

“The Eagle & The Dove”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
January 8th, 2017
1st Sun./Epiphany

Isaiah 42:1-9

Matthew 3:13-17

[As God said to the Servant of God,]

I chose you to bring justice, and I am here at your side.

I selected and sent you to bring light and my promise of hope to the nations. Isaiah 42:6

Let us pray... O God,

We pray for unity – for the sake of justice.

Amen

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Epiphany – the season of insight when people saw and recognized Jesus as the Son of God.

Two Gospel stories are generally associated with Epiphany including the visit of the Three Wisemen bearing gifts to the Christ child and Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist.

The artwork on our bulletin cover today comes from a pencil drawing I did quite a few years ago – which I finished in ink this week, and it is based on one of these traditional themes.

It portrays the moments after Jesus is brought up from the waters of the Jordan by John the Baptist – though the vision of the heavens opened and the Dove descending are assumed to be Jesus’ internal and personal experience of Divine revelation.

However, the image I’m using with my sermon title is nontraditional and comes from a drawing I did more than 30 years ago – which was published in the Asian-Pacific edition of the US armed forces newspaper, Stars & Stripes.

I was stationed in the Republic of Korea at the time when I sent it in as a response to the criticism against the original proposal for the national Vietnam memorial, to be displayed in Washington, DC .

Maya Lin, was an undergraduate student at Yale when she submitted her design for what we now call the Vietnam Wall – inscribed with the names of almost 58,000 American troops, including my second cousin Ralph Willard.

Critics of the Wall complained that it lacked *‘patriotic or heroic symbols’* and that its *‘V-shaped design was a subliminal anti-war message’* like the *‘peace sign’* or even as *‘a black scar, in a hole, hidden as if out of shame.’*

Yet, Maya Lin herself had been inspired by the war Memorial Rotunda at Yale University, as she touched the names of those who had been added as casualties of Vietnam.

She wrote,

‘I think it left a lasting impression on me...the sense of the power of a name.’

Willard, p.2

Eventually, representational figures were placed beside the monument
portraying four service members, including a woman with three men.
My idea – as you can see, was to use representational art, too,
in the hopes of a post-Vietnam mending of the country from this divisive time.
I was an active duty soldier then, and knew the effect that war still had on our Army,
yet I could respect what some envisioned in the hope for peace.
I drew the Eagle – more as a national symbol than political ‘hawk’,
to represent the well-intentioned desire to oppose tyranny militarily.
I drew the Dove – more as a symbol of the peace movement,
than as an anti-war or anti-US military image.
I suppose I should be surprised that it got published at all,
but I credit the editors for being open-minded.
Even then, those divisions were still present in our society
though no longer in the form of
violent demonstrations and counter-demonstrations.
Still we might take a lesson from the story that inspired my drawing...

This image shows both Eagle and Dove working together –
as the Eagle’s strength falters, the Dove soars above to achieve the goal
of attaining peace.

My inspiration came from an adaptation of a Native American myth
for how music came to our world...

Long, long ago, music did not exist upon the Earth –
neither insects like the crickets, nor even the birds knew how to sing.
Yet the creatures of Earth knew that there was such a thing as music,
though unattainable, above the highest clouds.
They knew this because the butterflies told them,
for they could fly high enough to hear the music,
but they did not have voices that could sing.
They also knew that it would be beneficial to all
if someone with a voice could reach above the clouds
and bring music to the Earth.

This was up to the birds who all volunteered to do this, each taking their turn,
but none could go up high enough.

The robin, the finch, the pigeon, the pelican, the Sandhill cranes,
the egret, the turkey, the falcon, the vulture, and even the albatross.

But they each tried and failed!

At last it was Eagle’s turn, for Eagle was the strongest and bravest
of all the birds.

As Eagle went to the starting place, Dove came and hid in Eagle’s neck feathers –
now in the Native American version, it was a smaller bird,
but this is my version of the story, so it’s a Dove...

Willard, p.3

Then Eagle began to ascend, with each stroke of its wings,
pulling itself higher and higher, towards the blue beyond the clouds
where the music was to be found.

The air became thinner and harder to breathe,
but still Eagle reached with its wingtips towards the Sun,
ever upward.

The air became colder, and feathers gave little protection to
the biting cold and fierce winds on the threshold of the heavens,
but still Eagle mightily drove on,
with each labored sweep of its wings.

