The Poetry of Lent

I came to our church's Poetry Reading Group a poetry neanderthal. This group started at the end of last year, and we meet monthly to consider poetry in the light of our faith, in the light of the lives we are living and the times we are living. In the company of people with years more experience reading poetry, it has been a place of new insight and much grace as I stumble my way through poems that delight, befuddle, and bless.

Reading poetry is like reading Jesus' parables, a literary form that is not a morality lesson or an explicit analogy to the known world. Parables are meant to disclose that which cannot be explained in prose or neatly lined up with the world as we know it. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, yeast, a pearl, a treasure hidden in the field. There was a man who had two sons, a man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves--these parable lead-ins draw us into a world of unbounded love and extravagant mercy. In the words of Professor Tom Long who has been a guest at our church more than once, "The purpose of parables is not merely to *talk about* the kingdom of God but instead to take us to those places all around us where the inbreaking of God's kingdom can be perceived and *experienced*." (*Proclaiming the Parables: Teaching and Preaching the Kingdom of God,* 2024.). I'm finding poetry can be read the same way, with the expectation of the revelation of a truth about grace, rebirth, resurrection.

To be clear, I remain a poetry neanderthal, but one blessed by the warmth of our group and the disclosures of poetry. This is an open group, anyone is invited. The poem below (see page 2) offers insights for our Lenten season, draws us in a way deeper than words and precise explication into the promise of this time in our liturgical year.

With care,

Susan Dunlap

Where the Breath Begins

Dry
and dry
and dry
in each direction.

Dust dry.
Desert dry.
Bone dry.

And here
in your own heart:
dry,
the center of your chest
a bare valley
stretching out
every way you turn.

Did you think
this was where
you had come to die?

It's true that
you may need
to do some crumbling,
yes.
That some things
you have protected
may want to be
laid bare,
yes.
That you will be asked
to let go
and let go,
yes.

But listen.
This is what
a desert is for.

If you have come here
desolate,
if you have come here
deflated,
then thank your lucky stars

the desert is where
you have landed—
here where it is hard
to hide,
here where it is unwise
to rely on your own devices,
here where you will
have to look
and look again
and look close
to find what refreshment waits
to reveal itself to you.

I tell you,
though it may be hard
to see it now,
this is where
your greatest blessing
will find you.

I tell you,
this is where
you will receive
your life again.

I tell you,
this is where
the breath begins. —Jan Richardson, from *Circle of Grace*, 2025