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Year A
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Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own, that, hearing, we may also obey your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

AN IMMIGRANT'S SONG
SONG OF SOLOMON 2:8-13; MATTHEW 11:16-19, 25-30

The US/Mexico border (at least in places not advertised in travel brochures) looks and feels like a cemetery. I still am haunted by the vision of memorials to would-be immigrants on the banks of the Rio Grande. Travel flowed freely into Nuevo Laredo, but on the other side of the bridge, the side leading back into the United States, security was tighter, traffic more congested. The stories represented by each cross or flower arrangement intrigued me. I let my imagination go wild and encouraged members of the Presbyterian Border Ministry team traveling with me to do likewise. Who were these people? Why were they willing to risk their lives to immigrate? Would they have been satisfied by what they experienced on this side of the border? Obviously, the questions being asked were unanswerable, but there was value in asking them, because they honored those who died tragically in search of something else while giving us a chance to empathize with our neighbors.

Mexico is a strange place to start a sermon on the Sunday after the nation celebrates the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the establishment of a more perfect union, and yet here we are midst a presidential election in which immigration is taking center stage. Who belongs among us? And what is the process for welcoming strangers into our midst? The sad irony in these questions, of course, is that they are being asked---for the most part---by descendants of imperialists who immigrated

violently, conquering land and people without compassion or empathy, which begs the question, “How much have things changed?”

This past week, a *New Yorker* cartoon appeared featuring some of founders of this country. Benjamin Franklin is flanked by George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Washington and Jefferson grumble as Franklin thumbs through an appointment book. At last Franklin concedes, “OK, OK, the third is out. How about the 4th?” Washington and Jefferson look pensively at the pages in front of them before nodding approvingly, at which point Franklin declares, “The fourth it is!” Thus the date of the signing of the Declaration of Independence was set, and given the way in which history has unfolded, perhaps dates of death for Jefferson, John Adams and now Jesse Helms.

Is life this arbitrary? Is death this poetic? Maybe so. So many of the plot twists in our stories seem contingent on where we are or who are with or who we meet. The story of UPC’s Julie Laible comes to mind. You know the story better than I; you are the ones who told it me. Laible served the University of Alabama as professor of educational leadership until her untimely death in 1999. She was driving south on I-75 in Florida when 22 lbs. of concrete crashed through her windshield after being thrown from an overpass. A university lecture series on anti-racist scholarship, education and social activism was established the next year in her honor. For those of you who lived through this experience, it had to feel like a nightmare.

A fine line exists between providence and tragedy. God brings people into our lives to enrich our experiences, and God sends us into the world to be gracious and merciful in our relationships with ourselves and with one another. The language of “providence” humbles us by helping us to recognize that there are factors beyond our control that are worth celebrating; the language of “tragedy” comforts us by naming the injustice we feel when someone dies unexpectedly or a person is admitted to a union to which we desire to belong. The cliché “a coincidence is God’s way of being anonymous” works only when the coincidence in question brings joy, not sorrow.

There is something romantic about the joy that springs from providence, from the circumstances beyond our control that takes us to a place for which we did not ask or imagine. For the poet in Song of Solomon, this joy is palpable. It is both audible and visual: “The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping over mountains, bounding over hills.” Oh, now there is chemistry here: “My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice.” At last the beloved speaks: “My beloved speaks and says to me, ‘Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.’” Diagnosis: spring fever...the circumstances of this person’s life raises the curtain of an opera. Suddenly, everything smells better than it ever has. Is that because it does or because of the joy that colors the poet’s perspective?

Either way, I am grateful that Song of Solomon appears in the Revised Common Lectionary (albeit ever so briefly). Song of Solomon is Scripture as erotica. It recognizes thoughts, feelings and urges that are characteristic of romantic relationships (not every day temple practices). Maybe this explains why I, as a native of the rural South, stumbled upon Song of Solomon by accident. Or was that providential? The leadership of the church that I attended at the time would have considered it tragic, because they were ill-equipped to discuss human sexuality without resorting to name-calling, and yet whether the church is willing to acknowledge it or not, it is there. Scripture celebrates our bodies and the intimacy that exists in deeply abiding, loving relationships.

Now to build bridge from Song of Solomon to Matthew, from Mexico to the United States: Both the poet in Song of Solomon and Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel command us to look, to confront that which is before us. Solomon says, “Look! Look at my beloved, the person peering through the lattice on the other side of the border.” Matthew says, “Look! Look at this generation.” “Children,” Jesus declares,

“children in the marketplace.” Not children who are well-behaved, cute or snuggly but children who are belligerent, bratty: childish. Products of a selfish, shop-or-drop culture, Jesus reduces this generation to a group of “children sitting in the marketplaces and taunting one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ Na, na, na, na, boo, boo...”

Jesus looks extraordinarily human here, as it is unclear which comes first: his frustration with this generation or this generation’s frustration with him. The movement seems condemned-if-they-do and condemned-if-they-do-not, as Jesus laments: “John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon;’ I came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” Jesus holds up the mirrors of baptism (remember John is the baptizer) and Eucharist (bread-eating and wine-drinking) and screams, “Look! Look at yourselves, at your inconsistencies and at the harshness of your judgments.”

Do you want to hear harsh? Listen to the words excerpted from the Revised Common Lectionary: “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! And Capernaum, on judgment day, it will be better for Sodom than for you.” Please note that inasmuch as political and geographic boundaries bring people together, they also tear them apart, and Christ calls us to a faith that unites rather than divides. When we join the regularly scheduled lectionary reading already in progress, Jesus prays, “Thank you, Lord, for hiding these things from the wise and intelligent and for revealing them to infants, for such was your gracious will.” Then says to the intelligent and wise, to Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum, “Come to me, all you that are weak and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (at least compared to yours).”

The faithful are immigrants---strangers, outcasts---in every place and in every time. Problems ensue when immigrants and children of immigrants forget who they and their neighbors are. All of us---each and every one of us---are children of God, and that distinction transcends all boundaries political,

geographic and other. When Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weak and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,” he will...again and again.

On Tuesday, I went to a production at the Bama Theater for the first time. The film *Under the Same Moon* was playing. Set on both sides of the US/Mexico border, it is the story of a mother and her son. The mom has immigrated to the United States to support her mother and the elementary-aged son left in Mexico. When the grandmother dies unexpectedly, the boy takes off for the United States. His adventure probes the immigrant experience and affords a glimpse of one of the best case scenarios, which, in my estimation is bad enough. Rather give away the ending (if you do not know it already), I encourage you to imagine one. What if you were the mother? What if you were the son? What if it were possible for you to embrace again and again? When Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weak and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,” he will...again and again and again. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God’s judgments and how inscrutable God’s ways! For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever. Amen.