

## Corona Chronicle

Week 34

Wednesday, Nov. 4<sup>th</sup>

And now we wait...for the millions of mail-in ballots in Wisconsin, Michigan, Georgia, and especially Pennsylvania to be counted. Last night Mark and I went to bed a little after 12:30, knowing by that time that we would *not* know for some time yet, for perhaps even another week – so there was no point in staying up and waiting for more inconclusive results.

It is after 3 PM as I write these words now, and the balance of the tally is beginning to swing towards the Democratic candidate for president, Joe Biden. But it is still far too early to predict what will happen. At 2 AM President Trump declared “victory” to a crowd of his supporters, claiming that any continued ballot-counting should be stopped, and vowing court battles to get these remaining votes ruled invalid.

It is an anxious time for the American people, whichever side of the red-blue divide one is on. It feels like waiting for an overdue baby to be born – or perhaps, more accurately, like a protracted labor. Will the baby be born healthy, will the mother survive? Will some sort of medical intervention be necessary? In this case, we worry what will happen if this “labor” gets drawn out in the courts, or worse, in the House of Representatives. If the birth of our next president (or the reaffirmation of the current one) is this tenuous, this contentious, how will the American public react? Will there be fighting in the streets? Will the next president be able to get anything done if the Senate majority is from the opposing party?

As the cantor of Temple Beth El, it is my sacred privilege and duty to serve all members of our congregation, regardless of their political views or affiliation. And as a citizen of this city of Fall River, and as citizen of this country, I desperately want to see people come together, to be able to talk with one another and work on projects together that will make us stronger and healthier in so many ways. We have to *care* about our future, and the next generation’s future, *together*. This should not be a partisan issue...but somehow, it seems to come out that way, since some of these “projects” could entail raising taxes, or imposing regulations on industry, or simply requiring everyone to do things that are for the good of the whole of society (like wearing masks in public places during a pandemic). There are people who feel that certain restrictions mandated by the government (like

having to wear masks, or not being allowed to purchase certain kinds of weapons) are infringements on their liberty. I don't know how these restrictions differ from speed limits on our roads, or not being allowed to burn piles of leaves in our suburban backyards (two examples of restrictions that are for the most part accepted). I suppose the human animal is not one that can be understood entirely via the faculty of *reason*.

We can be "reasonable" – but we can also be intensely tribal, if not just downright *selfish*. One supposes that *voting* is an agreed-upon exercise by the public to decide what the majority of the people believe is in the best interest of everyone (and that the minority will just have to go along, even if they don't like it). But is this the case? What if a majority only cares about its own "tribe," rather than about the good of everyone?

Okay, I know this is turning too abstract, too much like an essay for a political philosophy class, so I will talk instead about my *feelings* this morning. I felt dispirited, unable to concentrate, and depressed by watching the news, with all the analysis and handwringing. I knew I had to get away from the coverage for a while, so I headed up to the Watuppa Reservation (it was a beautiful morning), and took a long walk on Wilson and Blossom Roads, with a side hike down "Corduroy Path" in the woods there. Both the physical rhythm of walking and all the sensory gifts of the forest – the beauty of the trees, the smell of the leaves and the damp earth, the cheerful chirping of birds, and the quiet – these calmed and uplifted me as nothing else would have been able to do.

As I was walking, and thinking about this coming Shabbat's Torah portion, *Vayera* (which tells the story of the almost-sacrifice by Abraham of his son, Isaac), my mind wandered to whether there was any sense in people "praying" for a certain outcome to an election. There are of course deeply religious people on both sides of the political spectrum in this nation. Why should God "listen" to *my* prayer and ignore the prayer of someone who wants the opposite result? If God were to have a "hand" in the outcome of a political race, wouldn't God fix it the way *God* wants it rather than listening to the prayers of one political party member or the other? I think of one of our congregants who is fond of quoting the Rabbinic dictum that "God does not stop the hand of a thief." But did God (or God's angel) not stop the hand of Abraham from slitting his son's throat?

At least that is what our sacred story tells us. Of course the Rabbis of the time of the Talmud lived in an era already far removed from the world of Abraham. Did

they already not take this story literally? Did they still believe that God has a “purpose” for this world, that God is moving us towards some desired end?

