

The final notes of the cantata settled into the floor of the sanctuary. There was a long pause before the congregation could react. In that moment, it was absolutely and totally silent. She could feel the brush of angels' wings, and see glory on each face. Yes, surely ... SURELY! ... the Lord was in this place.

And, as she settled into that blissful reverie, her adult nephew leaned forward from his seat behind her and whispered into her ear – “Well, there’s an hour of my life wasted that I’ll never be able to get back.”

This is what we encounter on Sunday mornings.

Coming down the aisle and slouching into a pew is a middle school age young lady. The “semi-formal” dance is next Saturday. It is her first. She was asked to go by the guy she knew she loved, really loved. She and her mother went out of town to the fancy dress store, and – even though it’s semi-formal – everyone knew that only meant what the guys wore. She got her first gown. It was beautiful. She couldn’t wait. But last night, he called her up and told her that he had changed his mind and asked someone else to the dance. What chance is there that she will hear anything that goes on in the time called “worship” today?

This is what we encounter on Sunday mornings.

Back on the other side of the pew, he shuffles in. He always “shuffles” in, because he’s old and his legs don’t work very well. So nobody notices how he comes in this week. But the pastor knows. They talked this week. The pastor knows that this old man, who fought and sometimes bullied and always “wheeled and dealt” his way through life, becoming so very successful – who has come to the church cemetery every single day for the past three years to visit his wife, whose Alzheimer’s was the one competitor he could not beat – this old man shuffles in this week, having just gotten the news that his son’s cancer is inoperable and untreatable, and he’s only got a few weeks left to live. The pastor knows, but the old man doesn’t want anyone else to know – not right yet, not right now. And the pastor wonders what words can possibly be said this morning that will be received as good news.

This is what we encounter on Sunday mornings.

These are just a few of the stories we know. There are others of which we have only begun to catch a glimmer that something is going on. And there are the two folks

who have been friends for years and years, but now aren't speaking to one another. And they've each come to you and told you what a louse the other one is, but neither of them is willing to tell you what the real issue is. They want you to fix it, but if they each know what "IT" really is, you'd be surprised. But they're both here – not sitting anywhere near each other today – and they're each one counting on you to introduce the other one to Jesus during your sermon, so they will repent.

This is what we encounter on Sunday mornings.

And there's the parishioner who called you up this week and said, "Preacher, I've just about had it. If I come to one more worship and can't tell that I'm in church instead of at a tryout for American Idol, then I'm just not coming back. I swear: if people clap one more time after the anthem or special music, I'm going to make a scene. For the love of God, it's church, not some theater hall!"

And sitting in the pew right behind that one is the lady who is just waiting until she can get her chance to introduce the church to her rendition of ***Steamy Heat Praise*** – the kind of music that will lighten us up, and get us some young people coming here, to shake off the dust and cobwebs and come alive for Christ. Yes, sir – three more weeks and the worship committee is going to let her start the revival that this church has been begging for ... that will turn this place upside down for Jesus ... talk about making disciples for Jesus Christ, for the transformation of the world! It's a comin'!

This is what we encounter on Sunday mornings.

Oh, we know about these encounters – and ones like them. What scares us silly are the ones that we don't know about. What always gets ahold of me ... because I think of it every Sunday morning, when I climb into the pulpit: ***There's someone here who has had it. With life, with God, with everything. Today ... this is God's last chance ... today, if God doesn't convince me of a good reason to keep on living, then the next time the preacher sees me will be at the funeral home.*** Yeah, who is that one? And how can I reach him or her.

This is what we encounter on Sunday mornings.

What are we supposed to do?

It's easy to empathize with Elijah's whining on the mountain: [We know the passage from 1 Kings 19]: ***Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains***

and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, **“What are you doing here, Elijah?”**

What ARE we doing there on Sunday morning?

I know one pastor who has those words affixed to his pulpit to remind him of the question every Sunday morning. **WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?**

Two scriptures speak to this question: one from the First Testament; the second from the Gospel of Mark. There are certainly more than these two, but let me share these today. First from the Gospel:

Mark 9:14 When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵ When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. ¹⁶ He asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” ¹⁷ Someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; ¹⁸ and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.”

It’s a scripture that follows our Lectionary Gospel in two Sundays – right after Jesus, Peter, James, and John come down the Mount of Transfiguration – back down to the valley below. The Glory is left behind; the Mundane and the Frustrating are in their face.

