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 Arlington Street Church
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Ready For All Things

For my Great Grandmother, Gertrude S. Drew,
 on the occasion of her 140th birthday.

Her eyes always filled with tears of pride when the American flag was paraded past.
 In this New Year, may we “choose again what we chose before.”

2016’s word of the year was *surreal*. Based on an algorithm that tracks high-volume word searches, Merriam-Webster Dictionary comes up with 10 “words of the year.” We’re not going to talk about people looking up the meaning of “surreal.” But three other Words of the Year (two are actually phrases) bear a shout-out: “feckless,” meaning “lacking initiative or strength of character; irresponsible;” “*faute de mieux*,” meaning “for want of a better alternative;” and – my favorite – “*in Omnia paratus*,”¹ meaning “ready for all things.”²

As we launch into this New Year, what might it mean to be *in omnia paratus* – ready for all things?

The inclination to go off half-cocked is powerful. I’m going to suggest that we begin right now by resisting that inclination, begin with the rough translation of an old Zen adage: *Don’t just do something; sit there*. Right now, there’s nowhere else to be. Right now, there’s nothing else to do. Let’s take a few moments and sit ... right here ... right now.

This is the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda’s *A callarse (Keeping Quiet)*. To stretch it out, I’m going to read it in Spanish, as Neruda wrote it, and then in a translation adapted from Alastair Reid. I invite you to use this little gift of time to quiet your mind, find your breath, breathe, and listen for your heartbeat.

¹ *pah-RAH-toose*

² patch.com/massachusetts/concord/surreal-merriam-websters-word-year?utm_source=newsletter-daily&utm_medium=email&utm_term=arts%20%26%20entertainment&utm_campaign=newsletter&utm_content=article-topstories&utm_slot=1

Ready?

Ahora contaremos doce
y nos quedamos todos quietos.

Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still.

*

Por una vez sobre la tierra
no hablemos en ningún idioma,
por un segundo detengámonos,
no movamos tanto los brazos.

For once on the face of the earth,
let's not speak in any language;
let's stop for one second,
and not move our arms so much.

*

Sería un minuto fragante,
sin prisa, sin locomotoras,
todos estaríamos juntos
en una inquietud instantánea.

It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines;
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.

*

Los pescadores del mar frío
no harían daño a las ballenas
y el trabajador de la sal
miraría sus manos rotas.

Fishermen in the cold sea
would not harm whales

and the man gathering salt
would look at his hurt hands.

*

Los que preparan guerras verdes,
guerras de gas, guerras de fuego,
victorias sin sobrevivientes,
se pondrían un traje puro
y andarían con sus hermanos
por la sombra, sin hacer nada.

Those who prepare green wars,
wars with gas, wars with fire,
victories with no survivors,
would put on clean clothes
and walk about with their [companions]³
in the shade, doing nothing.

*

No se confunda lo que quiero
con la inacción definitiva:
la vida es sólo lo que se hace,
no quiero nada con la muerte.

What I want should not be confused
with total inactivity.
Life is what it is about;
I want [nothing to do]⁴ with death.

*

Si no pudimos ser unánimes
moviendo tanto nuestras vidas,
tal vez no hacer nada una vez,
tal vez un gran silencio pueda
interrumpir esta tristeza,

³ In Alastair Reid's translation: "brothers"

⁴ AR: "no truck"

este no entendernos jamás
y amenazarnos con la muerte,⁵

If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a great⁶ silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.

*

tal vez la tierra nos enseñe
cuando todo parece muerto
y luego todo estaba vivo.

Perhaps the earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and [then everything is]⁷ alive.

*

Ahora contaré hasta doce
y tú te callas y me voy.

Now I'll count⁸ to twelve
and you keep quiet and I'll⁹ go.¹⁰

*

To be *in omnia paratus* – ready for all things – we have to stop running in circles, or, conversely, we have to get out of bed, get off the couch, and walk out the door. We have to be deliberate about getting very quiet inside,

⁵ The next three lines belong with this stanza

⁶ AR: “huge”

⁷ AR: “later proves to be”

⁸ AR: “count up”

⁹ AR: “I will”

¹⁰ *Extravagaria* by Pablo Neruda (1904-1973), 1958. Translation by Alastair Reid [adapted].

until we know exactly what it is we need to do, and what it is we need not to do.

*

Just as happened here in Boston, an Anglican diocese in Canada was sued for covering up the long-ago sexual abuse of children in its parochial schools. The current bishop, who had been in no way involved, made profound apologies, called for sincere penitence by his people on behalf of those who had gone before them, and paid out settlements to survivors. In the end, everyone agreed that, as much as possible, justice had been done. But the diocese was bankrupt.