As I walked, a song from my childhood in the Episcopal Church came into my head. I could not remember all of the words precisely, but thanks to the internet, I can convey them here:

*God is working his purpose out,  
as year succeeds to year,  
God is working his purpose out,  
and the time is drawing near;  
nearer and nearer draws the time,  
the time that shall surely be,  
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God  
as the waters cover the sea.*

And here is the final verse:

*All we can do is nothing worth  
unless God blesses the deed;  
vainly we hope for the harvest-tide  
till God gives life to the seed;  
yet nearer and nearer draws the time,  
the time that shall surely be,  
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God  
as the waters cover the sea. (by Arthur Campbell Ainger, 1894)*

Granted, this sounds like a Christian missionary type of hymn. But it could just as easily, were it in Hebrew, be a Lubavitch song about the coming of the Moshiach (Messiah) or of the messianic era. Just last night I finished watching a beautiful 3-part series on PBS called “The Age of Nature.” The claim of the series is that with all of the problems we are facing now as a world due to human-caused disruption of nature, we human beings are finally beginning to turn our attention to how we can try to undo some of the mistakes we have made that have prevented nature from doing what it needs to do to survive – that Nature has a great power to heal itself, if we just get our obstructions out of her way. Like this hymn, like the Lubavitchers’ fervent belief in the coming of the Messiah, this series seems to put forth the belief that Nature will inevitably find a way.

And indeed, providing that the planet does not get hit by an asteroid so big that it pulverizes the whole Earth, Earth will survive. But we humans might not be here any longer (and many other creatures will have gone extinct, while others will evolve into something more adapted to the new conditions on Earth). Does *God*

have a “hand” in any of this? When looked at from such a distance (from the post-anthropocene point of view), *God* seems like a quaint human idea, something we invented to help us cope with the difficulty of getting through life on this earth, with the difficulty in living our lives together with other humans.

But I cannot really stand outside our own human era; I stand *within* it, and yes, this “God” business is precious to me. I don’t really know what God *is*; I just know I can’t live without God. Some people may call it by different names: love, spirit, wisdom, justice, joy, beauty, compassion. I think of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism) who called God “the power that makes for salvation.” But what is *salvation*?

Our human world will always have problems: injustice, disease, suffering, strife, mental illness and more. We live with the hopeful illusion that things are meant to keep getting better, that people all over the globe will eventually become more enlightened, more humane towards all people, less racist, less sexist, (and in my mind, this includes becoming more just towards the ecosystems we inhabit). But is this inevitable? Does God guide us at all? And if we are instead “on our own” in this Universe, what then?

I cannot answer all these questions. But as I walked this morning, I tried to turn the words of the hymn around, singing in my head “that *God* shall be filled with the *glory of Earth...*” – which would mean what, exactly? That perhaps we shall all eventually come to see how the glory of Nature on this gorgeous planet is one of the most powerful manifestations of “God” that we can encounter during our brief span of time in this existence. Which is not to discount the moral, ethical, or more “human” -like aspects of God. But it is this encounter with the beauty and wonder of Nature which sits opposite us – yes, we as human creatures are also *part* of it, and yet it is constantly *surprising* us, and feels everyday like a *gift* that we probably do not deserve – it is this encounter which can bring us to realize that whether we can understand one darn thing about *God* or not, that it is only by *grace* that are here, with enough consciousness to enjoy one another’s company. To be able to love, to sing, to dance, to appreciate tastes and aromas, opera and raucous humor, to be awed by the sight of the Grand Canyon or of a clear night sky full of stars...when you consider that you could so easily *not* have come into existence, you realize that every day is a gift.

I don’t know what will happen with this election, with this nation, with this whole *anthropocene* era. But last Friday after that surprise snow I took a detour on my

way home from Stop & Shop down Wilson Road. It was getting close to Shabbat, so I couldn't stay long, but I dashed into the woods at the Tattapanum Trail site long enough to catch the fleeting beauty of the snow in the still-autumnal forest. I suppose it is much less important that I *understand* everything than that I *appreciate* being here at all. We cannot understand it all. But we can *stand under* it, and be awed.



*Tattapanum Trail, Watuppa Reservation, dusted by a late October snow.*