

# WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

A Sermon on Jeremiah 8:7—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart

July 17, 2016—The First United Church of Christ (Congregational), Milford, CT

*This is the last Sunday we'll see the origami cranes in the Sanctuary, at least for a while. So today we'll spend some time reflecting on birds.*

*The Bible just wouldn't be the same without birds. If God hadn't created birds of the air, would Moses have sent out an otter to check for dry land after forty days of rain? Would Jesus have predicted to Peter: 'Truly I tell you, you will deny me three times before the cow moos'? At Jesus' baptism, would it have been said, 'And the Spirit descended like a flying squirrel'?*

*Birds serve important roles throughout the Bible. So now listen for God's word in Jeremiah 8:7: **"Even the stork in the heavens knows its times; and the turtledove, swallow, and crane observe the time of their coming; but my people do not know the ordinance of the Lord."***

1.

Magnetite and cryptochrome. Those are what appear to guide birds when they migrate. Cryptochrome found in bird retinas and magnetite in beaks seems to pick up the earth's magnetic field and allow them to know where they're headed when they fly south for the winter and north for the warmer seasons. There's less scientific proof for how birds determine WHEN to migrate, but it may have to do with a combination of food supply and the ability to detect weather conditions far away from them.

2.

Fairy tales don't mention much about birds using their sense of direction, but in one well-known case they thwart others from finding their way. While Hansel and Gretel may be remembered most for outsmarting the witch

who wants to fatten them up and eat them, they only get placed on the witch's menu because they're hungry and don't know how to get back home. The sister and brother are led out twice into the forest by their father and stepmother who thinks that she and her husband can avoid starving if they don't have the kids to split the food with. (Do you notice how stepfamilies get a bad rap in fairy tales? In this case, the first edition of the tale says it's their biological mother who abandons the two children, but apparently moms across northern Europe successfully petitioned that a real mother would never do that. Sure.) The siblings get wind of the stepmother's plans, so Hansel fills his pockets with pebbles and leaves a trail of them behind. The stepmother is shocked when they return, but she locks them in their room before a second trip; this time, no pebbles. The sibs instead try to mark the trail with the few breadcrumbs in their possession, only to discover, sadly, that the birds have eaten the bread before they can follow them back home. How ironic that birds, which can sense direction to their winter and summer homes, are the ones who gobble up the kids' attempt to sense direction back to their home. But it was a long shot anyway. Anybody who hangs out at the lower Duck Pond long enough knows that no crumb of bread is safe when birds are around!

Because of the birds, the sister and brother are faced with the questions, "What direction do we set out?" "Where do we go from here?" In other words: "We're lost."

3.

Today's scripture reading finds Jeremiah

speaking to a people who seem adrift or lost spiritually.

Generations before Jeremiah, the one united Hebrew kingdom split into the north—Israel—and the south—Judah. Israel in the north has already been conquered by the Assyrians, and Jeremiah can sense that it's just a matter of time before the Babylonians take over Judah and make life miserable. And part of what he preaches against and prophesies about is the people's loss of conscience, of an inner compass that attunes them through God's Spirit to the ordinances and laws that God intends to give life order and balance. Jeremiah implies that it is that loss of spiritual direction that endangers their collective future, perhaps even that the Babylonians will conquer them as God's punishment for losing their spiritual way.

Jeremiah uses the example of birds—turtledoves, stork, swallow, even our good friends the cranes—to offer an example of inner compass. Jeremiah says, 'Look at those birds: you know, the ones who disappear around the same time every fall and show up again the same time every spring? Do they consult with timetables to figure out WHEN to go or ask for directions to figure out WHERE to go? NOOOO! It's in them. IT'S **IN** THEM!! You can't tell me that the birds can innately figure this out every year and yet you all, God's chosen people, have forgotten what God has told you to do?'

One of the hallmarks of God's law and ordinances as I understand them is that in the words of Jesus, judge not lest ye be judged. Don't call out the sliver in the other person's eye when you've got a big log in your own. God has instilled in you the basic conscience so that the common good resonates with that conscience and applies first and foremost to what we do and not to what others do.

Jesus also speaks to his disciples especially in John's gospel about leaving them, for a little while: "Soon I'll fly away but in three days I will come back." The disciples, confused don't know what's in store. So Jesus tells them, 'My peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.' Between this peace and the Holy Spirit, Jesus gives them a compass for finding their way, for growing in love and discipleship.

4.

But it seems like as a nation we're having a hard time with identifying the compass within us right now. We're struggling to see the ostrich with its head stuck in our eye while we point out the sparrow in other people's eyes. "You know what's wrong with this country?" we're saying. "It's Mexicans, it's the gays and transgendered, it's prejudiced people, it's radicalized Muslims, it's African Americans, it's Black Lives Matter people, it's bad apple police officers, it's gun owners, it's gun control advocates, it's pro-lifers, it's pro-choicers, it's elites, it's populists. If only we could take THAT GROUP OF PEOPLE out into the middle of the woods and leave them there, THEN everything would be alright!"