Rev. Doctor Walter Brueggemann, a Hebrew Bible scholar and theologian, told the story of the day after the bankruptcy was announced: In a press conference, the bishop proclaimed, simply, “We have a book..., a table, and a cup. And we are back in business.” And then he authorized the clergy of the diocese to leave if they wanted to.

The question was, Are you willing to stay among these people, who have been deeply wounded by men who were called to serve them as you have been called to serve? Or would you rather go somewhere less messy, less fraught? The choice is yours. The bishop added, “We have a book that tells the story of G*d’s transformative power.... We have a table where all are welcome. We have a cup of life poured out in forgiveness.” No one left – not one! They were back in business, the business of welcome and healing and forgiveness.¹¹

I’ve been carrying around this story of going all the way down to the bottom – bankruptcy, in every sense of the word, and getting back up again: this story of sin and an unwavering commitment to redemptive love. And I’ve been wondering what it says to us about the choices before those of us who are feeling betrayed and undone and frightened by what lies behind us, and what lies before us. I hear that it directs us to bear witness to “the full catastrophe,” as Zorba the Greek would say, and then to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and move passionately into the future.

“We have a book, a table, and a cup,” said the bishop.

What do we have?

¹¹ Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann, “Getting Smashed for Jesus,” preached at the 2014 Festival of Homiletics in Minneapolis, MN. Please see time.com/110732/sermon-series-getting-smashed-for-jesus/

To begin, we have each other. Recently, I reread a poem called *The Wild Rose* by Kentucky farmer, poet, and environmental activist Wendell Berry. He wrote this for Tanya Amyx, his wife of more than 59 years.

Sometimes hidden from me
 in daily custom and in trust,
 so that I live by you unaware
 as by the beating of my heart,
 Suddenly you flare in my sight,
 a wild rose blooming at the edge
 of thicket, grace and light
 where yesterday was only shade,
 and once again I am blessed,
 choosing again what I chose before.

In these times, it feels so important that we look and really see – listen and really hear – take stock of what and who we have, choose carefully, choose well – perhaps un-choose some poor choices from the past, and reaffirm the good choices we’ve made: choose again what we chose before.

In Jonathan Weiner’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Beak of the Finch*, he writes, “There’s an old proverb: Just sink one well deep enough.” To be *in omnia paratus* – ready for all things – we have to sink a deep well, each of us, from which to draw the waters that will sustain us. Where is your well? What is life-giving for you? To what will we stay true – even beyond bankruptcy? What can we do to sustain what we love?

*

I didn’t set out to preach a heavy sermon; G*d only knows that, these days, I, for one, long for reasons to be joyful. Now more than ever, I invite us to take ourselves very seriously *and* to laugh our heads off.

Many years ago, Unitarian Universalist and now-retired Boston Globe columnist Linda Weltner wrote a column¹² in which she offered this commentary on her husband, a noted psychiatrist:

“My husband,” she says, “plays the tuba badly. No, wretchedly. With unforgettable in-expertise. After [he] played *When Irish Eyes Are Smiling* at my

¹² Linda Weltner, “Some Things in Life are Worth Doing Badly,” *The Boston Globe*, date unknown.

older daughter's wedding, as a way of welcoming our son-in-law's Irish family, his father created an award for Jack that read, in part, 'For a spontaneous public performance [that] demonstrated an originality so stark ... it stunned the audience, rendering them incapable of meaningful response.'

"This did not hurt my husband's feelings," Linda Weltner continues. "He knows the impact his 'music' has. This is a man for whom practice means playing all the notes, right or wrong, at least twice. His tuba, purchased at a yard sale for \$100, looks as if it's been run over by a truck. His entire [repertoire] consists of five songs, which run the gamut from *Happy Birthday* to *So Long, It's Been Good to Know You*. Still, the phone rings and people ask him to do a gig at some special event, an occurrence [that] happens more frequently than I might hope.

"He doesn't get nervous or decide to polish up his technique a bit. He glows. He basks. He's unabashedly delighted. And delightful. At his first note, audiences burst into hysterical laughter, and the more earnestly [Jack] attempts to render a recognizable melody, the harder they laugh, until they leap to their feet, choking and cheering.

"I understand why he's in demand," Linda Weltner concludes. "What has been harder for me to accept is how my husband can be perfectly capable of enjoying his tuba solos without ever aiming at competence."

Well, we know what she's missed, don't we? Jack knows exactly what he has to do. Jack is a doctor, a profession that exacts precision and demands profound seriousness, *and* Jack has a tuba. In spite of everything, a tuba – his "one well" – sustains him and everyone around him.

Beloved spiritual companions,
 What will our word for this year be?
 The choice is ours;
 may we choose well.

Don't just do something; sit there.
 Just sink one well deep enough.

From *Happy Birthday* to *So Long, It's Been Good to Know You*
 May we be *in omnia paratus* – ready for all things

Remember – thank G*d – we have each other.

Amen.