

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, MAY 24, 2020

“Looking in All the Wrong Places” *(Acts 1:1-14)*

I had heard there was a heronry near Five Oaks Retreat Centre. So I set off to find it. I was familiar with Great Blue herons, having observed them wading in shallow waters or standing absolutely still on the shore waiting for some unsuspecting fish or frog to come in range of their lightning swift bills. I had watched them in flight - their great wings outstretched and their long necks tucked into an “S” shape. I had never seen their nests, but imagined they would be near the shore, possibly hidden among the reeds like a loon’s. I combed what I thought was the perfect habitat along the meandering Whiteman’s Creek. No sign. I bushwhacked near the edge of the Grand River. Nothing. I was about ready to declare this heronry “a fairy story” when the Director of Five Oaks offered to guide me there. To my surprise, instead of walking down to the Grand, we headed uphill, skirting a farmer’s field. I heard the Great Blues first - their harsh cackling calls - then I saw them high up in mature deciduous trees, balancing on their nests, and coming in for awkward landings, fresh from fishing. There must have been at least forty nests - an impressive heronry - but I had totally missed it because I was looking in all the wrong places.

Jesus’ disciples are looking in the wrong place. There, they are on Mount Olivet, a hill just on the outskirts of Jerusalem. According to the author of Luke / Acts, the risen Christ has been with the disciples forty days - that’s Biblical shorthand for a long time - teaching them more about the realm of God, and giving them final instructions. Now, he is taken into heaven in a manner reminiscent of the prophet Elijah who was swept up in a chariot of fire. The disciples stand with their faces turned upwards, gazing at the now

empty sky. A stance not unfamiliar to birders who with binoculars poised, scan the branches looking for that elusive warbler.

A stance not unfamiliar to people of faith. In his book, *The God We Never Knew*, the Biblical scholar, Marcus Borg, speaks of two different root concepts for thinking about God:

The first conceptualizes God as a supernatural being 'out there', separate from the world, who created the world a long time ago, and who may from time to time intervene within it.

For many of us, that was our concept of God as children. We thought of God as up there, somewhere - perhaps seated on a majestic throne - looking down on us, watching over us, and like the Christmas elf on the shelf keeping careful track of our behaviour. This idea of God as up above was reinforced by the music we sang. Each and every Sunday, we began worship, as my mother had in her childhood, with at least one verse of "Holy, Holy, Holy":

Holy, holy, holy, all the saint adore thee, casting
down their golden crowns around the glassy sea,
cherubim and seraphim falling down before thee, which
wert and art, and ever more shalt be.

At Vacation Bible School, we learned action songs like "be careful little eyes what you see, be careful little eyes what you see, for a Father up above is looking down with love, be careful little eyes what you see." This image of God as residing up above was further strengthened by the prayer we said every day at school - "Our Father who art in heaven" - and by the Apostles' Creed we memorized for confirmation: "the third day he arose again from the dead: he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead." Nor did art do anything to call into question this notion that to find God, we needed to

look up: all those representations of Jesus - pale, almost ethereal - with eyes turned piously skyward - all those paintings of Jacob's ladder with angels ascending and descending, and of Jesus' baptism with the heavens torn open, and the dove sailing down.

Is it any wonder that when we think about God, we, like those first disciples, may stand gazing intently upward? Hoping perhaps that this God of power and might will intervene in our human affairs in some supernatural way. Not to expel the Roman conquerors, and restore the realm of Israel as at least some of Jesus' followers hoped. But to end this COVID-19 global pandemic and protect people who find themselves in the paths of natural disasters like cyclone Amphan, the most powerful ever recorded in the Bay of Bengal or the bush fires that swept Australia earlier this year or bring a miracle or two into the lives of individuals we love who are ill or going through difficult times.

When I went to Manitoba in the summer of 1997, the year of a great spring flood, this joke was circulating. When a farmer found the water rising over his dyke, he prayed: "O God, save me!" Soon, a neighbour paddled by in a canoe. "Jump in!" she said. "No thanks. It's alright," replied the farmer as he continued to wait for God to save him. The water approached the second story of his house. Along came the RCMP in a motor boat: "get on board." "Thank you," responded the farmer, "but I know God will save me." The flood waters rose so high, he had to climb out onto the roof. A helicopter flew over: "grab the harness. We'll pull you up." But the farmer shook his head: "I'm placing my trust in God." The water began to lap at his feet. In fear, the farmer cried out: "God, I trusted you! Why haven't you saved me?" A voice replied: "I sent you a canoe, a

motorboat, and a helicopter. What else did you want?" I smiled when I heard the joke, but I also acknowledged there is perhaps something of that farmer in us - something that long for the miraculous, the dramatic, the spectacular, the unmistakable hand of God - reaching out to save us or show us the way.

The disciples are standing on Mount Olivet, gazing intently upwards to the heavens, God's dwelling place, the heavens where their leader, their teacher, their friend has vanished. Are they like that Manitoba farmer looking for God to make some spectacular intervention? If so, they are to be disappointed. Two messengers from God do show up, but it is with a question - "People of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?" That is enough to jolt them into action. They return to Jerusalem, an urban centre which is not home to them, a city which may contain the temple, a splendid centre for worship, but also holds danger for these followers of that dead Galilean, Jesus. In an upper room, they gather together. In their brokenness - the circle of twelve has been shattered by Judas' betrayal. In their powerlessness - Jesus is no longer with them to guide and direct. They cannot return to the past, to the way life was before. And the way forward is not clear. In this uncomfortable, scary liminal space, they pray. And they discover ... that God is not up there in heaven, but in their midst.

This is how Marcus Borg describes the second root concept of God:

God is the encompassing Spirit; we (and everything that is) are in God. For this concept, God is not a supernatural being separate from the universe; rather, God (the sacred, Spirit) is a nonmaterial layer or level or dimension of reality all around us. God is more than the universe, yet the universe is in God. Thus, in a spatial sense, God is not 'somewhere else' but 'right here.'

God is right here. In the realm of nature. At the same time I was learning “Holy, Holy, Holy” and “Be Careful Little Eyes”, I was also memorizing the CGIT hymn “This is My Father’s World”. The second verse says:

This is my Father’s world: the birds their crops raise,
the morning light, the lily white, declare their Maker’s praise.
This is my Father’s world: he shines in all that’s fair;
in the rustling grass I hear him pass, he speaks to me everywhere.

Just as our Celtic forbears in the faith understood, God is revealed both in the little book of scripture and in the big book of creation. As Richard Rohr observed in last Friday’s meditation:

Creation is the first Bible, as I (and others) like to say, and it existed for 13.7 billion years before the second Bible was written. Natural things like animals, plants, rocks, and clouds give glory to God just by being themselves, just what God created them to be.

God is right here. In community, even when we cannot gather physically in our sanctuary, but only virtually on Zoom or separately in our own homes, using the same worship resources. There are moments when we feel the movement of the Spirit - enfolding us in love, holding us “in fathomless peace”, kindling “our wonder and hope”, silencing “our chattering fears”, inspiring us to dream once more God’s dream of justice and peace, renewing our strength to keep on our journey into our unknown future.

Thanks be to God that even when we look in all the wrong places, God does not give up on us. God waits for us to discover that God is right here, right now. Amen.