

POWERLESSNESS & THE POWER OF LOVE

Psalm 19, 1 Corinthians 13

Dominik Modlinski is a British Columbia painter. His canvases are painted from first-hand observation outdoors, with a brush wielded in the glow of the colours of the Canadian wilderness. But Modlinski doesn't take his paints out into the woods much anymore. "How can I go out on my trips," he says, "when everything is covered in smoke. I can't go to some areas I love because I can't see anything. It feels like someone is controlling my life and I can't do anything about it." Modlinski is suffering from the effects of the BC wildfires. And he's not alone.

Whether it's Inuit in the tiny Labrador community of Rigolet who speak about their deep sorrow being cut off from places they'd visited for generations, because of vanishing sea ice... whether it's children who are afraid to go outside in High River, Alberta after the 2013 flood caused a major bridge to collapse, who crawl into bed with their parents because they're so afraid when it starts to rain... whether it's survivors of the Fort-MacMurray wildfires which destroyed a chunk of their city, who have been diagnosed with high levels of post-traumatic stress and anxiety disorders... whether it's farmers in Australia who are diagnosed with rising levels of depression as their drought-stricken lands blow away... whether it's Canadian farmers who can endure months without rain and then see their fields submerged in a cloud burst, who can feel overwhelmed with helplessness... the growing extremity of weather events due to climate change has been causing a whole new kind of suffering. Psychologists have recently given a special name for it: Solastalgia.

Mental-health researchers from around the world are now tackling Solastalgia – from the American Psychological Association's recent reports, to a publication of recent research by the British medical journal -The Lancet - to various Canadian University researchers like Katie Hayes at U of T and Ashlee Cunsolo at Memorial University in Newfoundland.

Solastalgia is now recognized as a disorder due specifically to the effects of climate change on the psyche, although its symptoms have similarities to other disorders related to traumatic life events. People suffer repeated and prolonged bouts of overwhelming anxiety. They describe feelings of powerlessness and loss of control, a sense of doom and hopelessness, or as the Inuit describe it, a feeling of homelessness (because they are being displaced from their homes by how their habitat is changing). People also describe feelings of paralysis, an inability to make decisions, a sadness and a grief that's always there in the background.

So, what's to be done? Certainly, as individual citizens and voters we can make environmental policy a top priority for politicians to address seriously if they want our votes. Certainly, we can do our part in shrinking our carbon footprint and learning about the issues. But what makes a difference at the spiritual level? Are there better ways and worse ways to engage the kind of anxiety Solastalgia can create? Can faith in God and belonging to a community like church make a difference? Let's explore our scripture readings in search of some revelatory wisdom and insight.

Our Psalm reading begins with a beautiful description of our natural world – “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork.” This telling and proclaiming is not verbal description. By its movement, rhythm and flow, nature communicates the wonders of the creator who is behind it all. There is no Solastalgia crisis, fear or powerlessness here; simply awe, wonder and gratitude. Why is that? Especially as ancient peoples should feel even less control over the world around them compared to modern people like us with all our science and technology. Why no Solastalgia angst?

The reason awe, wonder and gratitude trumps fear and powerlessness is because, as the psalmist tells us later on: God is my Rock and my redeemer. God's moral law of right and wrong is the foundation of my personal life, and more. This God is the invisible yet real foundation of the universe no matter how randomly and beyond my control nature ebbs and flows. I am rooted in a power who is greater than all, a power who holds my life intimately and tenderly, a power who is not only over all things, but is also with me from the time I take my first breaths of life to the time I have no more breathe left in me. Faith in a greater power like God gives me a confidence and a freedom to be, a peace in trusting that I don't have to be in control. I can enjoy the world around me because I don't have to control it.

Isn't that a powerful, liberating and beautiful kind of faith? Certainly, researchers speak about the importance of developing the kind of personal grounding that can liberate us to enjoy nature rather than be afraid of what may happen we cannot control. And we can add, based on our reading, that if more of us had awe, wonder, gratitude and a desire to enjoy rather than control what is greater than us, we wouldn't be in the kind of environmental mess in which we find ourselves.

