

November 8, 2015

Falling Leaves, Mighty Deeds, and Boats to Carry Us

Musical Prelude

Greeting: "Storms of Maple Leaves Like a Tide"

First Hymn: Be Thou Our Vision, Green 154

Readings: Qur'an 6:59, Matthew 14:22-36

Second Hymn: Michael Row the Boat Ashore, sheet

Joys and Concerns

Musical Interlude

Prayer: Frail is Our Vessel and the Ocean is Wide

Third Hymn: Lullabye, Green 205

Message: Falling Leaves, Mighty Deeds, and Boats to Carry Us.

Silent Worship

Fourth Hymn: The Great Storm Is Over, Green 215

Benediction: Not a Leaf Falls Without God's Knowledge

Afterthoughts/Introductions/Announcements

Musical Postlude

Greeting: Good Morning Friends. As I was preparing for this message this week, a line from a poem by Gary Margolis has been with me, in which he imagines himself in the presence of God, surprised "To see a storm of maple leaves as the tides they are." To see a storm of maples as the tides they are.

We have passed the mid-way point of fall, and the season is turning toward the next one. As our part of the Earth readies itself for the coming winter, the great movement and mystery and rhythm of change is all around us, storms of maple leaves like the tides. We can neither stop the movement of the tides that carry our small boats nor hold back the November wind that takes the leaves.

Together today we will see those storms, those great gusts of change and align our attention to God's Holy Presence in the midst of them. And so our first hymn is about how we see, what we look for, how we use our sight. Be Thou Our Vision, Green 154.

Prayer: Dear God, You who are the calm before and during and after the storm, be good to us, we pray. God of Change, God of Immense Tides, of time and seasons that come and go. God of the November wind. Sometimes we feel like a storm of leaves at your mercy. Sometimes all around us it feels windswept and wild. It is hard not to be afraid, hard to let go, hard to feel held in the buffeting gale. hard to know we are safe. So Dear God, we pray, be good to us. For The sea is so wide, and our boats are so small. Remember us, small boat or little leaf. grant us the grace in the middle of danger to commit ourselves into your hands. Grant us the courage to walk into the storm and take your hand. You with the power to rebuke the storm and bring silence, you who can lay the roaring waves to rest at long last, be with us in the midst of the wind, the rain, when we call to you out of the deep, the dark, out of the tides and time's tempest, whose movements are so far beyond our grasp and our control. Hear our prayers, lead us to a safe harbor, lead us home. Frail is our vessel and the ocean is wide, O God. You are our only safe haven.

Readings

Qur'an (6:59) *With God are the keys to all secrets; none knows them except God. He knows everything on land and in the sea. Not a leaf falls without His knowledge.*

Matthew 14:22-36

²²Immediately, he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." ²⁸Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹Jesus reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Benediction

Not a Leaf Falls Without God's Knowledge, Not a Boat sails beyond God's reach. Let The Deep Abyss awaken courage. Let the storms of leaves like tides give rise to faith. May we see the invisible threads cast across great distances, may we hear with hearts tuned to the Holy, may we read sacred messages everywhere. Messages like boats to carry us over the wide and stormy sea.

Message: Falling leaves, mighty deeds, and boats to carry us.

One brilliant, windy fall day recently, I was at the assisted living facility where I work. It was lunchtime. The sky was the perfect, deep blue that happens at the end of October, and the remaining leaves on the trees were gold and orange. I looked out the window and saw what seemed to be a leaf hovering in one place in mid-air. It was not caught in an updraft or swirling in gusts of wind, but it was stuck in one place, as if glued in the air, swaying gently in the middle of an open space, not near a tree or telephone wires, apparently attached to nothing. While the wind blew, and other leaves rushed past it, it stayed where it was. Residents and workers began to notice it and point it out and talk about it with one another. And

there was an audible, collective inbreath as we all saw a flash of light and the gold-silver line of a spider's web fall away and disappear, and the leaf began a swirling descent, down to the leaf covered ground below it.

It seemed to me that there was a message in that leaf and in the indiscernible spider's web that had briefly held it in place in mid-air. A message that said that the unseen is real. That there are, actually, invisible threads that can catch us unawares in the middle of our rushing and swirling, and hold us fast. That we can find ourselves held aloft by something we can't name or see, a quiet island of stillness in the wind. That it will happen for an instant, and in the next instant it will change. That it's a confluence of utterly improbable events and conditions. That the time will come when we will fall. That we fall to a ground that underlies everyone. That we will be remembered for how we held on, but when we let go, we become part of those who have gone before us.

And that one stopped leaf made that little collection of people in that dining room also stop for a moment, look up and see, and talk to each other.

The impossibility of a leaf hovering in mid air made me think of the story of Jesus standing on the surface of the water. because the image of walking on the surface of water, of performing an impossible feat that bends the laws of the physical universe, can, like a stationary leaf suspended in mid-air, make us stop for a moment. It can cause us to see the meaning that shimmers just out of our conditioned sight, just outside of our frame of reference, our ideas of what is true and what is possible. the stories of Jesus' miraculous deeds can do this just the way that the momentary hovering leaf did this that day. But our modern, rational minds are not trained in this way. our collective metaphoric muscle has atrophied, as a culture. So people argue about what REALLY happened, if anything, on that stormy ancient sea, about what is factually true, about whether the Bible is a literal report from 2000 years ago, and then we miss all the other messages there, hidden beneath our vision and our understanding, because we don't know how to look for them, how to listen, to see, to read into and through the words, to know a truth beyond the factual.

