

Sermon: Echoes of Generations Past 5 5 2014

Let me tell you a story. Demeter and her daughter Persephone are in a field full of flowers- purple iris, white daisies, sweet-smelling hyacinth, tightly wrapped roses not yet in bloom. It is the laziest of summer days, the picnic has been eaten, and Demeter dozes off in a patch of warm grass.

Young Persephone bends over to peer at a peculiar looking root, a gnarled, peachy-tan thing. Suddenly, the root reveals itself as a hand and it clasps hers, pulling her closer and closer to the dirt. The earth opens up and Persephone sees that the hand belongs to Hades, god of the underworld, and Hades pulls Persephone down to him and draws the earth back together over his head. The whole kidnapping takes just a few second, Persephone lets out no more than a ‘oh!’, and then she is gone.

Demeter awakes at her daughter’s cry and dives toward the moving earth, scrapping handfuls away- give her back! Give her back! But her work is in vain, Persephone is in the underworld. Demeter petitions Zeus the all-powerful: make Hades return my daughter! But Zeus is oddly quiet, refusing. She travels to other kingdoms, tries to rally support of other gods and goddesses- but no one will cross Zeus. Demeter stops bathing, eating, and dressing. She refuses to let crops grow and forbids trees from bearing fruit, so deep is her agonized grief.

Now Zeus is paying attention- the mortals are grumbling about being hungry, and there are no grapes to make his wine. He sends a message to Hades- let the girl go. Hades obeys but slides a pomegranate seed into Persephone’s mouth- now she will have to spend 1/3 of her time in the underworld, and 2/3’s above, safe in a flowery field with her mother.

This arrangement isn't' as bad as it sounds- the underworld isn't hell, it isn't torture and red-horned devils stirring cauldrons of fire. The underworld in Greek mythology is a place of soul discovery, of confronting fears and searching deep within the self for meaning. In the underworld Persephone explores who she is and what life she wants to lead. She ponders the great mysteries. Yes, the underworld is where souls confront the reality of death, where mortality is realized. And that isn't fun, necessarily, but it makes for a richer, more textured life.

But- the underworld isn't an easy place, and easy is what Demeter wants for Persephone. Tranquil happiness, no soul-searching required.

Every month our congregation explores a different theme, and this month we are pondering Hope and Fear. These two emotions are incredibly powerful. Think for a moment- how many decisions do you make every day based on fear? On hope?

Hope and fear are each a mixed bag. I know, I know- we think of fear as the bad one and hope as the good one. But fear isn't generally a bad thing. Fear of pain keeps children from touching the hot burner on the stove, fear of destruction keeps us from jumping into the lion's cage at the zoo to say hi to the hairy beasts with the big teeth- they look so friendly. Fear is protective. And yes, it can get out of hand, turn into a consuming anxiety disorder, fear can keep us from taking chances we need to take to live full lives. But hope can get out of hand too. Hope can turn into wishful thinking without action. Hope can be a daydream of a better tomorrow that never turns into a plan.

So who are you? Demeter, playing it safe, sticking with the expected, the ordinarily lovely? Hampered by a fear of exploring the deep, the soul realm? Demeter is content but maybe a

little bored in her flowery field. She is safe, she is comfortable- but she isn't challenging herself. She isn't growing.

Persephone in our myth is towed underground against her will- but this is a metaphor for her own curiosity, which pulled her to places previously unexplored. We all are reluctant to visit the underworld, and yet we are pulled to explore our depths. Towed underground by that still, small voice, to examine the mysteries of life and death. And once there Persephone tastes the fragrant, tart pomegranate seed, she realizes that she wants a life of this kind of soul- traveling. She wants to spend some time comfortable up above, and some time in the realm of discovery.

So are you play-it-safe-and-traditional Demeter, or innovative-but-risky-Persephone? Well, don't forget, it's all metaphor-Demeter and Persephone are one soul. Sometimes we need to be Demeter, and sometimes Persephone.

Remember, for all its plusses, traveling to the underworld is scary- it made Demeter stop eating, bathing, she didn't even change clothes on a regular basis. Change is frightening, and soul growth is downright terrifying. Demeter is so consumed with her spiritual quest underground that the plants don't grow, the trees don't bear fruit- she can't be productive, she can't sustain her life, she can't contribute her gifts to her community. No one can keep up a Persephone-style spiritual exploration for very long- it's exhausting, and it pulls us away from the community we need and that needs us. Zeus demands Persephone returns from the underworld because there is no food for her people to eat. Staying in the underworld too long is bad for everyone.

But without our time as Persephone we can't earn the depth and strength we need in our lives.

We need time as Demeter and Persephone- we need struggle and ease.

This week we began the month of May, a great time to begin life afresh with a new balance of depth-searching and soul soothing. The country folk and farmers in the United Kingdom, especially Scotland, have for centuries honored the May Day celebrations of Beltane, the start of the growing year and a celebration of the earth's fertility. Around the first of May households would extinguish their hearth fire, which had burned off and on all winter, and instead bring wood to a huge blaze in the center of the village. The wood was lashed together, sculpted into the shape of a huge man, the Wicker Man, the inspiration for the Burning Man Festival I know many of you have attended.

The burning of the Wicker Man purified and restored the village, a spiritual spring-cleaning.

Young people took turns trying to leap over bonfires, naked, danced wildly. Everyone except the Puritans, who tried for centuries to end the pagan celebration. The British short-story writer and poet Kipling penned:

Oh, do not tell the Priest our plight,

Or he would call it a sin;

But we have been out in the woods all night,

A-conjuring Summer in!

Beltane was a release valve of sorts, a time for wildness after a long winter of sickness and toil.

Women and men went to the woods to gather garlands of branches to spread in their homes,

fresh clean smells brought inside, and the cows were driven out to pasture for the first time that Spring, driven through the cleansing ashes of the Wicker Man. After partying it was time to get back to work.

So what does May Day, or Beltane, mean to us today? It is an opportunity to start again, to balance our Demeter impulse to be safe, with our Persephone impulse to be bold. We don't have to leap naked over bonfires to realize that Spring is a time of rebirth and renewal- the evidence is all around us, in the brand-new, fuzz ball, baby geese at Green Lake to the riotous blossoms in our own orchard.

This spring let's challenge ourselves to dive headfirst into the underworld, to grasp at the gnarled root of the unknown, to plumb the depths. But we must also find our flowering field of renewal and rest, from which we can sustain ourselves and our faith. How can you explore the great mysteries? Where in your life do you feel the pull of the underworld, the urge to go deeper into your heart? But just as importantly, where are you safe? Where are you refreshed? Where can you fall asleep in a field of fragrant lilacs?

Be Demeter. Be Persephone. And blessed Beltane.