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Just Now (Exodus 3: 13-14)

Pentecost IV

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Just Now

In the morning as the storm begins to blow away
the clear sky appears for a moment and it seems to me
that there has been something simpler than I could ever believe
simpler than I could have begun to find words for
not patient not even waiting no more hidden
than the air itself that became part of me for a while
with every breath and remained with me unnoticed
something that was here unnamed unknown in the days
and the nights not separate from them
not separate from them as they came and were gone
it must have been here neither early nor late then
by what name can I address it now holding out my thanks

W.S. Merwin, *The Pupil* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001).

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I've heard it said in Anglican circles that once you've done something twice in church – a special service, a congregational event – it becomes a tradition. This is just what 'we' do now, and must ever continue doing! By that reckoning, our Benedictus winter series – *Poetica Divina* – is long-established and well on the way to being an immutable fixture. For this is the third year in which we'll spend four weeks reflecting on poetry and scripture together.

As some of you will remember from previous years, the series title is a play on the notion of 'lectio divina' or 'holy reading', which refers to the contemplative reading of Scripture. And what we've discovered over these last couple of years, as we've brought particular poems into unhurried, reflective dialogue with particular passages of Scripture, is that they richly illuminate each other, and help us engage with our own experience in new and deeper ways. There's something about the

relationship between form and content, word and silence in a good poem that draws us beyond what we thought we knew or could otherwise express. Which is how a good poem draws us closer to the mystery of life, the mystery of God.

So tonight, we begin with the first of our poems in this year's series: 'Just Now', by William Stanley Merwin. Merwin was an American poet, born in 1927, who died at his home in Hawaii earlier this year. He was 91 and during his lifetime had been much lauded; he was America's poet laureate at one point and he'd won two Pulitzer Prizes, among many other honours. For more than 60 years he laboured, according to his obituary in *The New York Times*, 'under a formidable poetic yoke: the imperative of using language – an inescapably concrete presence on the printed page – to conjure absence, silence and nothingness'.¹

Some critics complained that his later work trafficked 'in a level of abstraction bordering on the obscure ... rendered even less accessible ... by the fact that by the late 1960s he had jettisoned punctuation almost entirely'. You might have noticed that! But he had his reasons. 'Punctuation basically has to do with prose and the printed word', he once said. 'I came to feel that punctuation was like nailing the words onto the page. Since I wanted instead the movement and lightness of the spoken word, one step toward that was to do away with punctuation'.² Which means, it seems to me, that reading one of his poems is a bit like taking the plunge – you enter into it and it sweeps you away. Where do you draw breath? Where do you stop reading to allow the meaning of the lines to clarify? Or do you just need to let it wash over you whole, again and again?

'In the morning as the storm begins to blow away/the clear sky appears for a moment and it seems to me/that there has been something simpler than I could ever believe'. This feels like a moment of revelation. Something is coming to light, being perceived. The clouds part or evaporate; there's a momentary clearing and there it is, something 'simpler than I could have begun to find words for'. What is it? What is

¹ Margalit Fox, 'W.S. Merwin, Poet of Life's Damnable Evanescence, Dies at 91', <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/obituaries/w-s-merwin-dead-poet-laureate.html> (accessed 4 July 2019).

² Fox, 'W.S. Merwin, Poet of Life's Damnable Evanescence'.

this 'something', this simplicity suddenly apprehended beyond knowing? Merwin attributes to it no orientation toward him. It's 'not patient not even waiting' for him or his recognition, and it's 'no more hidden/than the air itself'. It's like it was always there, but he just never noticed, any more than he noticed how the air 'became part of me for a while/with every breath and remained with me'.

But Merwin goes on trying to speak of it nevertheless, to articulate the nature of this revelation. It's 'something that was here unnamed unknown in the days/and the nights not separate from them' – and notice in these lines the poet's deepening emphasis on reality as a seamless whole. Depending where you put the emphasis on this unpunctuated sentence, it can sound as though the presence of this 'something' is not separable from the days and the nights; or it could sound as though the days and nights aren't separable from each other. Or maybe it's both at once. Listen again: 'something that was here unnamed unknown in the days/and the nights not separate from them/not separate from them as they came and were gone', as the days and hours ebbed and flowed, 'it must have been here neither early nor late then' ... And by this stage we have a sense of such total immersion in the present – the oneness of time, the here-ness, the 'just now' of the poem's title – that we have a felt experience of the ubiquity of this simple something that's inseparable from everything, from day and night, early and late, from every breath you take. And yet, this inseparability is not identity.

I once heard Canberra poet, John Foulcher, say that a good poem is like a joke – it's the punch line at the end that makes sense of the whole. It should arrest and delight you. And the final line of this extraordinary poem does just that. We've been drawn into a sense of the indistinguishability of what's suddenly been revealed from what's always been here and is present now, ordinary as breathing. And then, just when we're on the brink of concluding that this 'something' is after all 'no-thing', nothing distinct or identifiable, the rug is pulled out from under us: 'by what name can I address it now holding out my thanks'. The 'something simpler than I could ever believe/simpler than I could have begun to find words for' really is *something* – and it elicits gratitude, a desire to address it by name.

This is a poem, I think, about the mysterious depth dimension of reality that is, as it were, hidden in plain sight. A poem, perhaps, about God. Merwin was the son of a Presbyterian minister and was himself a practicing Buddhist. On one reading, it might seem as though this poem reflects a tension between these two spiritual traditions ... non-theism lived out at the edge of theism, a radical awareness of there being nothing other than here and now, and yet ... the sense of a more, the sense of something addressable. Except that exactly this dialectic runs through the heart of the Judaeo-Christian tradition itself, as we see in the passage we read from Exodus.

Moses, you'll remember, has glimpsed something in the flicker, the heat-haze of a bush in the desert. Like Merwin's clouds parting, creating a momentary 'clearing', here too a revelation is underway. And Moses, like Merwin, wants to know the name of the 'something' calling to him. 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' And God gives Moses his answer, saying to him: 'I Am who I Am' ... Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I Am has sent me to you"'. But notice how this name is as elusive as that elusive 'something' in our poem; a kind of no-name, a bare assertion of being. This is even more obvious in the Hebrew, a language (incidentally) without punctuation, where the name given to Moses is rendered without vowels and considered too sacred to pronounce.

So what does all this mean for us? What I love about Merwin's poem and what I think resonates with the deepest of our theological understanding is the sense that living responsive to the truth of things involves undergoing the subtle dynamic, the tension between idolatry and atheism. On the one hand, there's our tendency to project illusory and all too concrete deities. On the other, there's our heedlessness, our inattention, our failure to recognise God's continuous self-revelation in the midst of life. The task of the human journey is to navigate between these false shores.

For the radical simplicity at the heart of being, the sheer, unfathomable is-ness of what our tradition calls 'God', is neither something we make up nor something we can capture in words and images. It's a reality we glimpse, that's revealed to us, as we're fully present, immersed in life itself. It's not elsewhere, but

always and everywhere; a presence almost indistinguishable from absence that yet evokes our response. And once we've glimpsed it, been touched by its simplicity and sheer givenness, it changes everything. We're at home in the world in a different way, we know the world in a different way.

So how might we respond to this revelation, this glimpse? 'What to do', wrote Welsh poet R.S. Thomas, 'but draw a little nearer to such ubiquity, by remaining still?'³ Or perhaps we could begin 'just now', as Merwin says, by simply holding out our thanks.

³ R.S. Thomas, 'But the Silence of the Mind', reprinted in *For Lovers of God Everywhere: Poems of the Christian Mystics*, ed. Roger Housden (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2009).