

# WE ARE BETTER TOGETHER

Sermon September 18, 2022

(Part 1) Cherry Johnson

Wow! When I saw all those references to praising God in Psalm 113, I stopped short. It's no secret that, for me, "God" is a problematic word – masculine, anthropomorphic, hierarchical. That's not how I want to think of the Great Mystery.

And then I remembered the brilliant eco-mystic theologian Rabbi Arthur Waskow who spent a weekend with us a few years ago. He taught us that while the God-name YHWH (used in this psalm) seems impossible to pronounce, it is actually just as it should be – without vowels – because when spoken as is YHWH it comes out as a breath. This, he said, is because God IS breath. And Alleluia, the word of praise used in this Psalm, is a combination of Allelu (Praise be to)-YHWH. Praise be to Breath – the Source – to God, if you will.

It is THIS God – this Inter-Breathing as Waskow puts it – that unites us, that sets a place at the table for the poor, the marginalized, for EVERYONE. It is THIS God with whom I can conspire, THIS God to whom I can sing Allelu-YHWH this good morning.

Three years ago this church commissioned a Long Range Planning Team. About six months into our work, the pandemic hit. One hundred twenty-six of us met in focus groups on Zoom – new to us then - in June of 2020 to talk about our future. One person said this: *Because of COVID-19 and the protests following the death of George Floyd, we find ourselves in a liminal time...when dreams and visions are born. ... Let's use this moment in time as an opportunity to move SFBC forward in the service of our justice mission.*

I'm reading Rabbi Waskow's latest book, *Dancing in God's Earthquake*. He refers to this pandemic as "The Great Pause" and compares it to the wilderness journey story of the Exodus. I wonder ... as Seattle First Baptist Church has been dealing with The Great Pause, has been dancing through this pandemic earthquake, and this earthquake of new awakening to the persistence of racism, what have we learned? Who are we becoming?

I was struck, in those focus groups, by how most participants felt a deep sense of "home" at SFBC, while a significant number – mostly BIPOC and younger adults – felt alienation to varying degrees, and also by how many people lamented that they had been attending for years but still hadn't found their place. These are the things that caused the Long Range Planning Team to recommend a Small Groups Ministry and an Antiracism Initiative.

Dancing during earthquakes is not easy. Many of you have wondered if SFBC has gotten lost, have asked "WHEN will we be 'back to normal?'" or "Why do we have to use that word 'antiracism' so much?"

And yet, here is what I notice. We have changed our governance structure to ensure more BIPOC voices being heard. Dozens of us have participated in educational forums. BIPOC members have a support group. Leadership has been educating themselves about systemic racism. The Brave Space group supports white members in personal growth related to racism.

Then there is the majority demographic in the congregation (of which I am a part) – white folks over the age of 60. As a group, we learned about race at a time when for white communities “racism” meant the KKK, and being “racist” meant being an out-and-out bigot. We saw ourselves as the “good” people who loved everyone. And then all that we thought we knew got turned upside down by this earthquake. But many of us have begun to listen to younger voices, to educate ourselves about current understandings of race. I have seen us become familiar with new language that is second-nature to younger generations. We have come to understand that “white supremacy” is no longer just a reference to skinheads, but rather to the system which affords the dominant race benefits it does not grant to our BIPOC siblings. We are growing and wrestling with these realities.

As a church we are learning to recognize the frequent unintended harmful remarks and actions which cause our Black, Indigenous and People of Color members to feel unwelcome, and we are learning to ask hard questions, to interrupt, speak up, show up, call in, stand with, seek reconciliation, be brave. We are learning to do First Aid and Wound Care when harm occurs. (And if you missed Rev Doug Avilesbernal’s Wound Care presentation last Tuesday, be sure to watch it when it’s posted to the website!)

Yes, we are still dancing with the earthquake of racism and antiracism. But we are not dancing in the same place we were two years ago. Allelu-YHWH!

And that earthquake of alienation! As we seek to follow the way of Jesus, we are called to ensure a place at the table for EVERYONE. Even those who are unknown, who look different, or have a different worldview. Even those who smell bad or seem strange. Especially those.

The goal of the Small Groups is that absolutely everyone in this church (and eventually beyond our walls) can find a sense of belonging here. Today we begin. But there is more work to do – for all of us. Those who currently feel outside of the circle for any reason will not find “home” at SFBC unless we all learn two things: Radical Hospitality and Sacred Witness. These are the cornerstones of the Small Groups Ministry.

“Radical” means “to the root.” When we practice radical hospitality, we don’t just shake hands with people and hope they return. We sit with them (if they are open to that). We ask them to tell us about themselves, and then we listen. We LISTEN DEEPLY. Not talking. Not interrupting. Not saying “I know what you mean” and then shifting the focus to OUR story.

This listening is what I call SACRED WITNESS. With it, we convey that we care and value their presence. When they are done we offer gratitude for their story; we make note of their name and how to pronounce it and their pronouns so next time we can greet them like an old friend.

As we get better at this AND at our antiracism skills, those who have felt alienated will hopefully begin to feel seen and heard and safe – to feel they have a place at the table. Notice I said “FEEL” they have a place. “Equality” means we have enough seats at the table for everyone. “Equity” means everyone *feels they belong* in those seats. Let’s aim for equity!

