

(With thanks for sermon "seeds" to the Rev. Dr. Nathan Jennings, Liturgy professor at the Seminary of the Southwest.)

Think of a dust devil, a good old west Texas whirlwind. Whenever the air is moving there are always little eddies and vortices and swirls in it. The same thing happens in water. But you can more easily see the little swirls and eddies on the surface of water. You don't always see these currents in the air because the air is invisible.

But sometimes those little eddies in the air sweep up some dust, and then they become visible—little dusty brown whirlwinds spiraling across west Texas.

Now, imagine a dust devil from the perspective of a little grain of dust. Yes, in the winds of west Texas, grains of dust often get blown from point A to point B. And sometimes they even combine to turn the sky various shades of brown. But there's no larger pattern. Just a brown tinge to the air.

But imagine a little grain of dust getting picked up by a whirlwind. That one grain of dust swirls and spirals around with millions of other little grains of dust. If a grain of dust could see, it wouldn't see much. From inside the whirlwind, everything probably looks like brown sky.

But if you stand outside the whirlwind, you could perceive a larger and more definite shape. A whirlwind is not some amorphous brown cloud. It's a spiraling, eddying shape twirling across the landscape.

A sentient grain of dust inside the whirlwind wouldn't be able to perceive that larger shape. It would just know that it had been picked up by something bigger than itself. The grain of dust has been taken from the ground, and picked up into the air, and moved around and around. And eventually the whirlwind will set it back down again.

Our Old Testament lesson today is from the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is Moses' farewell address to the Hebrew people before he dies. 40 years earlier, Moses led the people out of slavery in Egypt. For 40 years they've been wandering in the wilderness.

But now they're on the border of the Promised Land. Moses is giving the people final instructions about how they should live.

And one of the things Moses says this morning is that the people should love God, and obey him, and hold fast to him.¹

The Hebrew people have experienced amazing things during their Exodus from Egypt. Plagues and mighty signs. Crossing the Red Sea or more precisely the Sea of Reeds. Meeting God at Mt. Sinai. Getting water miraculously from the rock. They have experienced God's presence and God's power in special ways.

But now, they're going to be entering the Promised Land. That means things are going to change. First, Moses is going to die and Joshua is going to take over as their leader.

¹ Dt 30.20

But there are other changes for the Hebrew people. No longer will they be led by God's presence in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

They're going to be growing their own food. No longer will they go out every day and collect the Manna, the daily bread from heaven which God has provided.

In a way, they've been caught up for 40 years in a special way. They've been swirling around at God's direction in the wilderness. But now God is going to set them down again. And they'll have to face new realities.

But in the midst of these changes Moses tells the Hebrew people to continue to love God, and to obey him, and to hold fast to him. And one of the ways they will hold fast to God is through their rituals of worship. God has commanded them and their descendants to continue to remember what has happened to them in Egypt and the wilderness.

Every year in the spring, they are to participate again in the Passover. They will ritually reenact what their ancestors did the night before they left Egypt.

50 days later every year, on the Feast of Pentecost, they will ritually reenact God giving them the law at Mt. Sinai.

And every fall during the Feast of Tabernacles, they will set up tents and outdoor shelters and for several night in a row, reenact what it was like to be living in tents as they wandered 40 years through the wilderness.

Through all of these celebrations, they will participate again in the ways that God intervened in special ways. They will remember the ways God lifted their ancestors out of slavery, carried them through the wilderness, and deposited them in the Promised Land. They will remember that the deliverance from Egypt was like a whirlwind lifting up pieces of dust from the Earth and carrying them swirling around and around, and then laying them down again.

Of course, we Christians do similar things. We have our yearly festivals and remembrances. We enter into the celebrations of those mighty acts whereby God was especially present in this world through Jesus Christ. We have our festivals: Christmas, Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost.

But these remembrances are not just restricted to annual festivals and observances. Remembering is also something we do week after week.

We live in this earthly world. But every week we gather. And like a whirlwind sweeping up dust and lifting it into the air, our liturgy can sweep us up into a different reality.

Now, God is far too big and immense and different from us to be grasped with our limited human intellects. But every week we are given the opportunity to participate in heavenly realities. We are invited to be swept up into a transcendent reality, and to participate in spiritual things that would otherwise be beyond our grasp or our understanding.

At Christmas every year we celebrate Jesus coming down to Earth, to dwell among us. That's a wonderful thing.

But in the Eucharist every week, we are caught up in the exact opposite. We are invited to ascend spiritually to heaven. We are invited for just a few moments to spiritually set foot in God's heavenly reality.

