

A Holy Friendship with the World

Written and preached by Matt Matthews
from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church Champaign
February 11, 2018/Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday

2 Kings 2:1-8; Mark 9-2-9

I have loved getting to know you. Rachel and I are finally unburying ourselves from a tsunami of boxes. We brought a lot with us: quilts, pillows, kitchen wares, furniture, and books, books, books. I've enjoyed my days and nights here these last 11 days. It feels like I've been here all my life. I guess it is because the "church" has always been my home, and even though I don't know your names, you are not strangers. You are my brothers and sisters—and we've been brothers and sisters *all along*.

The single thing I've enjoyed most is the snow. I drove to church one morning in the snow. I drove home one night after 9:30; it was snowing. The houses, I imagined, were the ever-faithful kneeling in prayer; the streetlights were halos; the snow was a wedding veil behind which God was smiling. The snow covered and quieted bumpy streets. The snow brought a hush to harried lives. For me, the snow demands that I pause and contemplate the wonder of God's good work. I suppose this is so because snow is still quite unique for me. It doesn't snow often in South Carolina—or, for that matter, in Tidewater Virginia where I grew up. A sunny day or a harvest moon is a glorious sight. So is a rainstorm and a sunrise, or breeze though the treetops, or the play of light and shadow in Westside Park. But they are all things I take for granted; I miss seeing God's hand in these every-day marvels

But not so with snow. I've seen God's grandeur, power, artistry, presence in the snow. You might find the snow to be a nuisance. You might find it to be too cold or too dangerous or too much. Not me. So far—and this may change—I love the snow.

* * *

Julia Alvarez writes about snow in her story called "Snow." Alvarez taught at the University of Illinois (have you heard about that school?) in the mid 1980's, then on the Middlebury in Vermont. Her story "Snow" is really not about snow, per se, but about a young immigrant's first perception of snow.

Allow me to read to opening paragraph of her story:

Our first year in New York we rented a small apartment with a Catholic school nearby, taught by Sisters of Charity, hefty women in long black gowns and bonnets that made them look peculiar, like dolls in mourning. I liked them a lot, especially my grandmotherly

fourth grade teacher, Sister Zoe. I had a lovely name, she said, and she had me teach the whole class how to pronounce it. *Yo-lan-da*. As the only immigrant in my class, I was put in a special seat in the first row by the window, apart from the other children so that Sister Zoe could tutor me without disturbing them. Slowly, she enunciated the new words I was to repeat: *Laundromat, cornflakes, subway, snow*.

The story is set in the early 1960's. Sister Zoe explained to a wide-eyed classroom what was happening in Cuba at the time. The Russians were assembling bombs aimed for NYC. President Kennedy on the television looked worried. And the children in Sister Zoe's fourth grade class looked worried, too. We might have to go to war with the communists, Sister Zoe explained. Yolanda learned other words: nuclear bomb, radioactive fallout, bomb shelter. Sister Zoe explained how the blast would happen. She drew a mushroom cloud on the chalkboard, then a frenzy of chalk-dots for the fallout that will kill the world.

Let me read the last three paragraphs of this very short story:

"The months grew cold, November, December. It was dark when I got up in the morning, frosty when I followed my breath to school. One morning as I sat at my desk daydreaming out the window, I saw dots in the air like the ones Sister Zoe had drawn—random at first, then lots and lots. I shrieked, "Bomb! Bomb!" Sister Zoe jerked around, her full black skirt ballooning as she hurried to my side. A few girls began to cry.

"But then Sister Zoe's shocked look faded. 'Why, Yolanda dear, that's snow!' She laughed. 'Snow.'

"Snow,' I repeated. I looked out the window warily. All my life I had heard about the white crystals that fell out of American skies in the winter. From my desk I watched the fine powder dust the sidewalk and parked cars below. Each flake was different, Sister Zoe said, like a person, irreplaceable and beautiful." (Snow, Julia Alvarez, p. 86, *Flash Fiction: 72 Very Short Stories*.)

* * *

The snow reminds me how beautiful God is. And, like Yolanda, I'm reminded of how each flake is different and beautiful, like people. That story isn't about snow, after all, is it? *Each flake is different and beautiful, like people.*

Here at First Presbyterian Church each of you is different and beautiful. Lovely. Sacred. The apple of God's eye. I met Roza from Kyrgystan this week; she waves her hands when she speaks. Her smile dominates her face. She's Russian and Muslim and happy-so-happy to be learning English in the United States. Paul's English is very good but my

memory is not; I'm not sure what Asian nation Paul is from. I met Omer Anjum, a Pakistani Muslim; he's going to introduce me to the local Imam soon. Tomorrow, Rev. Beth Maynard will give me a tour of Emmanuel Memorial Episcopal Church; she'll show me where the fire was, what the fire damaged, how the fire kindled a desire to rebuild and grow and flourish.

