

**By Peggy Eastman
Poet-in-Residence**

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Be of Good Cheer

*Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's
good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*

--Luke 12:32

Inside us is a longing we cannot name.
It is ragged around the edges, tender,
gaping, a source of restlessness. Seeking,
constantly seeking, we strive to satisfy that
unnamed longing. As we would a hole, we
seek to fill it up with something earthly...
all in vain. Nothing, not food, not water,
not wine, not work, not travel, not sports,
not even our own most precious human
relationships, can satisfy that longing, for
it is as deep as eternity. And so we turn to
You, Lord, finally admitting that it is You
we seek; it has always been so. Then and
then only can we feel that inner longing
diminish, as if You are sending us a clear
message: 'Be of good cheer; I am with
you always.' What relief we feel, as if
something amiss deep inside us has been
put right. The relief You provide is
palpable, persistent, permanent.

It is the repose that comes from
a healing of the spirit;

It is the gratitude that comes from
trusting in the Healer;

It is the peace that comes from
reaching a desired destination;

It is the calmness that comes from
being understood;

It is the closeness that comes from
being fully loved.

Our restlessness is gone, leaving a
welcome stillness in its place. We
thank you, Lord, for guiding us, restless
seekers that we are, so we may satisfy
our deepest longing. When we rest in You,
we have reason to be of good cheer.

Chasing the Sun

Millions of us watched it, that celestial journey across the heavens, raising our eyes skyward, eyes shielded by glasses specially darkened for protection. With something like magnetic force, we were drawn to view the first total solar eclipse to travel across the United States in more than a generation. From Oregon to South Carolina our oh's and ah's and claps greeted the moon's blotting of the sun; the glow of the solar corona (shimmering halo hotter than the sun's surface); the emergence of a bright spot on the blackened sun - the diamond ring effect as the fiery ball began to re-emerge from hiding. As a darkening momentarily covered our land by day, we shivered in this eerily shadowed atmosphere. As the sun began to show its face again we looked down to see hundreds of light-filled crescents, bright little land ripples among the shadows cast by leaves. 'Look, look,' we cried, entranced by earthly evidence of this heavenly spectacle. Lord, Your signs and wonders keep us ever enthralled. We Your creatures know when we are in the presence of majesty; only You can order the sun and the moon. Only You can decree when the moon's path will cover the brilliant solar disk we see in our daytime sky. Pale imitations are all of our cinematic special effects compared to Your natural astonishments; our computer enhanced images can never equal your glorious light shows. What a marvel is a star; what a mystery is a rosebud. What a wonder is a mountain, what a surprise a waterfall. Lord, well do we know that solar eclipses are rare, but Your signs and wonders are with us continually, just for the looking. Please help us to stop, pause, take note of all the natural blessings of our breathtaking world and give You great thanks for them each and every day.

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Everyday Holiness

Where does holiness dwell?
Is it kept behind the communion rail?
Is it locked in the Bible, or in a
book on lives of the saints? Is it
confined to hymns or sermons?
Holiness cannot be thus contained;
we see it every day.
A teenaged boy with dreadlocks
takes the arm of an elderly woman
with unsteady steps to help her
cross a jammed intersection. In a
convenience store, the young clerk
smiles and says, "Take your time,"
while a street dweller fumbles for
coins with smudged and careworn hands.
In a suburban hospital a newborn cries and
then snuggles against his mother's skin; in that
same hospital on another floor a nurse
gently cleanses the fragile skin of a man
with cancer, pneumonia and tubes.
On a beach with rolling breakers,
a chocolate Labrador puppy chases
a ball thrown by a chortling toddler.
In a forest the tops of long-needled pines
sway in gusts from a southwesterly direction
as they try to reach wind-surfing clouds.
On a country clothesline in noonday sunshine,
clean white sheets play flapping tag as they dry.
In a city soup kitchen, an oversized kettle of lentil,
hambone, onion and carrot soup simmers for hours,
its aroma issuing an open invitation to
all those who hunger in body and soul.
Where does holiness dwell? We see its face
everyday, and what we see is love.

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God's Washday

Newly washed, a pristine morning greets us,
hung out to dry before our widened eyes.
See how the sun bursts through that shining bush;
see how the light defines that rambling branch;
clustered seedpods, reddened berries glitter.
Note well a twining tendril trembling from its soak;
observe how every petal, blade and needle gleams,
emerging from shifting shadows to glint and glisten
as if to celebrate a newly acquired gloss.
Watch a clear drop clinging to that one serrated leaf;
undecided, the drop elongates and sways before it...
falls.
Look up, way up, to view some lingering fluff:
remnants of soapsuds scooting across a cerulean sky.
Lord God, wash us too, we beg;
make every day Your washday,
and rinse us clean.

