

Proper 5B
June 10, 2018

Grace Church, Lexington
Fr. James

I Samuel 8:4-20, 11:14-15 *Psalms 138* II Corinthians 4:13-5:1 Mark 3:20-35

From Wonder to Witness

The world in its natural state is often one full of joy and delight. Often of an early morning, a Carolina Wren lets go with its song larger and more substantial than the body that supports it. As I lie in bed awakened by its trilling call and then listening for the counterjoy of a neighboring wren, each defining his territory through this early morning serenade, I suddenly hear the defining chuckle of the Pileated Woodpecker's primary territorial advertisement. Tuesday morning a few weeks ago, it was raining as this thrilling little concert broke upon me. Some Springs the Cedar Waxwings come by the hundreds to advantage themselves of the wild cherry trees beyond our window with their thrashing wings reaching for food and their sree sree calls creating a charming cacophony of feeding and broadcasting their presence. Sometimes, the wild turkey add their quiet or not so quiet gobble on the early air. Never will I forget the first time I drove up to my

home outside Stewartsville, New Jersey and spotted the trees at the end of my driveway full of what I thought at the time were Turkey Vultures, but discovered a few mornings later as I took my German Shorthaired Pointer, Charity, out the back door for her early morning relief, that Turkey Vultures they were not, but Wild Turkeys by the dozen. In response to our appearance they flew straight up like so many miniture helicopters and then began horizontal flight with a ululating, u-u-u-u-u-u that I could follow long after they were out of sight.

These joys remind me of the prayer I use each evening from *Compline in the Prayer book*. “Guide us waking and guard us sleeping that awake we may watch with Christ and asleep we may rest in peace.” Birdsong as an early morning guide to joy. Reminders that we not alone in the world, but surrounded by beauty and love, rest and provision. These are some of the delights of life. With Madelyn L'Engle who followed Pascal, we might say, that “Joy is the inevitable sign of the presence of God.”

George McDonald once wrote a poem that expresses this

idea of God in nature. “All about us, in earth and air, wherever the eye or ear can reach, there is a power ever breathing itself forth in signs, now in daisy, now in a wind-waft, a cloud, a sunset; a power that holds constant and sweetest relation with the dark and silent world within us. The same God who is in us, and upon whose tree we are the buds, if not yet the flowers, also is all about us—inside the Spirit; outside the Word. And the two, are ever trying to meet in us; and when they meet, then the signs without, and the longing within, become one in light, and the man no more walketh in darkness, but knoweth wither he goeth.” from his book, Thomas Wingfold, Curate [652:#53:2201].

Psalm 138 our Gradual this morning is a thanksgiving psalm, perhaps from the reign of King Zacharias, but regardless it is one that pours out the psalmists' gratefulness: “I will give thanks to you, O LORD, with my whole heart.... I will bow down toward your holy temple and praise your Name, because of your steadfast love, Hebrew hesed, your steadfast love and faithfulness.” Why is that? Because 'when I called, you answered

me, you increased your strength within me.'

I've read Hector Tobar's book about the 33 Chilean miners who were trapped 2000 feet below sea level in the San Jose mine a few years ago. Thirty-three men, disparate, competing for life, becoming disenchanted with each other as their hopes waned for rescue, coming together on a daily basis in prayer in ways none of them had ever imagined possible. Their strength was increased, their hopes re-founded, their sense of the presence growing as the time stretched out toward a month of entombment. Nineteen days without a meal when the hand of God broke through the mine wall 2100 meters below ground level in the form of a titanium drill bit. Though they were praying for just this eventuality, at the very edge of starvation, they had foregone their half cookie each for three days, the drill came through like the appearance of God himself. Prayer brings to us often a solution quite different from the one we seek, and yet...and yet, what it does is always what is needed, recognized or not.

'Worship and bearing witness' are different expressions of

the 'fundamental and essential constituent parts of divine worship.[251:798 Weiser]. One of those parts is directed towards God, the other bearing testimony of him towards others. 'Even the kings of the earth will ultimately praise you, O LORD,' perhaps because of our witness, 'when they have heard the words that come from you. They will sing of the ways of the LORD.

'Though the LORD be high, he cares for the lowly...Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you keep me safe.... The Lord will make good his purpose for me.' What is that purpose? Partly being one with him in worship and in witness, in absorption and reflection.

Sometime ago, I entered Fairmont Crossing, a nursing home in Amherst County and a clown was coming out. We spoke briefly and I discovered this clown was a Christian minister, carrying out a ministry to which he felt called clowning for God all over the country. I once had a priest who was sometimes clowning, and even including some of the rest of us in his congregation in clowning presentations. So when I discovered this

story, I thought of him and the man at Fairmont Crossing.

A friend named Bill is a minister. He also has been accused of being a little bit nuts. Bill does workshops for churches on clowning. Not long ago, he was in a distant city, packing up after a workshop. The phone rang. Nobody was around. He answered. "Are you a minister?" somebody asked. "Yes, actually I am." "Come quickly," said the voice, "our child is dying of leukemia." Bill dropped everything. He ran out to his rental car and drove to the hospital. He parked the car, ran up the steps, through the double doors, and down the hall. Suddenly it hit him: he was still dressed as a clown, with a white face, red nose, orange hair, and green suspenders. He didn't have time to change. It was an emergency. He kept going. He found the room, knocked on the door, and entered the room where a young girl in a hospital bed lay surrounded by her family. "We called for a minister, not a clown," said the father. The child replied, "He's better than a minister. Can he stay?" No one dared to deny her request. Bill sat on the edge of the hospital bed. He sang songs. He told Bible stories. He cradled

the little girl in his arms until the end. When the last moment came, she made a final request. "Would you come to my funeral?"

So that's how it happened. On the third day, crazy Bill stood with white face, red nose, orange hair, and green suspenders. He never spoke a word, yet he led the people as they laughed, and cried, and remembered the little girl's life. A few people present thought it was wrong to have a clown at a funeral, much less lead the service. They murmured afterwards, "That minister is out of his mind! He's crazy!" By all the proper canons of pastoral protocol, they were probably correct. But there he stood, acting as if God's joyful power has already defeated death. Was he crazy? Who can say? All we know is that Bill heard Jesus say, "I am the resurrection and the life," and he acted accordingly.

"You don't have to be crazy to work around here, but it helps." Likewise, you don't have to be out of your mind to do the work of Jesus Christ, even though a faithful life can provoke the world to think of you that way. Should evil conspire against you, listen closely. You may hear Christ say, "You're my brother --

you're my sister -- you're my family."

William G. Carter, Water

Won't Quench the Fire, CSS Publishing Company

It's a matter of focus, is it not? Do we focus on the matters that distress us or the ones that delight us. If the former, then God is present to bring us to re-focus on love and delight. If the latter, then we can move more readily from delight to praise, from wonder, to joy and witness. *So be it.*