

Wisdom in the Eye of the Storm

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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Yesterday, I had the privilege of witnessing the ordination, the Rev. Sarah Armstrong at the Church of the Epiphany. The Service was full of a sense of gravitas, especially as her colleagues surrounded her to lay on hands while we in the congregation prayed for her. Sitting there, I mused at how our world doesn't make space for ceremony like this, but I said a prayer of thanks, and embraced the mystery of the moment.

I found it interesting at the service how the former Bishop Stephen Andrews made connections between the modern struggle of refugees around our world today, and the ancient refugee experience; those Hebrew Scripture Israelites muddling in the wilderness. Ancient and contemporary people seeking a safe home; living in unimaginable conditions for any time period.

That sermon seemed absurd in all the pomp of Archbishop flanked by priests and laypeople and the pageantry of that service – and in the midst of it all, the preacher focusing on how we in our modern Christian church can feel like those Israelites in the wilderness. Yet how very appropriate, thought, that image.

The good news, Bishop Andrew's suggests, is that those Israelites were given what they needed, food from heaven. It wasn't great tasting food, and there was no variety – but in the harrowing storms of life, God's grace finds us.

Remember images of Hurricane Dorian bearing down on the Bahamas? People scrambling to gather supplies together before the storm hit. Ultimately, they must have had to hang onto the faith that they would find the courage and resources that they needed to survive. Taking those moments of calm, before or within the storm, to listen for wisdom, often the voice deep within our souls connects us with what is holy and wise.

The photo on the screen was part of a video taken aboard an American aircraft called a *Hurricane Hunter*, a Lockheed WP 3D Orion built to withstand hurricane winds in order to collect important hurricane data. This image is of the eye of Hurricane Florence in 2018. The “eye”, described as a surprisingly peaceful patch of clear blue sky ringed by fluffy white clouds. Imagine those difficult moments, the wings and propeller shaking violently as the plane makes its way through a blanket of thick, gray clouds. Then, the aircraft pierces the storm’s eye, there is peace; so serene, it can feel like an oasis at the centre of the fury.

That image makes me think of the story of the prophet Elijah fleeing for his life from the evil Queen Jezebel. He has been on the run too long through the merciless wilderness, and finally resigns himself to death, so he stops. It is in his resignation, an angel of the LORD meets him there and offers him refreshment, preparing Elijah for a 40-day gruelling journey to Mount Horeb. At the mountain, Elijah spends the night in a cave, then the LORD speaks to Elijah, tells him to go stand out on the mountain and wait as the LORD passes him by.

Elijah waits:

there was a wind strong enough to split mountains,
...but the Lord was not in the wind.

after the wind, there was an earthquake,
...but the Lord was not in the earthquake;

after the earthquake, a fire,
...but the Lord was not in the fire;

and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.
God was there, in the silence.¹

It is when we find ourselves caught up in those strangely serene moments that we could expend our time and energy to seek explanations; we want to rationalize, and we scrutinize, and sometimes we hyperbolize. Or, we could just stay in the moment and feel a sense of wonder – wonder not only at the absurdity of the storm we have so far survived, but also at the feeling of gratitude for this, brief, peaceful moment.

Can you relate to those spiritual moments at the eye of a storm in your life?

In today’s verses from Paul’s letter to the Corinthian church, Paul says that, "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." ² Paul was speaking to a community polarized, between Jews seeking signs from God, and Gentiles (Paul calls them Greeks) who leaned on logic, human wisdom

¹ 1 Kings chapter 19

² 1 Corinthians 1:25

to explain things. Paul chose not to try to resolve that conflict, because there was not an easy, “technical” fix that would resolve the conflict. Instead, he focused on the mystery of the cross - foolishness by human expectations of how one should resolve a problem - but then there is the even greater mystery of resurrection. What an absurd Story at the heart of our Christian tradition; God becoming human, being crucified, but then resurrected.

Planted deep within us, I believe, is a spiritual desire to make sense of our moments of tragedy, and of great joy. Sometimes human logic can help us to understand, while other times, it makes no sense.

Spending time in Palestine, watching people treated as animals, I had moments where I could make a small practical difference by challenging the Israeli authorities and helping one Palestinian. Other times, I just saw a sea of humanity, controlled and harassed, and all I could do was take photos, and to hold people and the whole community in my prayers. It was traumatizing to me, and I wasn't the oppressed one! I recall the feeling, the rare but wonderful experience, the Grace of wandering outside of Bethlehem on a sunny day and being welcomed into homes of Palestinians.

I was given the greatest wisdom in brief, peaceful moments like that; at its heart, this world is beautiful. Make no mistake, there are devastating, literal, storms. But there are also always heroic people who will respond by boldly respond by helping, rebuilding, healing. There are most definitely evil systems at play in our world that displace innocents – millions of refugees losing their homes. But people, creatures and Creation itself, we are all resilient. It is a remarkable world God has created, and even as the crucifixion of injustice happens all too often, God is always surprising us with resurrections as well. Amen.