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Just You and Me, Lord

After all the parties (too many people talking
too loudly about things we can't remember);
after all the meetings (too many flow charts, Powerpoints,
waving hands and cooling cups of coffee);
after all the tax forms, unpaid bills and 10-page
forms with boxes to fill in;
it's just You and me, Lord.
After all the dances and the jazz and the
razzmatazz; after the bright baubles for fingers,
arms and ears;
after the new cars with that just-hatched assembly line scent;
after the butterscotch ice cream and the pecan pie
and the Godiva chocolates and the aged Scotch;
it's just You and me, Lord.
After the New Year's Eve dinners and midnight kisses;
after the lit skies ending Fourth of July barbecues;
after the much hyped television series and
Hollywood's noir dramas and big-screen fireworks;
it's just You and me, Lord.
After all the weddings and the baptisms and the birthdays and
the funerals and the anniversaries
and the long goodbyes;
after all the dark nights of searching;
after all the unwanted hospital stays and the
melamine trays and the bottles of pills;
it's just You and me, Lord.
While I am earth-bound, stay with me
and be my everything, I pray;
for if I have You, I need nothing else.

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Little Fox Paws

How gracefully this little red fox lopes across my backyard. How regally she stretches her supple body up and places her front paws on the edge of my birdbath. How delicately she dips her pointed ears and takes a drink. So quietly does she lap that no sound reaches my bedroom window, where I watch her enthralled. Can this morning godly glimpse really be meant for me? Lord, You know I did not put this birdbath here for foxes. They're a rarity in a neighborhood more used to domestic dogs and cats. This fox is no one's pet; she belongs only to herself. This fox will never be leashed, never be brushed by human hand. Yes, this birdbath was meant for sprightly winged visitors who alight, dip their beaks, fluff their feathers and take flight, not for the likes of foxes. And yet, Lord, how can I deny one of Your thirsty creatures a drink, whether feathered or furred? In that burst of creation we know as Genesis, did You not command the earth to put forth "living souls according to their kinds, domestic animal and wild beast of the earth according to its kind?" Did You not give us charge of every living creature that is moving on the face of the earth? Did You not give us the example of Your saint, Francis of Assisi, who loved all Your creatures extravagantly? Who am I to decree that birds should have water from my hand while foxes should not? Lord, I will replenish the water in this birdbath so the little fox can come to drink her fill another day. I thank You for the quiet gift of this graced morning moment with her.

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Prayer for Redemptive Love

How often we have stumbled You know,
Lord; we long ago lost count.
It grieves us to ponder our personal
litanies of missed opportunities and
graceless acts of selfishness.
Lord, please blot out our failings
with Your redemptive love.
Our hearts have not been wholly Yours;
they have been mere halfway offerings.
We have not done all we could to
clothe the naked, feed the hungry
and house the homeless. We have
fallen short in charitable giving
and too often let the collection plate
pass by without doing our part.
We have acquired more and given
away less. We are ashamed to have
unused clothes hanging in our closets
and unworn pairs of shoes we no longer
slip onto our feet. Could not these clothes
and shoes be used by those in want?
Lord, please blot out our failings
with Your redemptive love.
Sadly we turn aside from our full larders;
we know it is wrong to have so much
stored when so many have so little
and know the gnaw of constant hunger.
We feel the prick of conscience; our sleep
is troubled. We cannot be at ease while
so many of Your flock struggle simply
to survive. We earnestly desire to be better
and do better; we humbly pray for Your help.
Lord, please blot out our failings
with Your redemptive love and mold us
into the people You would have us be.

Radical Hospitality

Lord Jesus, You call us to acts of radical hospitality. You, who stretched out Your arms on the cross of redemption, showed us the most radical act of love ever offered. Now, You ask us to stretch our arms wide and offer to all who need us our own radical hospitality. Lord, You who lived in community with Your apostles welcomed all who sought You into Your larger community: lepers, the poor, prostitutes, the disabled, beggars, tax collectors and thieves. It was Your dearest wish that all would know the Gospel and live together in the joy of Your good news. In Your expansive world, there was a place for everyone. There still is.

Did not our Father God set the example of radical hospitality when He looked at His creature, the first man, and said, "It is not good that the man should be alone"? God made Adam a helpmate, bone of his bone, heart of his heart. From that radical act of love we know that God does not want any of His children to be alone and lonely, bereft of the welcoming hospitality of community. What is radical hospitality but love amplified?

How are we living out that command to offer radical hospitality today?

What are we doing to shelter the homeless?

Do we offer nutritious food to the hungry?

Do we visit the sick and homebound with smiles and words of comfort? Do we offer to read the Scriptures to them? Pray with them?