Red and yellow, black and white. I met Jeannie who is of Dutch heritage. Christian and Alain come from the Congo. Oga is from Mexico. Jim is from Normal. Like a snowflake, everyone is amazingly and wonderfully different. Beautiful. Sacred. Is it true that we are created in the image of God? How beautiful we are, then. How beautiful God is.

* * *

When I was wrestling with the PNC and learning about the congregation and this place, one reference said that First Pres is known for being a welcoming congregation. In fact, some in the community have said that we are the church that's "going all black."

I suppose the only thing more onerous about "going all black" is staying "all white." What I see—gloriously—is **all** colors.

Yolanda learned well from Sister Zoe: Every flake of snow is irreplaceable and beautiful—like people.

One of the men's Bible studies has been talking about John's Gospel for almost a year. Jesus' prayer for his disciples is found in chapter 17. In it, Jesus beseeches God to protect his flock that "so that they may be one" (v. 11). It is Christ's prayer that we be united as one people marked by our love for each other and for God.

That vision describes what I'm seeing at First Pres. Vibrant, diverse, different ideas, saints moving at difference paces, saints with different ideas and passions that sometimes seem at odds with each other, but one church walking with Jesus. One church, serious about being disciples. One church, on the road with Jesus.

That's what Jesus made clear to his disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. They were content to stay there where they had been swallowed by light and a vision of Elijah and Moses. But Jesus had work for them—and us—to do down the mountain in the valley. Yes, we all yearn for and treasure "mountain top experiences," but we don't live on the mountain retreat. We have work to do in the valley. We have work to do on the plains.

Part of that work is building a world where everyone is valued as children of God. Every snowflake is irreplaceable and unique—like people. Oga, Roza, Alain, Eric, Chris. Part of our work as disciples is to repair the tears in the fabric of our communities and to love one another as God has first loved us . . . To love others as they are not as we'd like them to be, recast in our own image. Many faces, one people. Many languages to praise one God.

It's not often that Toyota inspires me, but this commercial aired during the Super Bowl last week about Tundra trucks describes well my understanding that we are all

children of God, and as such are called into authentic relationship. (A Jew, Christian, Muslim, and Hindu share a ride to a football game where they meet a bunch of nuns and root-on the home team. Unity in diversity.)

* * *

I love the story in Second Kings. Elijah is preparing to be ‘taken up.’ He tells his friend Elisha to stay behind while he—Elijah—goes to Bethel. Elisha says, *No. I’ll go with you. You don’t need to go alone. We’ll go together.* At Bethel, Elijah tells Elisha to stay behind while he—Elijah—goes to Jericho. Elisha says, *No, indeed. I’ll tag along. I’ll help you carry your load. It’s my pleasure to come along.* At Jericho, Elijah tells Elisha to stay behind while he—Elijah—goes to Jordan. Elisha says that he will come along. *We are friends. I’ll walk another mile with you.*

You see the pattern. You see Elisha’s understanding of devotion and friendship. It reminds me of other friendships in the Bible: Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, Jesus and the disciple whom he loved/John.

Being Christian friends together is part of our call. We work together. We travel together. We pray, and play, and pay together. We dream together. We weep together. We argue together. We pull together. We reach out together. We risk together. We value all people. We respect one another’s story. We hallow opportunities to share and care. Nobody is left behind. All are included. All have something valuable to contribute. Every person adds a few lovely notes to the hallelujah chorus. Everyone has a place at the table. Like flakes of snow, we’re all different and irreplaceable. As God loves us, we are invited to love another. We are invited to be friends in ministry. Following each other around. Going the extra mile. Helping each other out. Pouring ourselves out to build nothing less than a holy friendship with the world.

As God has called us, may God continue to help and inspire us.

AMEN.

2 Kings 2:1-8

¹Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ²Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel. ³The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?” And he said, “Yes, I know; keep silent.”

⁴Elijah said to him, “Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho.” But he said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they came to Jericho. ⁵The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?” And he answered, “Yes, I know; be silent.”

⁶Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. ⁷Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. ⁸Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

Mark 9:2-9 ²Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.