

Is it a Bird? Is it a Plane? It is Jesus!

Sermon - Sunday, June 1, 2014

Lord God, thank you for being so mindful of us that you put your Son in harm's way for our sake. Thank you Jesus, for your loving kindness. Thank you for continuing to empower us to be witnesses by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Good morning church! This is a great day, a glorious day and we are glad to be here in the house of the Lord. We are thankful for another day to worship Him. Let us give thanks and rejoice in His Holy name. Jesus in the morning, Jesus in the noontime, Jesus when the sun goes down. Welcome this morning. So glad you could be here. Welcome to our guests today. We have with us the Director of Crossroads Camping and Retreat Center, Anthony Briggs, and Crossroads staff members who will be working with us to bring the camping experience right here into our church and into our city, this summer. We are putting together a week long day camp experience for the week of July 20th this summer. So welcome and we will have some time to meet and greet and show them around a little later.

Wowww... so this has been a whirlwind these past few weeks! There is never a dull moment around here at St. John's. And, another thing, although there are a lot of things that can be said about my life, as a leader in the church and in general, "boring", is not one of those things! I have to ask that everybody please excuse our appearance because some parts of our buildings are under renovation. And also the bulletin today may look a little different and partly because of the fact that the copy machine was out of commission for two weeks, we do what we must do!

I have been traveling a bit lately: So after going to Minneapolis to a preaching festival, I was hardly back a few days and we were off to Synod Assembly in Long Branch, New Jersey. So I have been feeling a little unsettled, and then add to that some of the things that are going on with health issues in our community. So in spite of the whirlwind we take time to pray and care for one another. And despite the fast pace of our cyber space-age lives, we still take the time to mourn for those who slip away. In these past few days I have lost a couple of my dear friends and I share that to say it is important to acknowledge when a friend or someone who is important has left this realm. We suffer loss and while there are many things to be concerned about, it is with a tinge of sadness that many of us have also taken pause this past week to pay attention to the passing of a public figure, Maya Angelou, someone who accomplished so much more than was ever expected of her and whose gifts of wisdom and humanity touched presidents and kings, and queens and children, and reached across generations and oceans and color lines and categories. She was no ordinary person, but a truly phenomenal woman, who grew from a little black girl who was unable to speak at one time and became someone whose voice was so distinctive, that she would speak at inaugurations and receive untold degrees and honors.

Ironically, we have this image about the sky in our readings for today, because one of the images that many associate with Maya Angelou is that of the rainbow in the clouds. Maya Angelou liked to speak about the clouds as a metaphor for some of the struggle

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and hardship in our lives. The cloudiness of life is something we all know about. She would say that we could help each other with that. We could be the rainbow in the cloud for someone. She was that with her poems and her inspiration and the way that she affirmed all manner of humanity with unconditional love. She knew that love and acceptance, and encouragement and support were like a rainbow in a dark cloud for someone who is not be able to see the way forward. It is the difference between hope and despair, between being lost and being found.

Today we read about Jesus saying his final farewells to his disciples and after he had finished speaking he is lifted up into the clouds and all of a sudden their friend is just gone. I imagine it may have felt like with him, went their hope. They are left there, wondering, and of course they are looking to see, as far as they can see Him, and then they can't see him anymore. The two angelic figures who appear to the disciples ask, "Why do you stand there looking into the sky?" And I say why not? After all, Jesus just disappeared into the clouds. He simply disappeared and who would not stand there looking to see what might happen next. Is He coming back, now what?

It is like the ellipse...AND?

But how much can we allow ourselves to be distracted by the clouds? Those angels appear to bring the disciples back to the reality of what Jesus has just been talking to them about. Remember the things he was just saying about being witnesses. He told them that they would be empowered to be witnesses, to see, but not only to see the clouds, but to witness to Him who is the light, and who is the promise (the rainbow, if you will) that is what God has intended for the world. There is no good reason to keep on looking into the cloudiness.