Let’s keep dancing in these earthquakes until we find ourselves transformed into a wild and wooly, dancing and singing, multicultural, intergenerational Interbreathing Place-at-the-Table-for-All Beloved Community.  
Allelu-YHWH.

## **(Part 2) Pastor Mario**

Some specialized opinions say that Jesus and his disciples may have read this Psalm after their Last Supper. Jesus’ ministry connects us to the prophetic tradition of teaching in parables, indicating a powerful message of hope and salvation with symbols. Cherry’s message of what is becoming inside the bulb is also an open invitation to ask:

**What does it mean for us to gather in the Spirit as The Beloved Community that follows the Way of Jesus to share grief and Joy at the table in a journey with the Love of The Universe, who invites us to heal and regenerate life?**

First and foremost, The Small Groups Ministry at Seattle First Baptist seems to aim to be a sacred space for transcending our awareness of life as we grieve the loss of the myth of normal. This is not new for the faith community here at Seattle First Baptist. As far as I have experienced our denomination and my context of ministry as an immigrant, you are a congregation that has challenged the norms of society and has, in words and deeds, brought justice to those who were in the margin. Your history shows how you had the willingness to open space, equip and empower those who society closed their doors on their faces. Your history book has a silver thread that is called social justice.

You have experienced golden years of ministry amid controversial historical events. Again, in a moment like this in the USA and the world, God is calling you to do it again, to grieve what is “normal,” and open your hearts and minds to the adventure of embracing the new challenge diversity, all diversity. Just like it happened before, God has already begun his loving transformation. As we are reminded today, this are moments of becoming and together capturing the vision of accomplishing the transformation process as a community we are given the symbol of that in the bulbs there are flowers, the Small Group Ministries are bulbs becoming guided by the love of the Universe.

Many can see this vision already. That is why we are here at this stage; you know deep in you that there is a necessary journey of grief and joy ahead of us. The vision of healing and regeneration of life, and today we say: Here we are Lord, we are willing for the unveiling of what

it means to walk with YOU IN A MOMENT LIKE THIS, OH LOVE OF THE UNIVERSE we are called to welcome all diversity in the intimacy of our daily living.

Diversity is beautiful because it is what surrounds us, but our minds tend to seek a particular definition of beauty. The challenge is even more remarkable when our beauty definitions relate to the power of money and affluence, which is, in my opinion, the ill of our modern civilization, too materialistic and too mechanistic.

For example, I continue to bring here the Gross Domestic Product or GDP as a measure of wealth that does not allow us to give value to ALL life around us. GDP applied to any "Third World Country" does not recognize the importance of the living rivers, lakes, mountains, and soil in the living forests just as they are. These living subjects only have value for the GDP when converted into objects that can be transformed into cash. They become valuable when we extract minerals, timber, and other things to sell for money. We have to destroy the mountains, and the forests, pollute the rivers and the lakes and kill all these beautiful ecosystems because for the GDP they have no value when they are alive.

In the same way, as we are seeing in our day how politicians use as objects for their political campaigns the immigrants of color who are seeking an opportunity and a better life. They are treated as objects. They only have value for the company that has the power to employ them as cleaners, cooks, and builders. Only then do they have value not for who they are but for what they can do with their work for the economy. These people, these subjects and their families need an invitation to the table as we heard not as strangers but as part of the community.

In the sacred spaces at the table, we shall be able to grieve the damage of our definitions of beauty and regenerate life, all life. There is so much to discover together as we journey with the Love of the Universe and each other.

**What does it mean in the intimacy of the table to welcome the unveiling of life and find hope to "take action"?**

Here is where Psalm 113 is a celebration of a God who is all Love and for whom there is no such thing as "Normal": It says in verses 7 and 8:

"You raise the poor from the dust and lift the needy from the dung heap to give them a place at the table with rulers, with the leaders of your people."

The experience promises a possibility to welcome all diversity and the knowledge that life is in us and around us. The intimacy of being at the table where God is present, locally, personally, and collectively in the community will allow us sacred opportunities to transcend our materialistic and mechanistic understanding of life and arrive at a new version of nature. There will be earthquakes to dance. The realization of a new understanding of nature where there is equality in diversity is present in Jesus' ministry. He welcomes to the table the majority of those who were not included in the religious circles not among the powerful spheres of the Roman Empire.

Jesus invites to God's table, all those who no one wants to include they are indeed welcome as they are. The journey at the table is a process of discovery in the intimacy of a small group of friends. These friends welcome us just as we are.

Scientists are becoming increasingly aware that we are not made of matter but of energy. Life has feelings from the bottom up. The atom and its particles are not inert. They are communities that cooperate to form the life we see around us. If we can capture and awake to this new vision of life, we will be able to awake to the central message of Psalm 113: Life, new life rises from the dust and the dung. The dung is not an ultimate place. It is the beginning of new life; it is the normal process of life becoming.

In Conclusion:

The small groups' ministry is wholly aligned with the Love of this Universe to build space for the beloved community to blossom. A space to celebrate the rise of those who may be feeling in the dust, but as they transcend this stage of gloom and sorrow, the discovery of new life, new opportunities open up in a vision of regeneration that includes small actions in a worldwide collective effort to heal and regenerate us and our common home. Psalm 113 is a song of hope for all of us, for the beloved community to sit at the table where we are better together. We celebrate the Small Groups Ministry and the SFBC Mission of Love, justice, and hope. We are better together.

The Word of God of All of diversity Glory is to God! Amen.