

Genesis 22:1-8

Luke 15:1-7

“God Bless the Wandering Church”

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I wonder if you would agree with the following statement: “The real sermon is in the Children’s Moment.” Do you agree? This was the consensus among a small group of clergy I was with last week. We were in a meeting on Zoom. Episcopalians, Lutherans, Catholics, Presbyterians, and UCCers, we represented a cross-section of denominations stretched from Vermont to Atlanta, and Virginia to Texas. We were discussing where the magic happens. In church, where does the magic happen? In a worship service, which moment is it that makes people go “Wow!” and “Huh?” at the same time? When is it that most of us search our hearts and scratch our heads all at once? What’s the magic moment?

Is it in the singing? The sacraments? “This is my body broken for you. Take and eat.” That’s pretty magical. Or is it the actual gathering itself? In the chance to rub shoulders with other people who are also going, “Wow!” and “Huh?” As I’ve heard some say this past year especially, “I’ll return to church when the church returns.” What we mean, I think, is that the magic is in the gathering, in the place. When that comes back, I’ll come back.

Then there is what I heard someone say this past Christmas when I asked them if they’d like to read a few words in a worship service. The service, of course, was online. This person had never set foot inside our church building; as far as I know, they still haven’t. But their daughter, who comes all the time, told me that her elderly mother had been tuning into Four Corner Community Chapel’s YouTube channel every Sunday all year. “It’s been a long time since my mother could get to church. She has missed it. But not anymore.” When I asked her mother if she’d like to read some words as part of a Sunday service, I said, “Would you like to read a few words in *your* service?” “Oh yes!” she told me. Maybe that’s the magic. The way the local church has become the world-wide church in the midst of pandemic. The way of technological innovation to revive the spirits of an old woman. Wow.

Or maybe the magic is in the timing. In scripture, numbers count. God took 7 days to create the heavens and the earth. The Israelites wandered through the wilderness in search of a promised land for 40 years. Jonah sat in the belly of a fish for 3 days. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days, and like Jonah, sat in the darkness of his own bellied tomb for 3 days. And we come to church for an hour or two every Sunday. When the Jewish rabbis speak of Sabbath and the meaning of rest, they do not speak of place or sacrament, but of time. Figure out who what you are going to do with your time, or not do with your time, and the rest will fall into place.

On the other hand, my friend Nina, who pastored a church in New Jersey and is now retired, tells a story about a mother and father who came to her one day to talk about their son. "He is at college and has gotten into all kinds of things we'd rather him not be into. We don't understand how this could happen. We had him baptized."

I often hear this same sort of sentiment from new parents when they come asking to have their 1-month-old infant baptized. "Why, why would you like to have your child baptized?" And invariably some will say, "We just want to know they're going to be safe." To which I say, though never out loud, good luck. When Jesus got baptized, the next thing to happen to him was he got swept away by God's spirit to be tempted in the wilderness for 40 days. With no food or drink, and nowhere to turn, in those 40 days Jesus learned to turn to God.

As a parent myself, I understand the desire to keep your children safe. But whatever "safe" is, it won't be guaranteed by baptism. There is no magic in the water or the words, or in the timing of it. Whether we are baptized as a baby, on our deathbed, or moments before our parents drop us off at college, unless we are prepared to throw ourselves to the winds of God, our baptism is going to last only as long as it takes for the water to dry from our head. It took Jesus 40 days straight to figure out what he was going to do with his baptism, and he was the Son of God. I'm just the son of Jon and Martha. So if it's magic I'm looking for, I figure I've still got some time.

Where's the magic? In a worship service, where does the magic happen? Quite naturally, in my meeting with fellow clergy last week, we all agreed the answer is, the sermon. The magic happens in the sermon. I mean, like every good magic trick, the sermon is well thought-out. You plan all week long for it, carefully writing down every sentence to make sure it speaks with conviction, relevance, compassion, and truth. You practice it, smoothing out the transitions, figuring out pitch and volume, in hopes that it will make listeners go, "Wow!" and "Huh?"

Wow, I had no idea God loves me that much.

Wow, I never saw before just how deep grace goes.

Huh, I never thought of prayer as being the most powerful weapon for peace in the world.

Huh, what would it look like to hike up a mountain to sacrifice the one thing I love most in this world at the top?

