

THE WINGS OF ICARUS

A sermon preached by the Rev. Aaron Billard at
St. John's United Church, Moncton, NB
April 11, 2010

This past week, I had a friend of this church send me a message listing six reasons as to why he found it hard to believe in God. They were good, too. Really good. Each of them spoke of a powerlessness, with respect to illness in some cases. His comment was, "If there is a God, I'd like to meet him..." said in such a way that there might be an argument ensuing. His story isn't new to me. Time and time again I meet with people who just aren't sure, and in fact, while they like the idea of a God, they haven't been too impressed with what they've seen. No longer does the church have to compete with hockey on Sunday mornings. I have found, during my time here that our biggest competition is with whether or not God exists. It's about couples with one partner thinking "maybe" and the other partner thinking "no." We now have a different message that is growing in popularity, that of the newer breed of atheism that really isn't so new at all. Christian fundamentalism, as well as atheistic fundamentalism, have obscured any possibility for an in between. Friends join Facebook groups about atheism and how rotten Christianity is in full knowledge that I don't stand for those bad elements of Christianity either. People now define themselves, in some ways, by what it is they don't believe instead of what it is they do believe in.

It's almost as if faith can no longer walk hand in hand with thoughtfulness, with mental rigor, or with simplicity in understanding. A sophisticated faith that makes room for diversity, intellect, and heart seems too suspect. It almost feels as if the lines are being drawn in society in such a way

that we can never again have majority governments; theologians are no longer talking to each other but instead are addressing academics in other fields who are trying to poke holes in Christianity and faith; and no longer do we all attend the same church, or belong to a faith group even. It's almost as if we are embarrassed to speak of what we believe with the people we most love for fear of upsetting someone. Just when we thought we were past the time of division because of religion, it seems to be getting stronger. I know for many of you, coming to these church years ago was a decision made because one was Catholic and the other was Baptist and the United Church seemed like middle ground. For couples today, we are becoming middle ground not because of belief, but because people just aren't sure "if" they believe any more.

Some of you may have heard of the Greek myth of Icarus. Icarus and his father Daedalus were prisoners. Daedalus fashioned two pairs of wings out of wax and feathers for himself and his son. Before they took off from the island, Daedalus warned his son not to fly too close to the sun, nor too close to the sea. Overcome by the giddiness that flying lent him, Icarus soared through the sky curiously, but in the process he came too close to the sun, which melted the wax. Icarus kept flapping his wings but soon realized that he had no feathers left and that he was only flapping his bare arms. And so, Icarus fell into the sea in the area which bears his name.

I've always been an opposite of Icarus. Part of my ministry has always been to try and stay low to the ground in order to make my faith more real. "Really Real" as Barbara Brown Taylor would say, with capital R's. Whatever made God real for me, I hung onto that. Though I envied my friends in the sacramental churches, somehow ornate golden chalices and long prayers speaking to the Glory of God didn't quite hold

my attention, even if they held my eyes for a bit in curiosity. My best understandings of worship came from different places. I liked ordinary things. Bread I can understand. Grape juice may be a little too simple, but I get it. Even the simple cross that hangs in churches like ours, with no Christ affixed to it, appealed to me because it was minimalist and helped me keep things on the ground, though to this day I am fascinated by a crucifix. My friend Father Mario in Toronto once told me, when trying to get me riled up, “Aaron, this is how to think of it. The United Church is the New Coke, and the Catholic Church is Coca Cola classic. Everyone prefers the classic!”

Yet, staying low to the ground has not always benefited my own faith. There were days, and are days, when I have used logic and reason to explain away the finest parts of faith and God. That wasn't the Spirit at work; that was coincidence. When we die, we're dead, which is fine by me because I don't want to learn how to play a harp. I've seen Lucy MacNeil play one near where I'm standing, and it looks complicated. And I too, like my friend who wrote the note this week, have stood in gaping confusion as pain and sadness has enveloped not only my world, but the world of the people I love, and the world around us. I've often wanted God to be a little more proactive and a little less reactive when it came to catastrophes and other plights experienced by people all over the world.

