Now it Begins?

the Rev. Lisa Doege February 3, 2019 Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

Someone I know, now a hardy, healthy 25 year old, almost died when they were 2 1/2. The abdominal distress came on suddenly, out of nowhere. Or so it seemed until emergency surgery revealed that they had been born with an extra band of tissue stretching between their appendix and small intestine, and over time other parts of the intestine had looped and tangled around that band and become gangrenous. We hear about these things from time. Not necessarily the extra length of tissue and the gangrenous intestine, but other things lurking in apparently healthy bodies—sometimes for decades—and then suddenly, bam! Stroke, heart attack, failure of some kind—not from a terrible accident or exposure to infection or a detrimental life-style; simply a hidden bit of not-quite-rightness finally making itself known. Like the human version of that flawed coil built into the oxygen tank on Apollo 13 years before the fateful cryo stir, years before the crew was even named.

Imagine the revelation that the nearly fatal disaster on Apollo 13 had been traced back to a defect built into the system more than two years prior. Lying dormant until just the right—or wrong—circumstances converged. I imagine that revelation laid to rest any lingering questions of guilt among the three astronauts on board. I wonder if it also awakened in them, and their families, and all of NASA, a fear of never knowing. Never knowing when another disaster or near disaster might strike, the result of some flaw or defect in tiny bit of machinery in a space shuttle or car or plane or furnace or elevator or hundred million other mechanical and digital and engineered things we rely on every day. Such a fear, even subconsciously, could lead to so much second guessing and hesitating and double checking of safety standards and accident ratings as to effectively paralyze a person.

It doesn't seem to have happened that way. That closing voice-over from the movie tells us that some of the astronauts flew again, many times, and some of the flight control folks continued on in their jobs for many years after that successful failure. Now, of course, Hollywood movies never tell the whole, complete, true story of any real life event—perhaps especially real life events that carry an element of official national pride.

Remember the scene in which Marilyn Lovell and Mary Haise practice their "I'm so happy and proud and excited" line for the press? No doubt there were fears and nightmares and hesitations. Maybe some of the people who left flight control did so because they couldn't do it again—feel responsible for the lives of astronauts now knowing that they never really know.

But maybe the lesson that the principals in that harrowing event took most to heart wasn't about hidden and unknown defects and flaws, not about disasters that have their secret beginnings years before we're aware of encountering them. Maybe the lesson they took most to heart was about a seed of hidden fortitude lurking for years before revealing itself, about a bulb of secret ingenuity and unseen capacity for operating in uncertainty, and about a tuber of unknown faith, all planted years earlier, sprouting, growing unrecognized but steadily for decades before they emerge, suddenly but not really so suddenly after all, in just the moment they are most necessary.

Imbolc is here to tell us it does happen that way sometimes.

Several weeks from now, on the Sunday closest to the Vernal Equinox, or a few weeks later still on Easter, I'll be reading words like these from Archibald MacLeish:

Why it was wonderful: Why, all

At once there were leaves,

Leaves at the end of a dry

Stick, small, alive

Leaves out of wood. It was

Wonderful,

You can't imagine. They came

By the wood path

And the earth loosened, the

Earth

Relaxed, there were

Flowers

Out of the earth! Think of it!

And oak trees

Oozing new green at the tips of

Them and flowers

Squeezed out of clay, soft

Flowers, limp

Stalks flowering. Well, it was like A dream. It happened so quickly, all of a Sudden

It happened.

One of the central messages of spring and Easter both is that life prevails even after the appearance of death. Poems and sermons and hymns celebrate blooms out of buds, shoots out of long buried bulbs, chicks out of eggs (and draw the parallel to Jesus out of the tomb). All sorts of rebirth after seeming death. An important message I revel in preaching spring after spring. But that message is weeks away.

