

“Waiting in the Nest”
Luke 12: 32-40

Rev. Liz Miller
August 11, 2013

For a lot of families, teaching the Bible to their children is similar to getting them to eat their vegetables. Like vegetables, parents know there is a lot of good in the Bible, but also like vegetables, the Bible sometimes comes in a package that seems unappealing to kids. It's one of the longest books in the world, it has a lot more words than it has pictures, and it is full of so many people and time periods and events that it is hard for even the most astute student of the Bible to be an expert on all of it—there is a very good reason why we have Old Testament scholars and New Testament scholars and Gospel experts and Pauline experts—its too much for any one person to tackle on their own.

If we're being honest, this apprehension towards the Bible doesn't always end with childhood. At any age it can be an intimidating book! It is a book that often evokes more questions than it asks, and for those of us who are tasked with teaching this books to others—especially to children—it can seem daunting. I remember sitting in seminary next to Baptist students who grew up with a rich Bible tradition in their churches and homes, listening to them quote passages with ease, and think that I was so far behind them in my knowledge of the Bible that it would take the rest of my life to catch up.

Besides the length and the breadth of the Bible, I think one of the things that can be intimidating is that it includes topics that make us uncomfortable and includes stories that we disagree with. Typically, in our culture, when we disagree with someone or something, we don't keep listening to them. When we realize that a particular news channel is slanted with an perspective that we disagree with, we change the channel. When radio and television personalities say things that are offensive to the public, they are publicly fired. When a politician has different values than us, we vote for someone else.

But, the Bible is different—we recognize that with the bad comes some really good, and so we don't give up or walk away as quickly as we might in another situation. There are several passages and

stories in the Bible that can and should be considered offensive in today's world. We have drastically different experiences and beliefs on the roles of men and women, homosexuality, and racism, to name a few of the biggest issues we might find ourselves at odds with in the Bible. I am thankful that we are able to recognize that just as we are limited by our own time period and our own culture, so were the writers of the Bible. Instead of throwing out the whole book, we can grapple with the stories that make us cringe, we can explore where they were coming from, and—most importantly—we can search for the underlying meaning—the faith and values that are often (but not always) easier to relate to. The search we can understand: the search to understand God and make sense of our human experiences.

Because the Bible is the foundation of so much of Christianity, we have a complex relationship with it. It really is a relationship. We don't have to agree with it all the time, we don't have to understand it all the time, but we can keep reading, digging deeper, exploring our faith in the context of the faith stories of our ancestors—finding the ways in which the word of God is still speaking to us.

Today's Gospel lesson is one of those parts that makes me cringe and take pause when I hear it. “Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves...” Cringe, cringe, cringe. The history of slavery in this country runs so deep that I can't hear this passage, or preach on it, without first acknowledging that it hurts to hear references to slavery at all, and especially when it is supposed to be uplifting. Slavery and servanthood would have been a very normal part of the culture at the time this was written and during the time Jesus was alive—slavery was a part of his daily life.

This is not the only time that Jesus mentions slavery in the Gospels. The way he used it was as a way to try to compare the relationship between God and humans. Slavery and the idea of having a master and a servant is such a concrete image that even today, we can hear it and even as it makes us cringe, we can understand the power differences between God and humans. We can understand that

there are defined roles and differences between us and God, but, even in those roles, there is respect and compassion and care. This is evident even in this passage, as we see the master sit down for a meal and invites his servant to sit down as well and join him in the feast. And, we can still disagree with using an image of slaves to get that point across.

There are two broad ways to take a stand against something: the first is to stand outside of it, to be an outsider who is able to look in and offer a critique, while refusing to participate in the offending activity until amends are made. An example of this stand would be someone saying, “Because Jesus and the Bible mentions slavery, I am not going to read it anymore. I am not going to study it or talk about it until it is taken out.” I know people who have made that decision—and it is a valid one. Like any relationship, there are times when it becomes too painful or hurtful and it needs to end.

The other way to take a stand is to do it from within—to call out the offense and stay in relationship, and to try to change from inside. So in our case, it would be calling attention to the fact that there are things that are no longer in line with our contemporary morals, and recognizing them as such, but still looking to the text, or to other parts of the text, for meaning underneath the cultural trappings that it was written under.

In this particular passage from Luke, although I get caught up on the slavery reference, I think the underlying message is a powerful one. “Do not be afraid, little flock.” Wait for God, be ready and live each day as if the kingdom of God was at hand, and do not be afraid, because God wants to do good things in your life.

If I was going to rewrite this passage, to make it more culturally relevant with a different metaphor, but retain the same message, I would evoke the image of a parent sending their child off to school, and of that child leaving home for the first time. Perhaps this particular image came to mind because of the line “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” *Where your tuition is, there you children or your heart will be also.*

It is not just relevant to those sending their children away to college. It is a common image in

our town this month, as many parents prepare for their kids to go to school, some for the first time, some for the last time. Some will take their kids to school across the neighborhood and across town, but others will be going with their young adults across the northeast and even across the country. To those parents, I remind them of Jesus's words: "Do not be afraid, little flock." When our children leave home, be it for the day or the semester, it becomes a time of waiting and anticipation of their return. Put your faith in God—put your faith in the one that watches over your children and will be with them on their journey. Trust that God wants goodness for their lives, trust that God wants to keep them safe and happy and full of love. Trust, and wait, living at home, looking forward to their return. And live every day in anticipation of that return. Live with a fullness of faith and life, live in a way that sets an example for your young ones so that they can model their own lives in a similar way one day.

I think when our graduates go away to college for time it is not uncommon to imagine their family's lives stopping or pausing for those first months they are gone. It is hard to imagine the familiarity and comfort of routines and rituals continuing without their presence or participation. I think when we are in those days and weeks preparing for the final send off, it is hard for the families who feel left behind to imagine what it will be like. It starts young—my niece, my brother's youngest child, is preparing for all day kindergarten. For the first time in 9 years, my sister-in-law will find herself with an empty house for most of the day. She keeps asking the universe, "What am I going to do without her at home? It's going to be so lonely."

For those parents out there who are in the midst of this month of anticipation and anxiety, "Do not be afraid, little flock." When your children leave, know that they will return. Know that God will be with them just as God was with you when you left home. In their absence, do not live in fear or worry, but live with a fullness of life and love. Live as if they are coming home that very night—continue the routines and rituals of family life, and even dare to make new ones. Live with purpose, as if your children were watching you and observing, for even from afar they are learning what it means to be a grownup, a parent, and a friend, from you. And finally, spend your days in joy and gratitude knowing

that they will soon return. “Do not be afraid, little flock.”