

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER
IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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BIRDS RETURNING

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Text of a Sermon preached on the 3rd Sunday after Pentecost

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EZEKIEL 17:22-24 | PSALM 92:1-4, 11-14
2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-10, 14-17 | MARK 4:26-34

I wonder if you noticed last year in the middle of the pandemic there was a sudden flurry of interest in birds. Locked away in our homes and apartments we were glad to awaken to the normal migrations, take time to listen to the dialogue outside, perhaps buy one of the many new books

rushed to publication, and realize the miracle of the winged kingdom that had always been just outside our windows, just outside of view, outside what we choose to be aware of.

In recent weeks there has been some glorious songs outside my windows. Just last morning there was the usual patter of business, of checking in, of feeding – and then suddenly the loudest argument you ever heard. I bolted up in bed and wondered if I had missed the end of the world. Thankfully, in a few minutes they took their argument elsewhere.

When Jesus appeared and raised his voice to say “the kingdom of God is near,” and asked, “with what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?” our hearts should thrill to these words as if awakened by the sparrow, the cardinal and the wren calling back and forth to one another. Listen. What Jesus says here is not a response to some controversy or critic. It is him pointing out the seed, the birds.

Jesus tells us that the kingdom produces a steady but mysterious harvest, if we just trust the seed of faith that God has put in our hand to plant. Jesus tells us that the kingdom is present really present when we have allowed for the conditions for birds to gather and sing, not in lofty cedars, but in the weeds, in invasive and determined wild plants, in the mustard seed.

After all, the sign of peace, the sign of new life, is the sign of the spirit. We are told to look for a dove in flight, a dove descending, a dove returning. The kingdom is the kind of trust, the faith, that gives rise to the beloved community.

The kingdom of God is a message that brings an awareness that we are God’s children created to live as one family. Obviously, given the many different kinds of people we are, and the many different kinds of families we experience, and the thousands of years we have not listened to or believed this message, it would be a challenge for anyone to get our attention, to get us to see things differently.

What I find immediately attractive about Jesus’ teaching at this moment is that he disarms us. He tricks us into looking for something just outside our view, that we didn’t know was there, that we desperately need to see.

At first we only see an absentminded, perhaps incompetent farmer. But look, he has that kind of faith. And then, oh, by the way, you see the weeds overtaking the yard and the sidewalk? Wait for it. That persistent, daily investment in others has created a stronger family, a different kind of community. At the end of the day, the birds will return. The community will gather. There will be a song in the land once again.

The gardeners among us laugh! What kind of seed is this?! All I need is the littlest, the smallest part. All I need to do is release it from my hand. Call it faith? - trust? - hope? - love? - it, and the movement of my heart, is all we need.

Jesus is worried about us. He worried that when we meet him, we won't get him. He knows we are preoccupied with making it in the world, with larger, grander, competing narratives of power, of wealth, of fame, of privilege, of security.

He knows we have a hard time not defending ourselves and our tribe, our little kingdoms, just long enough to appreciate each other, to see the kingdom of God. He knows it is so much easier just to busy ourselves with our concerns.

And so, in a world that is ever more complicated and confusing, ever more open to misunderstanding and mass delusion, Jesus bids us open our eyes to the miracles just outside our windows, to the hope of the birds gathering, of the birds taking shelter, of the birds singing us their songs.

I think of this in terms of handing on our faith to one another. We used to depend upon the church, or the community, to help us raise our children. Whether it is the internet, or a loss of trust in institutions and all authorities, things are different now. We used to talk about handing down the faith we inherited. That happens less and less. Indeed, as I stepped away from full time work in the church, my children began to listen to me just a little bit more.

Notice that Jesus did not say that kingdom of God is like the teacher, the parent, the authority, who brings the book, the rituals, the songs, and from higher place hands them down to you, and says, this is what you believe.

This never really worked by the way. This certainly does not work now in our strangely over wired and under connected world. There is a more basic process. We need to start where Jesus starts.

You have faith that I do not have. You have a seed, a movement of love and trust, that only you can gift to the world, offer in sacrifice, plant in the expectant earth. Therefore, mothers and fathers, do not depend upon the church handing down the faith. There are too many sources of truth, too many competing narratives.

The only faith that gets handed down these days is the faith that is handed on, that faith that we ourselves have released into the earth in the seeds of the kingdom. The only hope we have of seeing the kingdom of God is passing on the trust, the love and the hope we have, hand to hand, eye to eye, as we release it in our lives, as we strive to live it with integrity.

In that way our families, especially our children will see it. Even if they deny it, they will go to sleep and wake up again and believe it, because “the seed will sprout and grow, we know not how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.” Our children will see it for themselves in our lives, in the song of faith we sing.

Whenever we hear Jesus say “the kingdom of God is like” we should drop everything, go to our windows and listen. We are listening for the salvation of our souls, the rebirth of our communities, and the responsibility we have to be the message we pass on.

We are listening for the dove to return, the spirit to descend — for the birds to begin a new song.