The Psalmist proclaims a God whose moral law is the ground of their life, a God who is their rock and their redeemer, a God who is the greatest power of all. But this leads to a 2nd kind of question: what kind of power is God if the natural world's ebb and flow, actions and reactions are not in anyone's control? How is God a power I can trust in the face of all that? If I know that anything can happen to me just like it can to the person next to me, how can I deal with that kind of fear and anxiety? How can I trust God as the greatest power when I've

seen things and experienced things that have happened to people I love, that shake my confidence, my peace and my sense of awe, wonder and gratitude?

Psalm 19 already gives us a glimpse that God is not some superpower who controls the universe like a puppet-master. And it's not about being good enough so that trouble will be diverted from my path onto the paths of others who aren't so good. "Clear me from hidden faults" the Psalmist declares, recognizing that they're not perfect and know they need God's love if they're going to make it through life. If God is a power, then God's power is more about love than control, more about relationships than self-sufficiency, more about mutuality than rugged individuality, more about interdependence than fierce independence, and more about community than an entrenched autonomy.

Our New Testament reading is one of the most popular passages in all of scripture. What makes it so popular? Its all about love. But it also recognizes how hard it is to love. You can have all the power in the world, all the status and money, all the science and technology, all the knowledge and information, all of which we depend on in the world to provide us with maximum security, safety and control over all those things that could affect our lives adversely. But, we're missing the most important thing: love. Well, can't we just have love as an add on to all these other things we're after? No. True love makes us vulnerable. We recognize our need for others and for community and the more we try to control, manipulate, dominate or use any kind of coercive power over our environment, the more we lose the very thing we're after.

Awe, wonder and gratitude are qualities of relationship where we connect with other life as equals, without trying to control. Control kills love. Love has to let go the obsession with control so that we can be open to learn, receive, treasure and cherish, knowing this makes us more vulnerable to feeling grief, stress, pain and loss because other life is vulnerable too. The more we love the more we will hurt and the more we can suffer in a world we cannot control. But love is the very thing that will save us and give us the richest meaning, fulfillment and happiness. Unless we learn it and unless we trust it, we will lose it all even if we live in an iron fortress of protection and security.

This is what the apostle Paul is trying to teach the Christians of Corinth. They need community in order to find personal support, fulfillment and peace as individuals. Life as a competition for limited resources is a terrible way to see the world. Life as an opportunity to give and receive love in an open universe where anything can happen... this actually gives us greater freedom, greater protection and greater fullness. The reason? Because we build richly beautiful and grounded relationships around us and this gives us what all the power of our science and technology to build our fortresses of personal protection from hurt can never provide.

In fact, researchers on Solastalgia speak about the importance of community. As Julia Payson of the Canadian Mental Health Association in B.C's Okanagan region, where fires and evacuations have been a constant feature of recent summers, says – Powerlessness tells you, you can't fix this and you're not going to stop feeling bad. There's no point in reaching out, in gathering with community and seeing what you can do... Powerlessness, she goes on to say, breeds feelings of isolation and unless we can break that down by building community around us or find some community, we will not find our freedom, fulfillment or peace.

As secular psychologists, though, talk of community is one thing, but talk of God or a greater power is another. Faith and certainly 'God' are not scientifically measurable things. Faith is not quantitatively verifiable. God has no tangible referent accessible directly by the five senses. However, there is plenty of research to show that people who give themselves in faith to a higher power whose nature is not ultimate control but love, who are then inspired to build loving relationships of intimacy and trust with those around them in community, weather the storms of life's volatility, crisis and pain far better than those who have all the money and security our best science and technology have to offer, but lack community bonds or spiritually relational imaginations.

That's what we're here to do as a church. We cultivate a faith in God and we do so in community, learning and practicing what it means to love in a world where all bets are off loving if I have to give up the walls that protect me. In our powerlessness we reach upwards and outwards to give and share the love of Christ. I let go my imaginary power of invulnerability so that I grow stronger in the one power that counts – love.

“The heavens are telling the glory of God.” We need to establish a new relationship with our planet as we do with all the life in it if we are to survive as a species. “Now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” We need to learn again and again how not only to put our faith and hope in love above all else, but how to cultivate love ever more deeply in our lives and our relationships. May God reveal to us those places and spaces in our lives where we need to change, to learn and to grow. And may God arouse us to become greater advocates for a planet that is proclaiming by all that is happening, that it needs us to love it better by restraining our destructive ways for the greater good of all; Amen.