Eagle penetrated the clouds that were the last barrier
to the highest heavens where the music was to be found.

Then, ice formed on Eagle like a great blanket,
making its wings heavy, but still Eagle dared to go on –
yet faltered like all those who went before
and began to fall back to the Earth...

just as Dove emerged from its hiding place in Eagle's neck feathers!

Dove soared above the clouds and heard the music
and memorized the songs.

Then, Dove glided back to the Earth to teach all who would listen
to sing their own song.

Theses days, not everyone is singing. Not everyone has found their song.
Many are singing out of harmony,
and there are those who are like 'mine canaries'
telling us that something is wrong with our society's atmosphere
and people are dying because of it.

The Eagle of this story reminds me of John the Baptist
who prepared the way for the Lord – even though he would die before
all was achieved.

Christian theologian and author Dominic Crossan claims that
John's baptismal ritual was intended as a re-enactment
of the Hebrews crossing the Red Sea in their exodus from Egypt.

John was preparing all who would listen, to be ready for what God would do
to free them from Roman oppression and establish the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus – on the other hand according to Crossan,
was proclaiming God's Kingdom of Heaven as something that
needed the active participation of people in order to come about, now.

Willard, p.4

For John, the message was 'Prepare the way of the Lord'

The Kingdom of God is coming...

For Jesus, 'The Kingdom of God is in your midst',

The Kingdom of God is here

These two perspectives work together with John preparing the way,
leading the community of faith to keep looking up with hope,
while Jesus challenges us to be ready to help,
and be united against injustice.

Some songs are oldies, but goodies. They just need to be heard again in a new way.

"Kumbaya" has come to be a cliché of oversentimental longing
for the folk movement of the 1950s and early 1960s,
when it was frequently used for youth retreats.

Coming from the musical "Spiritual" tradition – like "Gospel",
this song still has meaning for our time.

"Kumbaya" is in dialect for a phrase that means, "Come by here" –
a call to God for help.

Maybe we need to hear this song in a new way...

*Someone needs you, Lord, come by here
Someone needs you, Lord, come by here
Someone needs you, Lord, come by here
Oh, Lord, come by here.*

*Someone's crying, Lord, come by here
Someone's crying, Lord, come by here
Someone's crying, Lord, come by here
Oh, Lord, come by here.*

*Someone's laughing, Lord, come by here
Someone's laughing, Lord, come by here
Someone's laughing, Lord, come by here
Oh, Lord, come by here.*

*Someone's praying, Lord, come by here
Someone's praying, Lord, come by here
Someone's praying, Lord, come by here
Oh, Lord, come by here.*

*Someone's singing, Lord, come by here
Someone's singing, Lord, come by here
Someone's singing, Lord, come by here
Oh, Lord, come by here.*

Amen

*Our lesson today from Isaiah 42:1-9 is the first
of the 'Servant Songs' found in the Book of Isaiah.
Here, God proclaims this Servant as one who works without fanfare,
but with determination for justice...*

¹Here is my servant! I have made him strong. He is my chosen one;
I am pleased with him. I have given him my Spirit,
and he will bring justice to the nations.

²He won't shout or yell or call out in the streets.

³He won't break off a bent reed or put out a dying flame,
but he will make sure that justice is done.

⁴He won't quit or give up until he brings justice everywhere on earth,
and people in foreign nations long for his teaching.

⁵I am the LORD God. I created the heavens like an open tent above.

I made the earth and everything that grows on it.

I am the source of life for all who live on this earth,
so listen to what I say.

⁶I chose you to bring justice, and I am here at your side.

I selected and sent you to bring light and
my promise of hope to the nations.

⁷You will give sight to the blind;

you will set prisoners free from dark dungeons.

⁸My name is the LORD!

I won't let idols or humans share my glory and praise.

⁹Everything has happened just as I said it would;

now I will announce what will happen next.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Matthew 3:13-17

¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan
to John, to be baptized by him.

¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying,

"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

¹⁵But Jesus answered him,

"Let it be so now;

for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness."

Then he consented.

¹⁶And when Jesus was baptized,

he went up immediately from the water,

and behold,

the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove,

and alighting on him; ¹⁷and lo, a voice from heaven, saying,

"This is my beloved Son,[Ⓜ]with whom I am well pleased."