In this moment, we are halfway between the Winter Solstice and the Vernal or Spring Equinox. This time, as is true of so many times, holds significance in a variety of religious traditions. The pagan Sabbat of Imbolc. The Christian feasts of St. Brigid and Candlemas or the Feast of Purification. Groundhog's Day, even. All jostling and piling up against one another in these first few days of February. All, in their own way, carrying a message that precedes the message of Easter—in, you know, my interpretation of things. That is to say, they all recognize and mark the reality that rebirth, life out of seeming death, doesn't happen so quickly,/all of a/Sudden It happen[s]. Not suddenly out of nowhere. Not life out of absence of all life. But gradually, from seeds of life planted long ago—in the earth, in the womb, in the essence of our very being.

The world—or the soon to emerge world of Christianity—began fully to recognize Jesus as Messiah when he rose from the tomb on Easter. But the Christian scripture for today, from the second chapter of Luke, tells us a by-stander in the Temple recognizes in the Messiah to be in the infant Jesus:

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; [a] this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. **26** It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. [b] **27** Guided by the Spirit, Simeon[c] came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, **28** Simeon[d] took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

29 "Master, now you are dismissing your servant[e] in peace, according to your word; 30 for my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the presence

of all peoples, **32** a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

The savior was born at birth, long years before the resurrection. And while we might be accustomed to believing that spring begins when we see the first robin, or the first crocus or pussy willow, pagan tradition (not to mention horticulture and biology) tells us that spring begins now—half a quarter before any of those signs appear. The processes that bring about green and color and fragrance and birth and return are already stirring unseen and unheard deep in the earth, in the trunk of the maple tree, in ewes preparing to lamb.

I'm finding hope in the possibility/reality that spring begins now—weeks before the date I've always accepted as the first day of that season. Retailers embrace this notion with fervor—displaying spring clothes and other merchandise months before any reasonable person has stopped wearing sweaters, scarves, long-johns and winter boots. And truth be told, while I sneer at those anticipatory displays, I abandon my jackets and boots long before such shedding is seasonably appropriate. Still, I've never given much thought to the possibility that spring begins before we apprehend it. It makes sense, of course, if those buds are going to appear on seemingly dead sticks, if blossoms are going to emerge from the buds, if chicks are going to hatch from the eggs, some process had to have begun well before the moment the sign of rebirths appear. Even if it seems that way—all at once—transformation is a process. Usually. Perhaps always. If spring begins in the depth of winter, what else begins long before any noticeable sign appears to our senses or awareness? What might be beginning to stir even now in my soul, in your soul, in our community or society that will one day soon—or months or years from now—burst forth so quickly, all of a sudden? A capacity to dwell in the unease that comes with recognizing privilege? A love that continually expands the definition of we? A passion for justice and a tenacity for the long haul? The joy that rises from delighting in difference and resting in familiarity and dancing between the two? And if these—or other sources of life and survival and growth—are even now germinating within us, individually or collective, quite without our knowing it, what then is our role? If we're vessels of possibility, how are we to nourish and sustain that which is growing in us unawares? It sounds like a trick question. If we don't know what's there, how can we feed it, tend to it, bring it to birth or bloom or harvest? I say, we already know how. We might not know what's been planted in us, what's sprouting as we go about our oblivious everyday lives. But we know what's good for

human bodies and human souls. We know what's good for community. We know that light and darkness, silence and music, activity and rest feed us. We know that challenges and efforts strengthen us. We know that the words and examples of prophets and artists, activists and musicians boost our spiritual immune systems. We know that as surely as crop rotation and inter-planting preserves the soil, infusions of language and food and art and persons from many lands and cultures and ages and genders enrich and preserve our society. We don't need to know exactly what's developing within us, readying itself for birth. We need only believe that something is, and that the good-for-us practices we already undertake will assure the one day, suddenly-it-happened, birth of a spring we can't now even begin to imagine.

May we be here together to witness and to celebrate and to offer thanks when that Spring arrives. Amen.