accelerate their demise, we have an inner treasure of the Divine simultaneously being renewed, as if stirred back to life after being, during the years of our living, stilled in a dormant state. This spiritual light has not been*

vanquished, however obscured it may have been. Nodding, nearly napping, perhaps, but not absent, not even in the deepest midnight dreary of the soul. Approaching death, there is a tapping, a rapping on the chamber door of our flesh. This gentle rapping tells us that we are not 'Only this and Nothing More.' No, my Christian friends, do not lose hope!"

I heard a song on the radio yesterday that reminded me of these words of Paul in 2 Corinthians. *Love Is Here To Stay* was George Gershwin's last composition before his death in 1937 (the lyrics by his brother, Ira Gershwin). The song has been recorded by many artists including Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Nat King Cole, and Gene Kelley, and featured in the soundtracks of many films since the 30's, most recently *Forget Paris* and *When Harry Met Sally*.

The song begins with the line, "It's very clear!" But the best line of the song, in my opinion, is:

*In time the Rockies may crumble,
Gibraltar may tumble
They're only made of clay.
But our love is here to stay.*

That's precisely what Paul is saying of our human make-up. We're only made of clay. True, but we are not Only This and Nothing More. There is something else, a divine light and love that Paul calls a "treasure in these clay jars." That light and love of God is sturdy, and here to stay.

Click on the link below to hear the song performed by Frank Sinatra:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ritHAj_gjz4

Speaking of sturdy, in our reading this morning from 1 Corinthians 3 Paul used the analogy of a builder, that from the foundation up he was concerned to use durable materials, to build the church as a skilled master-builder. It's this analogy that led me to one of my favorite Emily Dickinson poems, *The Props Assist the House*.

*The props assist the house
Until the house is built,
And then the props withdraw –
And adequate, erect,
The house supports itself;
Ceasing to recollect
The auger and the carpenter.
Just such a retrospect
Hath the perfected life,
A past of plank and nail,
And slowness – then the scaffolds drop –
Affirming it a soul.
(Emily Dickinson)*

This Emily Dickinson poem has long amazed me, not only for its cadence and movement, not only for its wording and vocabulary, but for its ability in the last word to veer away from the analogy and bring everything together into her true purpose. A good analogy works through mis-direction, like a magician. This poem takes off in the dirty direction of a construction site – props, auger, carpenter, plank, nail, scaffolding.

Then, with the last word, “Then the scaffolds drop – affirming it . . .” We may expect, “a house,” or “a church,” or “a skyscraper.” But no, Emily Dickinson is talking about the building of a soul. “Affirming it a soul.”

Our spiritual life is “*a past of plank and nail . . . and slowness.*” Slowness is such an appropriate Lenten word. Forty days we progress on the slow journey, all along being built by the “*plank and nail*” of the Christian disciplines, the means of grace acting as the scaffolding. Throughout our lives the scaffolding of parents and teachers and mentors wraps around us, shape-shifters all along our Journey of Becoming.



Here's an image of St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue in New York City. I walked past it last week, Sherry and I spending a couple of days in Manhattan to celebrate our anniversary. It's an iconic and historic church, to be sure.

New York City is still celebrating the removal of the scaffolding from the façade of the church, which for nearly a decade (2006 and 2015) covered the façade in the completion of a \$175 million project of renovation. (*Image of St. Patrick's wrapped in scaffolding on the next page*).

Ah, the glad moment when the scaffolds drop!

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “*I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it.*”

I received a nice note this week from Rev. Carness Vaughn, Senior Pastor at St. James UMC in Little Rock, thanking me for my six years of leadership, how the foundation was well laid for him to continue after me with a successful ministry.

I Sorry (but only a little bit) that I didn't think of it first, I wrote a note to Bubba (Rev. Dr. Walter Smith) to thank him for his eight years of ministry here at Christ of the Hills.

I know that all the former pastors of Christ of the Hills -- Bubba, Mike Morey, the late Bill Leslie, R. T. Jarrell, and the late "Chic" Johnson -- could speak the words of Paul, "*I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it.*"

This is true of Lay Servant Leadership as well, of course, that our lay leaders are both building upon a foundation previously laid for you, and are laying a foundation for future generations as COH continues to *Bring in, Build up, and Reach Out.*

