

The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss: Horton Hatches the Egg

Psalm 103:1-14

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In the past year two different men who do not know each other have come into our ministry with almost the same situation. They are not members of the church. They want to meet God. In fact they are both desperate to meet God as they both suffer from rare and terminal cancers and their days are short.

Both men are in their sixties. Both men are highly accomplished professionals, with excellent educations and brilliant minds. Both men started successful companies, made significant wealth and have contributed to the advancement of science. They have loving families and lots of support. Neither are members of our church. Somewhere along their journeys they lost their connection to God. As they are now facing death they are desperate to find it again.

Both men grew up in Protestant Christian homes. Both attended church and youth groups as teens. Diving head long into heavy-duty academics in college and graduate school they adopted the cynical agnosticism so prevalent among the scientists and engineers of our community here in the Bay Area. It wasn't that they rejected their religious upbringing so much as they just didn't have time for such things as they were starting families. They didn't have time to engage the mysteries of spirituality while building careers in a culture that rarely honored belief in anything one couldn't measure or weigh.

Then came the cancers, two different deadly types. They mustered all available resources with the best doctors and the best hospitals. On their own they researched their diseases and could speak intelligently about them with the medical professionals. They made the best informed choices in treatment. They followed every protocol. And the cancers got worse and worse.

It wasn't until the medical options had run out that they came to my office both asking to find God again, to learn how to pray, to find a miracle. They remembered the child hood religious practice they had rejected long ago. They needed to find something new in which to have hope.

I am not the kind of preacher that's comfortable handing out quick and easy platitudes in such a situation. I don't have any simple answers to such questions as "....I've led a good life why is this happening to me?!" I've met a number of times with both men. We've talked and prayed together. We've prayed together for a miracle, without apology or embarrassment. And the cancer keeps coming and their days are shorter indeed.

I love these two men for their honesty, sincerity, for the good lives they have led and for the scientific contributions they have made to our common good. I grieve that they are suffering so. I wish I had the answers they are looking for to make the pain of fear and doubt go away. All I can do is share with them the answers I've found along the way knowing that the only ones that

matter are the ones they find for themselves. So I listen, and cry with them and pray with them to the God that has always been there for them that they only now want to find.

In our Hebrew Scripture lesson this morning we hear the wonderful words of Psalm 103, a song of praise for the God whose "steadfast love endures forever..." It is written by someone who has experienced healing from a physical illness and forgiveness for sins committed. The Psalmist describes the God who renews our spirits, works for justice and does not deal with us as we deserve but just the opposite lavishes love, mercy and grace upon those who don't deserve it:

"But the steadfast love of The Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him....to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments...."

Today we translate the words "fear The Lord" to mean "to be in awe of God"; the literal translation from the original can mean those times when in awe of something your knees get weak and you finding yourself trembling in the presence of something beyond all expectations. "To fear The Lord" means to cultivate the awareness of...the awe of...the steadfast love of God, always present, always near. As the bumper sticker put it, "If you are not in awe, you are not paying attention!" "To fear The Lord" means to pay attention, to wake up to the miracle of every day, to make God's love and grace the foundation of one's life and to live like it....in other words, to "do God's commandments", as Jesus summarized them, to love God, neighbor and yourself. (Matthew 22:37-40)

In the never ending challenge here at LAUMC to keep the congregation's attention and hold it we've launched into this wonderful "Dr. Seuss series". And one has to admit that the elephant in Dr. Seuss' Horton Hatches the Egg is a great metaphor for God?

Horton Hatches the Egg (Random House) was first published in 1940 before the beginning of World War II. In 2007 the National Education Association named Horton Hatches the Egg one of its "Teachers' Top 100 Books for Children."

The book centers on Horton, an African elephant, who is convinced by Mayzie, a lazy, irresponsible bird, to sit on her egg while she takes a short "break", which in actuality ends up being Mayzie's permanent relocation to Palm Beach.

Naturally, the absurd sight of an elephant sitting atop a tree makes quite a scene – Horton is exposed to the elements, laughed at by his jungle friends, captured by hunters, forced to endure a terrible sea voyage, and finally placed in a traveling circus. However, despite his hardships and Mayzie's clear intent not to return, Horton refuses to leave the nest through all of these challenges, because he insists on keeping his word; "I meant what I said and I said what I meant, And an elephant's faithful, one hundred per cent!" (paraphrased from Wikipedia)

And you know, God is like that.

Watch what happens when the egg hatches and Mayzie returns: [YouTube, conclusion of "Horton Hatches the Egg" Audio Reader]

The egg that hatches is an elephant bird! Horton's DNA of steadfast, sacrificial love has permeated the shell of the egg. What comes out is a new creation that doesn't look anything like its mother Mayzie. In fact it looks just like Horton with wings. They go off to live happily ever after.

Of course the egg didn't have a choice in the matter. Mayzie certainly does and we see her priorities quite clearly as we do Horton's. But one clear moral of this story is the belief that steadfast and persistent love has impact on all involved. When we get our priorities straight it can change things beyond all expectations. Isn't seeing an elephant-bird hatch out of that egg awe inspiring?

If we want faith, to find God as a reality in our lives, it has got to become a priority. Like Horton on the egg, we've got to invest ourselves to the relationship, nurturing it with time and attention.

In the Sermon on the Mount, while preaching about material wealth and the anxiety it brings, Jesus concludes "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33)

What do we put first in our lives? That which gets first priority in our lives is that which we will become. Well, what is that which gets' first priority?

My two brilliant friends spent their adult lives studying their fields of science and engineering. They practiced their crafts to such a high degree that they have discovered new technologies and applications. They invested thousands of hours in the pursuit of professional excellence and achieved great things as a result. That's fantastic!

And.

Why would anyone of us think that a living and vital faith in God would take any less investment? Why would any of us think that we could "find God" in an hour appointment with a preacher, or by fitting in a Sunday worship service every now and then as if Christianity can be reduced to an occasional concert and lecture?

I am not suggesting for a minute that if my two friends had nurtured their faith that they would never have contracted cancer or that if they had been religious God would have miraculously cured them. That's not how it works. But if they had, as they faced the end of their lives they would know deep in their hearts that this God of extravagant love had been with them all along, even in the devastation of terminal cancer.

A lifetime commitment to seek God and live like it will have a formative effect on anyone. Like Horton, faith can penetrate our shells with the DNA of the "steadfast love of the Lord." It makes a difference what time and attention we invest in this relationship. As I have said many times before, if we are not feeling close to God right now, guess who moved.

Horton says, "I meant what I said and I said what I meant, and an elephant's faithful, one hundred per cent!" And God...however we understand divinity....God's steadfast love endures forever and never gives up on us. If we will embrace that and be embraced by that, it can change the nature of whom and what we will be. Amen.