

**The Socks of God**  
**Isaiah 35:1-10**  
**December 15, 2007**

When the first snow fell a week and a half ago, I happened to catch Garrison Keillor's Writer's Almanac on WYPR. Like Prairie Home Companion, Writer's Almanac airs exclusively on radio. Unlike Prairie Home Companion which is a two hour variety show, Writer's Almanac is a five minute reflection on the historical circumstance behind an American writer or great work of American literature. Once Keillor narrates the story behind the story (so to speak), he concludes his program by reading a poem. On that Wednesday as the first fluffy stuff of the season gently blanketed the yard, Garrison Keillor read a poem entitled Snow by Massachusetts-born Anne Sexton. She was a 20th century poet. Garrison Keillor's deep, distinctive, expressive voice read:

**Snow**

**Snow,  
blessed snow,  
comes out of the sky  
like bleached flies.  
The ground is no longer naked.  
The ground has on its clothes.  
The trees poke out of sheets  
and each branch wears the sock of God.**

**There is hope.  
There is hope everywhere.  
I bite it.  
Someone once said:  
Don't bite till you know  
if it's bread or stone.  
What I bite is all bread,  
rising, yeasty as a cloud.**

**There is hope.  
There is hope everywhere.  
Today God gives milk  
and I have the pail.**

My reactions ranged from the sublime to the silly. I thought that it was a beautiful poem. The simplicity of her diction renders a charm that is more appealing than an ornate, busy poem. I also enjoyed Sexton's theology and her straightforward embrace of hope. Her lack of cynicism captivated me. Irony and sarcasm get old after a while; hope sounded fresh. At some point after I heard this poem read, I thought "How lovely that Garrison Keillor timed the reading of this poem with our first snowfall. What a thoughtful thing for him to do." Garrison Keillor broadcasts out of Minnesota. My errant thought was absurd. However, the timing of the falling snow and the reading of the poem created a lovely moment. As I finished getting ready for work, I kept thinking about the poem and the poet. Somehow my English major brain scratched up this thought from the misty recesses of my brain: "Anne Sexton. Anne Sexton. Didn't she commit suicide? Or, am I getting her confused with someone else?" I immediately checked my Norton Anthology of Modern American Poetry. I quickly found Anne Sexton. The last sentence of the short introduction to her body of work finishes with this statement "Those who had followed her career were shocked but hardly surprised in 1974 to hear of her suicide."

I've actually ordered a biography of Anne Sexton from Amazon, but I haven't received it yet so I can't speak about the circumstances of her death or why those who followed her career weren't surprised. Nor have I read all of her poems. Based on this one hopeful poem, I started to ask: how can someone who sees each tree branch holding the sock of God completely lose sight of any reason to hang onto life? How can someone who sees hope, like a deep snow, blanketing the ground, the house, the road, the birdbath, the woods, the fence, the mailbox... how can someone who sees hope everywhere kill herself? How can

someone who bites and always tastes bread, not stone, how can she choose death rather than the chance to taste the bread of life once again? How did she misplace her pail? We don't need to know the details in order to know that the answer is, of course, depression.

Depression is a disease. Depression is not a disease of the emotions; it is a disease of the brain just like epilepsy is a disease of the brain. Depression is a complicated disease because genetic, environmental, emotional, and hormonal factors can all be causes of the disease. Depression affects the nervous system, the endocrine system, and the limbic system. It can also disrupt digestion, cause body aches, disrupt sleep patterns, accompany chronic fatigue, weaken your heart, and ruin one's ability to concentrate. Depression also causes distortions, serious distortions. Just as we would not think of telling a person with pneumonia "don't take antibiotics for your infection," nor should she think about telling a person with depression "you don't need that medication." Although talk therapy is an important part of the management of the disease, medical intervention is necessary to correct the chemical imbalance that is the root cause of this disease.

For those of you who don't understand people who cry depression, I'll never be able to explain to you how it feels to be depressed because it is so much worse than you ever imagined that it could be. Yes, everyone gets the blues. The blues come; then they go. Depression is different than the blues; it's substantially different. Depression means that you ache when you wake up in the mornings, that you might spend about half your day with your hands and legs shaking as if you've had four Mountain Dews even if you haven't had too much caffeine, that no matter how much you sleep you can't get enough sleep, and that your love for people seems somehow bizarrely removed from your heart. Depression means that you habitually see yourself as a meaningless piece of flesh and bones. You're not feeling like you're disrespectful to God when you say that you're meaningless piece of flesh and bones because you're convinced that God is disappointed in you too. Not only are you convinced of it, but you have tons and tons of proof because you constantly let everyone down, including yourself. In the past year I've been initiated into the club of people who know how depression feels. I know how pernicious that hopelessness can be. I know how illogical that such depths of feeling bad and feeling worthless sound to healthy people, but I now know the logic of how it feels to have the strange logic of depression to dominate your life.

When Anne Sexton was healthy, she wrote this marvelous poem that located hope everywhere. She delighted in the observation that trees wore the socks of God. When your body hurts and your brain becomes diseased with hopelessness, it's not about will or moral fiber or strength. It's about your body chemistry being under siege. Some folks submerge under all of that weight and can't resurface. This year I've received good care, but this exhausting, demanding battle with depression shoved me through a new portal. This new portal, when I ask God "What good is all of this? What point does it serve? How am I a better pastor? What good does it do you, O God, if I am disabled in either the short or long term from this experience? Who am I to be?" God didn't answer. God hasn't answered. Maybe there is an answer forthcoming, but maybe not. Maybe I know the answer. Maybe the answer is what it always is in this situation-- be wiser, be kinder, be more loving, be more compassionate, be more understanding. In other words, be more God's than you were. I have a new take on disease. I have a new take on how long people suffer. I have a new take on how despair and hopelessness require a tremendous amount of courage and bravery for those who live with it and who face it and try to stare it down day after day after day. I have a glimpse, a new glimpse, of how people suffer. Because I have a new glimpse of how people suffer, I have a new glimpse of how suffering people need God and how suffering people need the church.