The purpose of preaching is both to silence us, and to give us something to say. Both to comfort us and to disturb us. Both to make us see that God is with us in the ordinariness of the every day, and that God is about to take us out on the town and do something extraordinary.

Needless to say, we were all feeling pretty good about our ability to make magic in our sermons when one person—just one—said, "Yes, but we all know the real sermon is the Children's Moment." Do you agree? I do. And that's really saying something coming from this preacher. I mean, I just spent half my week planning this sermon. Meanwhile, Children's Moments almost never go as planned. This sermon will last about 13 minutes and I, and probably you too, will have forgotten it by this afternoon. Children's Moments last, well, just a moment, and we can't seem to forget them. I still remember one such moment from 14 years ago. I was in my first church, sitting on the front steps, as I do here, and I was sharing with the children a thank you letter we had gotten from a family in Guatemala who had received a cow we bought for them that Christmas through *Heifer International*. I was talking about the huge difference it would make in the life of this family to now have fresh milk every day, straight from the cow. I was talking about wealth

inequity, and using words like justice, and I could tell, the children were getting it, the sermon was getting through, when little Parker interrupted me to say, “We have a cow in our family.” I had been to Parker’s house, and I’d never seen any cows. “Really, what’s your cow’s name?” “Mommy,” he said without skipping a beat. He said it right there in front of the whole church, and his mommy. When Parker began to go into certain details regarding the milking process at his house, it was all I could do to say, “Let’s pray.”

On a more serious note, I also remember what one child said last week about grapes. You remember, after Shelby Gabel read the story for us where Jesus says, “I am the Real Vine and my Father is the Farmer. He cuts off every branch of me that doesn’t bear grapes. And every branch that is grape-bearing he prunes back so it will bear even more grapes.” And I held up a bunch of grapes and asked our children to tell me what they know about grapes.

“You have to water them.”

“They taste good.”

“No two are exactly the same.”

“Even the bad ones can be used for something good.”

“Some grapes will fall off and roll away.”

Huh? Some grapes will fall off and roll away? I thought the whole point of the sermon was that if Jesus is the vine and we are the branches on which the grapes grow, so long as we stay on the vine, we’ll have a lot of good grapes to show for ourselves. I mean, I spent a whole week working to make the sermon say just that. That we could spend a whole lifetime following Jesus and still not have very much to show for never crossed my mind. But there it was, courtesy of our children, “Some grapes will fall off and roll away.”

I think what makes the Children’s Moment the real sermon is that children are willing to wander off script. To point out with brutal honesty what isn’t being said or considered, and to point out the implications of what is being said, even if those implications are impossibly hard to stomach or fix. Isaac. In Genesis 22, he and his father Abraham are out for a morning hike. Abraham knows this is a death march, that when they reach their

destination, he is going to do as God has told him and sacrifice his son, his only son. Tiffany pointed out to me yesterday that even if it weren't Mother's Day, this story is rife with problems for every parent. What kind of God asks a parent to sacrifice their child for God? What kind of parent does so?

Walking up the mountain with his father, Isaac sees a problem, too. "Father, the wood and fire are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham's answer is to tell his child, God will provide the lamb. Does Abraham mean Isaac will be the lamb, or that God will provide some other lamb? If we want to find out, we are going to have to wander up the mountain, too. We are going to have to trust that, with little to show for ourselves except our fear and confusion, God will provide.

In story after story in scripture, this is how the real sermons go. They take place not in the safety of church sanctuaries, but in the wildernesses, on the mountainsides, in the wandering places. They take place in those moments when, for the sake of creating something new in this world—peace, hope, justice, celebration—people have been willing to risk everything they have to roll off like a grape to where God only knows, only to come back with not much to show for.

But how did Jesus put it? When one day a group of teachers who thought they knew every trick in the book, saw him eating with sinners. They began to grumble about it, and Jesus said, "*Which one of you, if you had a hundred sheep and one wandered off, wouldn't leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness to wander off yourself in search of it?* When they have found it, they lay it on their shoulders and rejoice. And when they come home, they call together their friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'"¹

¹ *Italics* auth. translation.

Now I ask you, where is the magic? Is it in getting all 100 sheep back together again? Is it in being home again? No, it's in The Shepherd who wanders out to find each and every last one of us.

And the people of God said, Wow.