How welcoming are we to those who look different? Come from a faraway land? Speak another language?

Do we welcome newcomers to our church? To a Bible study group? To serve on a committee?

Lord, we desire to be people of radical hospitality. As we cannot do this on our own, we humbly ask for Your intercessory aid. Please empower us, we earnestly pray.

Safe Harbor

Sometime during the long night of sleep
fog descended on the harbor and wrapped it
in softest gray, as if to bestow an earthly shroud.
Replacing the familiar are blurred outlines:
Where are the rooflines? Where the piers?
Where does land end and water begin?
Like displaced ghost timbers, masts reach up
into an uncertain sky as if to pierce this
shroud of gray that surely throws even seabirds
on the wing off course. We, moored inside
our shore cottage, can only wonder at this
shrouded world and offer gratitude for this,
our cottage at the edge. For might we not
be still on board our small craft, trying to
find our way home in this wrapped world?
Insecure are we in our navigation, and as
prone to floundering as flapping sails.
Unseen now are known landmarks: the
three pines on the point and the bulbous
water tower disappear into this settled shroud,
so finely woven no threads can be seen.
Hidden are our guiding, bobbing buoys.
Vast and deep is the ocean, Lord, and our
little vessel a lone surface voyager subject to
heeling, rocking, bucking and sudden spills.
But, safely moored inside, Lord, we can hear
Your voice in the call of the foghorn: low, deep,
prolonged, intermittent, persistent. Out of this
shrouded world, Your voice calls, guides, directs
and protects. What need have we of other landmarks
if we have You, Lord? What need have we of the
pines on the point, the water tower and the buoys?
Were we still unmoored on the deep, we know
You would safely guide us home in this enveloping
fog shroud. For in You, God of mercy,
do we put our trust.

Saved by Perfect Love

A hard path was your constant portion, Lord:
a wandering ministry with no home to call
Your own; foot-bruising days of continuous
walking, always walking; jostling crowds
and importunate petitioners pulling at Your hem;
pompous appointed authorities scheming
to entrap You; exhaustion at eventide.
All this and more You bore for us, Lord.
Profoundly disturbing were the failings
of the chosen twelve who let You down:
heavy with sleep were their eyelids when
You needed them most; continual was their
misunderstanding of Your teachings.
Before the morning crow of the cock
The man You chose to head Your church
denied You three times; another sold Your
life for thirty dirty pieces of silver.
Did Your heart come near to breaking?
All this and more You bore for us, Lord.
Agonizing was Your long walk to the
place of the skull. Not once but three times
You stumbled and fell. Unspeakable was
Your time of trial nailed with iron through
flesh to the hard wood of Your cross.
Crowned with gouging thorns were You,
stripped of your clothes and subjected to
the raucous casting of lots for Your cloak
(could they not have waited for You to die?).
All this and more You bore for us, Lord.
The dark days that came in three dragged on;
would this never be finished? At last it was over.
In a sudden sunburst of glory You ascended
to Your heavenly Father ennobled and exalted,
there to be our loving savior and advocate,
master, teacher, pastor, redeemer and friend.
All this and more You have done for us, Lord;
how can such perfect love possibly be?

Spiritual Antibodies

Lord Jesus, we know that in this imperfect world invisible viral enemies can invade our bodies and cause epidemics and pandemics. Insidious and opportunistic are these wily unseen foes: they can jump from one species to another and take mutational shifts that evade vaccines. Infectious outbreaks of pestilence remind us just how powerful are these inner viral invaders; they can make us very sick; they can kill. We thank You, Lord, for the antibodies we have built up against some of these viral enemies.

But there are other kinds of illnesses, Lord, illnesses of the soul. You know how desperately we need antibodies against these enemies, too. The list of these spiritual enemies is long: fear, lust for power, anger, selfishness, greed, hardness of heart, failure to repent, despair, impatience, failure to forgive, judging others by outward appearance, boredom, hoarding, neglect of the poor, addiction...and so many more.

Please, Lord, help us to build up antibodies against the spiritual illnesses that separate us from You. Give us discernment and discipline in how we spend our time, so we can walk the path of deeper prayer with You. Help us to resist the temptations of too much television, too much time looking at computer screens, too much time on smartphones. Help our souls develop antibodies to all that draws us away from you in this fast-paced world of constant distractions.

Please protect us against people who dwell in darkness and strive to lead us into evil ways. They can be seductive, that we know. Please grant us immunity against them; they are no match for You. We know that Your antibodies, Lord, will always guard our souls.

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Poet-in-Residence**

The Waters Are Rising

The waters are rising.

Hurricanes with monstrous intent flood our rivers and estuaries;
walls of water crash onto our coasts and collapse our homes.