And the disciples could not

I was reminded of this text recently by Bishop William Boyd Grove, because it was the text used in his sermon upon the occasion of the consecration of four bishops in July, 1996: [Alfred Johnson](#), [Susan Wolfe Hassinger](#), [Ernest S. Lyght](#), and [Peter D. Weaver](#). He preached at their consecration from this text to remind them that ***although they were just elected Bishop***, they **must remember** that **power does not originate with them**. Without Jesus, they were empty, powerless vessels.

Bishop Grove told me that one of those bishops pulled a copy of that sermon from his briefcase whenever they met, and showed it to him to thank him for the reminder it

provided him daily.

Yes, my sisters and brothers, **we are but SPARK PLUGS** – the spark does not originate with us; ***the best we can do is to keep from being fouled***, so the spark can pass through us. And, **guess what? When we are turned clockwise out, and another spark plug turned clockwise in, the engine keeps on running.**

We are incredibly blessed to be called to this profession, to be given this calling. But it's **NOT ABOUT US**. And we **can't do it on our own**. **BUT IT IS OURS TO DO**.

It's not our right to let Jesus down, just because we're not in the mood, or because we are not always sure of what we are doing.

Janet Wolf is a pastor, teacher and author. She tells a story of how when she was a child, her grandmother was the one who always listened to her stories, taking the time to hear all the details. She even listened to Janet's complaints:

- *My sister got the good grades, but I'm the one who worked hard.*
- *Life's awful. I was the last one picked for kickball, because no one knew how good I am.*

After listening, her grandmother always asked, **"And?"**

There was only one acceptable response: **"I'M GOING ON ANYHOW."** Janet couldn't leave the room until she gave that response.

"It was a rock-bottom faith statement," she explains, **"that no matter what, God is in the midst of this and so you can and will and must go on."**

When her grandmother was dying, Janet visited and sat by her bedside.

Her grandmother said, **"I need to hear you say this again. And you know what it is. So I'm going to ask, "And?" "**

Janet couldn't get anything out.

Again her grandmother said, **"And?"**

Janet still couldn't get anything out.

"Janet," her grandmother said, **"I know that you hear me. And I know that you know that death is coming. And I know that you will answer when I say, "And?" "**

Janet finally responded, **"I'M GOING ON ANYHOW."**

"Yes, you are, child," her grandmother said. "And I just want you to know that God's going to be asking you that question each and every day of your life, and I'm going to be able to hear your answer. It better be loud, and it better be clear. Every time God says, "And?" -you say, "I'M GOING ON ANYHOW." "

Janet Wolf's grandmother understood that **ACTION – NOT FEELINGS – IS THE ONE ARENA IN WHICH WE ACTUALLY HAVE SOME FREEDOM TO CHOOSE. OUR FEELINGS OFTEN REFUSE TO FOLLOW OUR HEADS, OUR LOGIC.** But WE CAN CHOOSE to Go On Anyway – *even when we don't feel like it*. And in so doing, we can find what we were unable to discover when we just wrung our hands and moaned.

The second scripture I want to share, and I'll close with this one, is from the First Testament. Although it is part of the lectionary text for the second Sunday of Lent in 2013 (Year C), I can't remember ever hearing any other preacher ever use it for a sermon text. Have you ever preached it? It's from Genesis 15:

Genesis 15:7 Then he said to [Abram], "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." ⁸But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" ⁹He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." ¹⁰He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. ¹¹And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

¹²As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. ¹³Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; ¹⁴but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

¹⁷When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.

I DON'T UNDERSTAND THAT TEXT. I've yet to have someone explain it to me so that I understand it. It's almost creepy. It's certainly not comfy, cuddly: ¹²As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

But Abram did it. And a promise was made. And a promise was kept. And God was there.

- Saturday night, the night before you get into the pulpit to lead
- a people who haven't quite captured the practice of *In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things love* and
- **when it feels like the past week has been mostly consumed with driving birds of prey away from carcasses** ...
- if you dare think about it, realistically, a a deep and terrifying darkness will descend upon you
- and whatever liturgy you follow, it had better include a recognition **AT LEAST BY YOU** that
- what you are handling is as mysterious and beyond your control as **darkness, in which a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch pass between its pieces.**

And, as you faithfully do your part, wait upon the Lord. For this job is not yours alone.

The Psalmist expressed it like this: **O Lord, I am not proud; I have no haughty looks. I do not occupy myself with great matters, or with things that are too hard for me. But I still my soul and make it quiet, like a child upon its mother's breast. [Like a child upon its mother's breast,] my soul is quieted within me. O Israel, wait upon the Lord, from this time forth, forever more.**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.