We are invited to a place where seraphim and cherubim, angels and archangels and all the company of heaven are forever singing God's praises. We are invited to join in that continual worship with them.

It's no accident that I say to you every week, "Lift up your hearts." That's not a random or empty statement.

Instead, that's an invitation for all of us to participate in the worship of the living God as the angels experience it. It is a chance to get swept up, to get lifted from the earth, to enter the swirling heavenly reality that is usually beyond human sight or hearing or comprehension.

And you tell me in response, 'Yes, let's do it.'

I say, "Lift up your hearts." And you say,

{8:00 "We lift them up unto the Lord."}

{10:30 "We lift them to the Lord."}

And then I say,

{8:00 "Let us give thanks unto our Lord God."}

{10:30 "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God."}

And you say, 'Yes, let's do it. Let's go for it.'

{8:00 "It is meet and right so to do."}

{10:30 "It is right to give him thanks and praise."}

Do you know, if I said,

{8:00 "Let us give thanks unto our Lord God,"}

{10:30 "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God,"}

and you said, 'Nope, not going to do it,' that'd be it? The service would stop right there.

I can't celebrate the Eucharist without at least one other person participating. And I don't stand at the altar and lead the celebration because I'm so wonderful or anything like that.

I stand at the altar because the church has asked me to perform a specific function. I have been ordained to be the one to stand up in public and lead the prayer that all of you are

praying. I'm the one who speaks out loud the words of the Eucharistic Prayer on behalf of the entire congregation.

And you give me specific permission to do that every week.

I say,

{8:00 "Let us give thanks unto our Lord God."}

And you reply, "It is meet and right so to do."}

{10:30 "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God."}

And you reply, "It is right to give him thanks and praise."}

So the prayer I pray is your prayer, not just mine. You ask me to pray it out loud on your behalf. And at the end, you add your stamp of approval by saying, "Amen." That means "So be it." It means, 'Yes, I agree.'

And you are there at the altar with me every Sunday. You've presented bread and wine and had them placed on the altar. OK, everyone didn't bring it up personally, but you've authorized ushers and acolytes to get it there on your behalf.

You put pieces of paper, cash, checks, legal tender into offering plates, and send those to the altar. Those pieces of paper are pieces of your time, your treasure, your livelihood, your life in this world. By doing so you are in a real way placing a piece of yourself on this altar.

And you've put yourself up on this altar in a spiritual way too.

I say, "Lift up your hearts." And you reply,

{8:00 "We lift them up unto the Lord."}

{10:30 "We lift them to the Lord."}

We get caught up in that heavenly worship, we get caught up in that divine liturgy that goes on all the time in the heavenly places.

We lift up our hearts, our wills, our lives. We swirl up from our normal earthly world and participate in heavenly, transcendent realities.

Almost 1,700 years ago, St. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote about this moment in worship. He said,

"The Priest cries aloud, 'Lift up your hearts.' For truly we ought in that most (awesome) hour to have our heart on high with God, and not below, thinking of earth and earthly things. In effect therefore the Priest bids all in that hour to dismiss all cares of this life, or household anxieties, and to have their heart in heaven with the merciful God."²

² Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis* 5:4, cited (in an older translation) by my mentor, The Rev. Dr. Leonel Mitchell in *Praying Shapes Believing*

Cyril is saying that for a moment, we leave earth and earthly things and earthly anxieties behind. And God, in his love and his mercy invites us into his nearer presence in his heavenly realm. And that's an amazing and awesome thing.

Can we understand everything about God or about his heavenly realm? Of course not. No more than a speck of dust can grasp the totality of the whirlwind it's caught up in.

And yet, God allows us to be part of these realities, nonetheless. God allows us to join in with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. God allows us to join in their song,

{8:00 "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts:
Heaven and earth are full of thy glory."}

{10:30 "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
Heaven and earth are full of your glory."}

Other specks of dust down on the ground may not understand what's happening. From the outside, what we're doing may look dumb or pointless. They may think that we're weird people going through a weird ritual every Sunday.

But, as one liturgical scholar says, "What is really happening, in the heavenly places, heavenly things are in motion and they're sweeping up the earthly realities we usually deal with into a heavenly reality."³

That's the larger pattern. We don't see it from within the whirlwind. But it's an amazing thing, nonetheless.

So "Lift up your hearts."

{8:00 "Let us give thanks unto our Lord God."
"It is meet and right so to do."}

{10:30 "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God."
"It is right to give him thanks and praise."}

³ The Rev. Dr. Nathan Jennings, *Liturgical Theology*