There is a long history of debate and argument around this story and what are called the mighty deeds in the Bible: those tales of the supernatural, of Jesus' miracles -- turning water into wine, feeding thousands of people with a few loaves of bread, walking on water. There are deep disagreements among those who would identify themselves as Christian as to whether you can claim that belonging if you don't believe that Jesus literally walked on water. And then on the other hand there are those with a negative critique of Christianity and the Bible that comes at least in part because they've been told that Christians read the Bible literally, and doing so means accepting that, once upon a time, 2000 years ago and more, a supernatural deity bent the laws of the physical universe. Whether you reject the Bible out of hand because it is intellectually impossible for you to assent to its literal truth, or whether you accept the bible as a literal report, both of these poles equate the factual with the true, as if the truth is a simple one dimensional matter of facts. As if what is literally, factually true is the most true. That is our Western cultural bias, part of the legacy of the Enlightenment, and it's been useful, in many ways. I am not here to cast aspersions on facts. Nor am I opposed to the possibility of miracles I cannot explain.

What I want to say is that whether you accept or reject the literal reading of the Bible, all of us modern Western people could stand to stretch our metaphoric muscles. The factual is one aspect of truth, and an important one, but it is not the only aspect of truth. It is not the only way that the Sacred speaks to us, it is not the only way that we have a capacity to listen. It is not the only way to know something. It is not the only message.

There are messages that go beyond the factual, beyond the literal. There are truths that exist deeply beyond what can be measured, confirmed, and verified. The Bible is alive with those kinds of messages, as is the world around us. And those messages speak in tongues, in metaphor, in poetry, in language that points to a truth beyond language, a truth that is hard to put into words.

The linguistic origins of the word metaphor mean to carry over, to carry across. A metaphor is like a boat bearing precious freight across a stormy sea. New Testament scholar Marcus Borg called metaphor a vehicle for the "more than literal", conveying a surplus of meaning, not a deficit of facts. And he said, that is

how the gospels were written. As the testimonies of a developing tradition, in the sacred language of a people trying to put into words an experience of the living Christ and the historical Jesus that was profoundly beyond words.

So, just as the leaf hovering in mid-air outside the window carried a message, so does Jesus, walking on water, doing the impossible. In the verses from Matthew there are messages like boats to carry us. Messages that say *that for the disciples of Jesus, following him was like walking over the vast depths of a perilous, stormy sea... following someone who lived so centered in God meant that you too could take hold of that hand stretched out to you, and move over those terrifying depths, the dark void, the measureless abyss. that faith is what you call forth in the face of grave danger and crippling fear. That faith takes courage you think you lack, but you don't. That even when you are terrified, faith can make you do what you never thought you could. That when storms rage and you can not make your way forward there will be a voice in the tempest and you can follow that voice, and it will calm the storm. that when you strain against the wind, there is a Holy Presence with you, a force more powerful than terror and tempest.*

For the disciples, Jesus was the revelation of what can be seen of God in a human life. for us, perhaps the miracles on the sea are less historical data and more about what trust in the God that Jesus revealed looks like in practice, then and now. perhaps stories of miracles, of momentary bends in the nature of the physical universe, reflect the testimony that in this man who claimed that he was in God, as God was in him and in *everyone*, who scandalized those in power, those who controlled access to the temple, who challenged the economic, political and religious authorities of his day, who argued for the inversion and subversion of every power dynamic -- to follow this man was actually to walk toward great danger.

The evangelist Matthew only mentions Jesus praying at really critical moments: here on this stormy night and in the Garden of Gethsemane just before his death. the context of this story is that Jesus and his disciples are profoundly in trouble. John the Baptist has just been killed by Herod in a gruesome, barbaric beheading. This popular movement is not going unnoticed. to have faith in what Jesus said and did at that time was to agree to be in mortal peril, and it was to seek the Holy

hidden amidst this danger, to walk across water and not drown, to place your faith in something that could not be imperiled despite the menace closing in. What about in our time?

From the impossible leaf to the impossible path across the surface of the water I am compelled to come at last to the perilous seas and rickety boats of this day, to the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing the midEast and Africa, trying to find a better life in Europe across the water. I come to the image that I can't shake: of the 2 year old Syrian boy who drowned this summer, and to the at least 77 other children who have drowned since. They needed a miracle, they needed a mighty deed. They needed a stilled tempest, someone to reach a hand across the surface of the water and say, "Come."

According to the UN, almost 2 million Syrian refugees have crossed the border into Turkey. There is agreement that our country's foreign policy decisions bear some responsibility for creating this crisis. Just as I don't know whether Jesus REALLY walked on water, I also do not know what to do about sorrow and tragedy and shear need of this complexity and magnitude. But I do know that all the Bible's miracles would pale in comparison to the mighty deed it would be for human beings to at last create a world together where this kind of suffering is no longer allowed to happen.

To do that, we would need to argue less about what REALLY happened 2000 years ago and instead see the invisible threads hidden in the world around us, and read the messages beneath the surface of the ancient stories, and listen for a truth that is a big enough boat to carry us all across this bottomless, stormy sea.