Is Jesus coming back? Yes and in power. That has happened already, in the power of his Spirit. Is he coming back? Yes, always, and, in the meantime, let us proclaim his presence in all that we say and do. It is the rainbow and we have it, to stretch out over every situation that would consume the world in darkness.

Sometimes we do get distracted in the clouds or by the clouds and it is easy to be kind of paralyzed by that cloudiness. Barbara Brown Taylor, who spoke at the conference I went to recently, said we are socially conditioned to look in the same direction that everyone else is looking. But she suggests that may need to realize that when everybody is looking up or over there, we may need to look away, a little to the left, or over our shoulder to the right, to look in another direction, because there may be something else going on that we are missing. God may want us to notice something that happening a little to our left or behind us or down the road. That call it is like those angels who showed up when Jesus was ascended that day and who asked the disciples to refocus their attention. While they were looking up in the clouds, they were missing the point.

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Yes, Jesus is coming back and they were asking Him about that just before He ascended into heaven. He had told them that He could not tell them when or where He was coming back, but in the meantime, that they would be given power. He told he would send them that; that they would have work to do, that there was witnessing to be done. In the meantime, you have a lot of territory cover (indeed to the ends of earth). So rather than looking into the clouds, they were to get busy about the kingdom.

So we will miss the people who leave us, no doubt. We do. Any loss. I am going to miss my friend Freda, and my friend Buck. My friend Sue is going to miss her dog who died. And the world is going miss Maya Angelou. Loss leaves a void and of course we take some time to mourn and lament. But part of that might be to consider what has been left with us, what legacy, what gifts, what inspiration. The best way to love Jesus is to witness to Him, to feed His lambs, the best way to honor the unconditional love of God is to be a rainbow in the cloud for someone else.

Dr. Caroline Lewis is a seminary professor and she gives us another image that helps with this idea of where we might be focusing our vision. She says that we have a little area of our reality that is our comfort zone. Think of it as information. It is the set of values, ideas, our worldview that we are comfortable with and in which we normally move. This information is what we use to make our judgments. But Lewis says there is a whole other world that we have never considered and that we are just not conscious of and it is beyond what we have already experienced and it requires new thinking and new experience and it requires some amount of courage and openness for us to enter it or open ourselves to it. She said that the reality outside of our comfort zone is a much bigger reality than ours and she holds that that it is actually “where the magic happens”.

Here we are: ● and here is where God’s miracle is: ○.

I like that idea, because it means that that God certainly has something bigger in store for us than where we have already been, than what we already know! That God’s kingdom is much bigger than what my little brain can imagine.

Our Bishop, [*The Rev. Tracie Bartholomew*], is thinking like that when she suggests that we be bold enough to think in terms of new missions, and house church spinoffs, and new partnerships that have not been tried before.

The reality of our world and the challenges that are presenting themselves to the church today may suggest I am too focused on what has already happened. Maybe I am not allowing myself to look over there where God is doing something new. It may be there is someone or something that we haven’t seen yet or that we can’t see, but if we just allow ourselves to hear where God is calling us we might just step right into a miracle. Maybe if we stop blindly following the crowd, or just doing what we have always

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done...maybe if we are courageous enough to look in a different direction, maybe God is doing something marvelous that never thought about before. Maybe there is someone crying over there, someone needing over there, or someone looking for a blessing over there. And the church is being asked to come by there.

It does take courage to be witnesses for Jesus, you know. It does take clear vision, and often new vision. We can't just stand there. We are called to realize that God is not finished with you or me, that God was not finished when Jesus ascended into heaven. Jesus is not finished the work of the kingdom. We have been called into that work. So we are allowed to mourn our losses, and to lament our past, but we are not to stop for too long. Is He coming back? Yes and there will be time for that, and in the meantime He is already here, in a way that you can make count.

At the very least, we can try to be a rainbow in the cloud for someone who is being threatened by the storm clouds of life. At our very best we can do what Jesus asks of His disciples, that we be witnesses in our city, in our lives and in the world over as far we are able.

AMEN