

Sermon: God Winks at Easter

Scripture: Matthew 28

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

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I heard the story of something simple and beautiful that happened to a member of our church and asked him if I could share it. Some of you will know Jim Stansfield whose wife Janet Snover died earlier in the year. It was a remarkable thing to witness from a distance the love story of these two as Jim devotedly cared for Janet through her medical struggles over the course of many years and it's touching to hear him speak of their love affair over their almost 40 years.

As a mathematician Jim does necessarily go looking for signs beyond the realm of equations and numbers and he shared that one afternoon, a few weeks after Janet's death he was walking down the path by Mill pond, across from the UU church, where the fish ladder is before you cross the bridge into town and he was standing there remembering the day that he and Janet had sat there decades ago under the shade of a large birch tree and had a conversation that led them to the decision to move here to Winchester. He was remembering the excitement they felt, rooted in the love they shared and all the promise of what the future would hold and as he stood there again amidst the grief over her absence, his heart was full up with a sense of her as he looked over the water and across the town. Once the reverie moment had passed he turned to continue walking and he glanced at the wall that banks that pathway leading up to the library and there was scrawled on that wall a heart with the initials JS in it, both of their initials, together.

The writer Rushnell Squire refers to such experiences as God-winks, these moments that seem to just come to suggest there is something more happening behind the scenes of our lives than we can possibly know, a whisper from another dimension that says “you are not alone” or “there are larger and more benevolent forces at play than you imagine” or in Jim’s instance “love is here and does not die.” A whisper to Jim that calls him not to stop too long on death’s door and what has lost but an invitation to continue on in the unfolding of God’s miraculous life of which Janet is still a part.

God-winks, you can miss them so easily by just not paying attention much. They are subtle and quiet and even if you do catch them they are often easily dismissible as coincidence or an odd convergence of factors. But they are there as indications that there is a God in the midst of all this and that this God is not distant but very near and intimate to our lives.

Now why it has to be such a subtle and mis-sable thing as “God-winks” and not God-shouts or God-hits-me-over-the-head-with-a-2by4, which is sometimes what feel like I need, I’m not sure I can say. I’ve heard it said that God’s communications must be subtle so as not to overwhelm us and to keep in tact our essential human freedom. If God used more dramatic methods like let’s say natural disasters and plagues to get our attention, we’d be overpowered and subjugated to such a presence, how could we freely choose? We do pay more attention to God when such things happen but I am loathe to suggest that God *causes* them for God’s purposes... I’ve also heard it said that God uses subtlety and even darkness and obscurity in God’s work in our lives because if we knew where God was bringing us, what God was growing us toward, we’d likely sabotage the process. We are meant to live life moments at a time, and and not

to know the overarching plan or the end of our days. The way the writer of Ecclesiastes put it –

“God has set eternity into the human heart but in such a way that we cannot see the scope of God’s work from beginning to end.” -Ecclesiastes 3:11.

So maybe some of that is some of the “why” behind God’s subtlety, but I don’t always appreciate it. I remember as a kid I would sit in the congregation at First Baptist Church Richmond, VA and as the preacher was preaching and my mind was drifting – which I’m *really* glad that never happens to you all! – I would look at the stained-glass window above the baptismal font at the front of the church and I would sit there and look at Jesus standing there in the Jordon River and look into his eyes and say to God “c’mon, just once, God, just make Jesus’ eyes blink once and then I’ll know it’s true!” And you know what, they never blinked, not once. That stained-glass window stayed glass window. And I remember thinking, “I wish I was alive in your time so I could have met you and known you and then everything would have been clear”!

But do you know how clear everything was for the disciples throughout their time with Jesus? Not very! And do you know, on that first Easter morning, how simple and clarifying things were to the people who experienced the resurrected body of Jesus? Hardly at all! Clarity was when someone who was dead stayed dead and Jesus didn’t. Clarity was if the ghost of Jesus appeared cause sometimes people see ghosts and it’s kind of a strange and mysterious afterlife thing but something that you’ve at least heard about and have some context for. But this wasn’t that either. This was a glorified risen body which we say “yeah a resurrected glorified risen body!” but for which there was absolutely

no context and the disciples were like “what the heck?!” probably using more colorful Aramaic word than *heck*.”

So even here, at the fulcrum of human history, on that first Easter morn, while it wasn't exactly subtle, whatever God was doing, maybe it was a little more than winking at us, but it was still obscure, unsettling and disorienting and there was *enough* subtly so that even with rolled stones and earthquakes and angels sitting in tombs and gardeners who weren't who they seemed to be, there were A LOT of questions. In fact the resurrection – similar to the whole of Jesus' life - as the disciples experienced it, was less the answer to all their questions and more the great question that disrupted all their pat answers.

The resurrection was somehow about life emerging out of death, fullness out of emptiness, direction out of chaos, hope out of despair, but all of it arose in their awareness out of the lived experience of it; a *coming to* life and fullness and direction and hope when what it seemed like at first was all death and emptiness, chaos and despair. Similar to the Spring of earth, all that we want to hightail it away from – death, emptiness, chaos, the unknown, etc – is exactly where the new shoots of new life emerge, not as full grown stalks of amazingness but delicate, vulnerable, barely noticeable emergences. What can we say but that that's the way God seems to like to work in subtly, until suddenly, like we walk outside and say “wow, Spring is upon us” we wake up and say “oh my gosh, out this terrible situation, out of this plague, this isolation, this near economic standstill, this death.... emerged all of this!” Or, to quote John Lennon, “everything will be ok in the end and if it's not ok, then it's not the end.”

That's the promise of Easter. That it'll be ok but we are called to be participants in the making ok of things. And that's maybe what God's winks are

for; to remind us that we are not alone, that there are larger and more benevolent forces at play than we could imagine, that love is here, and does not die. And then with hearts filled to overflowing we do not linger too long at death's door but continue onward to participate in the unfolding of God's miraculous life. Amen.