There is historical evidence that the world Jesus was born into was one of conflict and poverty. Jesus grew up near Sepphoris, a city that had been attacked with fire and sword and reduced to nothing, and its surviving citizens were made slaves by Rome. Nazareth was an hour and half's walk away, and we can only assume (based on how armies worked back then) that Nazareth had been attacked as well. The major event in Jesus' village's life was the day that the Romans

came. As he grew up, he would have heard these stories again and again about the day the Romans came, and about those who had lived, and those who had died; those who had escaped and those who had not. One might assume that a question was asked, “Where was God on the day that the Romans came?” (From the book, “The First Christmas” by John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg.)

As in many, many stories throughout the Gospels, Jesus has a way of combining the heavenly and the earthly. He used things, such as touch, to lead to greater healing and miracles. He broke bread and shared fish – which fed so many. He used spit and mud to help a blind man see. He held a child and showed people what the centre of the kingdom of God looked like. He asked a friend to place a hand in his side to feel the wounds of an act of violence he experienced, and the friend called him Lord; and on and on. Each ordinary moment broke way to an extraordinary insight or event. How can we miss the message of the teaching that the one without sin should cast the first stone? When Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me...” he set off a chain reaction of liberating the poor, and helping those who had no power of their own.

In an online article, it is remembered that Archbishop Óscar Romero was assassinated 30 years ago this past March 2010. Romero is quoted as saying,

“When the church hears the cry of the oppressed it cannot but denounce the social structures that give rise to and perpetuate the misery from which the cry arises.”

Romero was shot by a squad of men while raising the Eucharistic cup to bless it during the Mass.

He taught us that the notion that Jesus Christ doesn't take sides in politics is a falsehood. Romero taught us that Jesus Christ *does* take sides.

Jesus is on the side of the poor - the single mother working two jobs just to keep food on her kids' table, the father desperately searching for work, the little girl who goes to school with nothing in her belly.

Jesus Christ is on the side of the gay teenager who's bullied and beaten up at school for nothing more than being who he is. (*I have misplaced the article this is from. My apologies.*)

Archbishop Romero taught us that sometimes standing *with* Jesus (despite how we believe in him or what we believe him to be) requires that we stand *against* the principalities and powers, nonviolently resisting them and prophetically calling them to repentance and justice to be with the very ones Jesus healed and protected during his own ministry.

Thomas in the passage we have today wants proof. His practical, action oriented personality cannot believe that which he has not seen, even though all his friends say they saw it. When Jesus appears Thomas does not really need to put his hand on the wounds - he is stunned and believes saying "My Lord and My God" - taking the story to a whole new level - this is "God" in their presence.

I think we need Thomas' in our time - people who do not get swept up in the latest fad or alarmist news story, people who take time to check the facts to see for themselves, who do not take something as true, just because "everyone" says it is or acts like it is. Thomas is not a doubter or unbeliever in the long run - he is a person who says "hold on" "wait a minute" "let's check this out." He does not refuse to believe but wants more information.

Sometimes faith has to be like that. It sometimes is about just doing something, following the actions, going with the flow,

until one day we too can exclaim something similar when we are confronted with the reality of God in our lives. Every day I give my wife a kiss, not only because I love her, but because I read a statistic somewhere that said men who kiss their wives every day make more money!

John Buchanan writes, and I'll end with this,

“Yet, we are so often like these disciples in that room. Afraid of what's outside.

The point here is to get these people out of that room. The point here is to give them enough peace, enough of his spirit - his life and breath - to get them up and moving again. The point here - the point of Easter - is to get frightened, discouraged men and women who are very much inclined to stay put, to stay in the room as long as necessary, to get them up and moving toward the door, toward the streets of the city, toward their homes and families and communities - toward, that is to say, life in this beautiful world now suddenly, dramatically, and profoundly different because Jesus has come to them and breathed on them and sent them.”

Maybe that message is for us, too. Despite what we do or don't believe, let's get out and do the work of ministry. Of caring for people, not matter who they are or what they believe, with the greater goal of making this world a kinder, better, more excellent place because of this work that is ours to do in the way that we do it.

I don't care what you believe about Jesus. What I do care about is how your belief affects what you do to simply be a friend to the people who need one; an angel when the situation calls for one; and a challenger when we see something happening that is unjust and unfair.