Battering winds topple trees we trusted were firmly rooted;
piers and walls snap like matchstick models
crafted by children at play.

Have we learned nothing from the first great flood?

What ark can save us now, Lord?

For nearly half a year the waters of the biblical great flood
prevailed upon the earth, and no sign of land was seen.

If we bring the second great flood upon ourselves,
what dove can save us now, Lord?

The waters are rising.

Lord, You blessed Noah and his family with

Your boundless mercy;

You delivered them to safety on dry land.

With faith and fear Noah followed Your salvation blueprint
to the letter and number, and built the ark You bade him make.

Please, Lord, guide us as You did Noah;

deliver us from our sinful ways with Your plan for our salvation.

Lord, we do not want to

bring a second great flood

upon ourselves.

We do not want to be latter-day environmental refugees;

we do not want to be earthly evacuees.

The waters are rising.

Please, Lord, help us to preserve and cherish this fragile
blue-green globe on which we depend for our very being.

Temper our rapacious appetite for ever more energy to fuel our
castles and limousines, and

that grasping greed for fossil fuels that turns us into gluttons
who dig and drill and dam.

The waters are rising.

For Noah you set your rainbow in the heavens, Lord,

Your sacred sign that never more would flood waters deluge
and cover all the earth.

But the waters are rising.

Please, Lord, deliver us from ourselves, we pray.

Wayward But Willing

That free will You gave us is quirky, Lord;
sometimes it leads us down wayward paths
we should not tread. We need the strength
to tame it. Saul/Paul knew its power, that
capricious will; did he not say that at times
it led him to do the things he did not wish
to do, and at other times pulled him away
from doing what he most desired to do?
Please, Lord, make Your will our will.
Surely we are Your grand experiment, Lord,
creatures who can choose our own path.
This is no double-blinded study; there is no
control group. It's not for us to probe
the mystery of why You made us so,
but it is our duty to consider whether our
choices are pleasing in Your sight.
Please, Lord, make Your will our will.
Are the paths we choose in concordance
with Your Scriptures? Do they bear the
fruits of kindness? Do they bring others
happiness and peace? Do we bring Your
word to those who don't yet know You?
Do we seek out ways to feed the hungry,
clothe those in rags, house those who
have no roof and no bed, comfort those
who grieve and those who are not well?
Please, Lord, make Your will our will.
And when we stray, as stray we will,
please set our feet back on Your right path
and forgive us, for we know that walking
Your way is where we belong. With Your
help, we will try ever harder to discern
Your will for us and make it our own,
diligently taming the obstinate caprices of
that quirky will that wants to go its own way.

Welcome to God's Family

You are a member of God's family; so am I.
Sons and daughters of the Almighty are we:
that is nothing less than our inheritance
as members of the family of our Lord.
Doesn't it give you pause?
To those who feel unwanted, we say:
you will find belonging in the family of God.
To those who are hurting, we say:
you will find comfort in the family of God.
To those whose biological families have
left them loveless, we say:
you will find love in the family of God.
To those whose lives have been arid and
without meaning, we say:
you will find purpose in the family of God.
To those who feel soulless, we say:
you will find your soul in the family of God.
Come, let us celebrate our status as
beloved children in the family of God.
Don't you find this good news?
Let us shout with joy, let us dance with glee.
Let us join hands as fellow members of God's
family. To those hanging back and looking on,
too frightened or diffident or lacking in confidence,
trust or hope to come forward, we say:
we don't care who your parents were
or where you came from or where you live.
We are all related in God's family, and
we take care of our own.

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Where Shall We Turn

Comes the earthquake,
comes the hurricane,
comes the deluge,
comes the darkness,
where shall we seek our refuge?
Comes the airborne attack,
comes the genocidal terror,
comes the armed thief in the night,
where shall we turn for succour?
Can our flimsy limbs stand firm
on moving earth? Can our frail frames
withstand lion-roaring winds that
topple hundred-year-old oaks?
Can our scale-less bodies swim
fast enough to escape devouring
floods? What defense can we offer
against a suicide bomb-bearer wedded
to nihilism? Can our exposed bodies
resist weapons wielded by zealots? Can we
disarm the stealthy thief who stalks by night?
Where shall we turn for succour?
Lord, You know our vulnerabilities
far better than we do. We, Your creatures,
humbly beg Your protection in perilous times.
When the ground rocks, when the hurricane
shakes the rafters, when the flood gulps
the house, when the plane of death
flies straight at us, when the gun
is poised to shoot, when the intruder
appears masked at the bedside,
be our ever-present refuge.
O Lord, we have no other.
Comes the deluge, comes the Deliverer.

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