Anne Sexton who knew the bounty and the blessings of God. She found hope everywhere. Yet she also knew the depths of hopelessness. How does the church address the reality of suffering in the world? Do some of our greatest claims as Christians come across as facile and shallow to those who are shrouded in darkness, who thirst for clean water or clean air, who have been victimized by violence, who know limited possibilities for alternatives for their life, or who know day after day of psychic or physical pain with no relief in sight? What can we do to confront hopelessness? What do we do as the body of Christ so that people know that they have a source of hope that continues to shine brightly, that shines consistently no matter what the circumstances of the economy or politics of the moment? What do we believe that the church can do about suffering in the world? Do we believe that the church can do something about suffering in the world?

In the prophet Isaiah creates a vivid picture of a desert landscape. This desert isn't just a metaphor; it's a real desert. When the Babylonians removed a big chunk of the Israelites from their hand, they took them into Babylon across a desert. When God allowed the Israelites safe passage home, they crossed back over the desert. The desert separated the Israelites from their home. The crossing of the desert was a huge hardship. The return of the exiles, albeit joyous, would mean that they would once again

endure the perils of the desert. When the prophet addressed the transformation of the landscape, he spoke on behalf of the Creator who can still tame creation. The prophet spoke on behalf of the Creator who does not tire of creating.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, the desert is real. Our first responsibility must be to acknowledge that the desert is real. The prophet paints this picture of a changed, transformed landscape but not everything about the landscape is altered. The sand, the dryness, the isolation, the heat of the desert- all remain. They are realities. The desert is real. Christians must practice sensibility and sensitivity. We must acknowledge that our love for God means that we share the holy obligation to be honest about the suffering of the world. People hurt. They hurt deeply. They do without. They experience violence. Bad things happen. People near and far to us suffer unimaginably horrible experiences. Instead of playing judge and jury, the church needs to stop moralizing and acknowledge the reality, the damage, and the destruction that people endure. The desert is real. What are we going to do about it?

The prophet teaches us that the desert is real, but the prophet also teaches us that God is Sovereign even in the desert. The desert is a God-infused landscape. The desert is a place where God does some of God's most amazing work. It's amazing work because, in spite of the harsh realities of the desert, good things live. Beauty flourishes. The crocus, the tiny flower that is one of our first harbingers of spring, manages to find a way to bloom in the desert. Salvation is God's work. All salvation, all saving falls under God's domain. God brings salvation to the desert. God strengthens the bodies of those who are afraid to make the difficult journey back home. Those with physical limitations will find a reversal of fortune because of God's ministrations. The God who brings salvation to the desert also brings water, streams of water, to the desert. Those who God calls will find safe crossing. Sorrow and sighing will cease; they will be things of the past. Joy will take their place. Singing, laughter, gladness, hopefulness will take their place.

So the church teaches that yes, the desert is real. We also teach and live and breathe and share that, the crocus blooms in the desert. The crocus blooms are as real as everything else about the desert. We teach and live and breathe and rejoice because of the streams in the desert that make safe passage possible. The Bible teaches us that the desert is real, but that God is sovereign in the desert. The Bible teaches us that God makes the desert a place where, although it is easy to get lost because every direction looks the same as every other direction, even those without any sense of direction can find their way home. No longer is the desert a bewildering landscape, but it is a foolproof landscape through which even the simplest can find their way.

In December 2003 I visited my brother and sister-in-law in San Diego. Fairly close to Balboa Park we visited a cactus garden. They had cacti of many shapes, sizes, spikes, and colors. It was breathtaking, wonderfully splendid in its diversity of color, shape, size, and texture. My sister-in-law said, "you know Theodore Geisel was born in San Diego." Theodore Seuss Geisel. As I stood in the wonderment of that cactus garden with all of its shapes and sizes, I said "Ah! I understand his iconography now." Dr. Seuss knew the beauty of the desert. I love the red clay and dogwoods of a North Carolina spring. I love the ancient beauty of the Smoky Mountains. I love the rocks hewn from the ground used in fences and housing in Maryland. I love the clarity of the brook beside the trail in Patapsco. I love cactus beauty. Dr. Seuss knew a different sort of beauty, cactus beauty, and he incorporated it imaginatively in his many books.

The church will only be faithful if we acknowledge the realities of the desert. Nor can the church pretend that spiritual solutions can take the place of medication or good public policies or job training or strong infrastructures. Christians must consistently acknowledge that the harsh realities of the desert are real, but that even the desert is a Christ-dominated landscape. The desert is real, but hope is real too. We can hold out hope. We can hold out hope for others as they make their way across the desert. We can demonstrate our solidarity with those who are experiencing a time of bleakness and travail. When others can't find the oasis, we'll have enough crocuses planted so that their blooms will be seen for miles and miles. The church, on behalf of the Christ we adore, will bloom for all to see and for all to recognize as a landmark pointing their way safely toward home. Amen.

Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, II Edition. p. 1303.