When we get going in feelings of resentment and antagonism and violence, we start to resemble more and more Peter who denied Jesus in the end. If there is Christ's Spirit in all people, then resentment blocks our ability to sense Christ in the other. Eventually the cock will crow and we'll see perhaps too late that we threw the Spirit out with our Christian conscience. Jesus doesn't give peace as the world gives. The world gives quick fixes; Jesus offers love and grace, courage and patience.

Still, any way forward feels foggy at best. The trails like so much alike. In the face of political turmoil and social resentments, our spiritual

direction can feel out of alignment. Like Hansel and Gretel after the bread crumbs are gone, we ask ourselves and God, “Where do we go from here?”

5.

We don’t hear it in today’s reading but Jeremiah isn’t all doom and gloom with the people of Judah. He speaks of hope that the people will find their bearings, that the impending exile will not break them as a people and that there’s more light and truth coming from God. Isaiah, or rather the third person who identifies himself as Isaiah, lives long enough to see the exile come to a close and the people of Judah reunite after a long time apart. This is not unlike the Platts and the Boxfords, descendants of Milford’s founders who have come back this weekend to reunite. As the Hebrew Bible reminds us over and over again, God’s judgment is for the night, but God’s grace and forgiveness endure forever. God’s grace can draw us home—a transformed home but home nonetheless.

It is God’s grace/forgiveness and peace that more than anything else lead us forth from our predicaments, not back the way we came but forward, to find a new way out. We can’t go back home the way we came—the bread crumbs are gone, the past is gone. But our story, God’s story is not over.

6.

Clifton Truman Daniel is the grandson of U.S. president Harry S. Truman.<sup>1</sup> Clifton’s grandfather is most famous for authorizing the use of nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki that ended World War II. Clifton never heard his grandfather talk about the decision; he instead learned about the bombs like most of us, by reading about them in school textbooks.

Clifton grew up, his grandfather died. As a journalist in Iowa, Clifton was impacted by an interview he did a Japanese exchange student

whose grandfather, it turned out, had died in Hiroshima. Later that year Clifton met two veterans who thanked his family, for the vets believed they would not have lived if the US had invaded Japan instead of dropping the bomb.

Then Clifton’s son Wesley had to read ***Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*** at school.

Sadako was a real girl exposed to radiation from Hiroshima who ten years later died from leukemia caused by the radiation. She folded cranes in the hospital in the hopes that if she folded 1,000 she might be granted a wish or a long life, as was legend. She nevertheless died.

Clifton’s son Wesley not only read the book but for school was immersed in Japanese culture. Not too long after that, Clifton heard from Masashira Sasaki, Sadako’s older brother. They met in New York City, where the Sasaki’s were donating one of Sadako’s cranes to the World Trade Center Memorial as a “gesture of healing.” Sadako’s nephew gave Clifton what is claimed to be THE last crane that Sadako folded. Masashira then invited Clifton and his family to come as honored guests to the Hiroshima memorial the next August. Clifton accepted.

The flight and the train ride into Tokyo were amazing—witnessing Japan’s mountains, forests, bamboo. The evening before traveling to Hiroshima, though, Clifton sat down for an interview where a TV reporter asked him if he had come to apologize for his grandfather’s decision to drop the bombs. Clifton was flabbergasted—he said with as much poise he could muster that he couldn’t apologize for something his grandfather had done nor apologize on behalf of a whole country. Clifton couldn’t sleep that night, he was worried that he had stepped into an impossible situation. The next morning Clifton’s family took the train to Hiroshima, was escorted to the Children’s Peace Park where the ceremony would take place, and

sure enough, Clifton was soon surrounded by 30 reporters poised to ask him to apologize. But then Sadako's brother, Masashira, appeared, gave Clifton a big hug, and answered the reporters: "If we ask them for an apology for Hiroshima and Nagasaki, then they can ask us for an apology for Pearl Harbor. And where do we go from there?" After that, Clifton knew he had nothing to fear. Clifton, along with Masashira, spent much of the next two days simply listening to the stories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors, promising to share their stories with the world.

7.

The good news is that even in this world where violence and fear seem to take away any chance of going back the way we came to the home we yearn for, we do have a way forward. God entrusts us with the core ordinances of the Christian faith—to forgive others as we seek to be forgiven; to love God, love our neighbor as ourselves—all our neighbors around the world, and to love even our enemies, even as their hatred seeks to destroy us. If we let that be our

compass, God's love will give us a chance to melt away the hatred that seeks to destroy us and eat away at us from within.

If we are willing to not let our past sins or pains constrain us, then God can give us the peace of Christ that passes all human understanding. If we let the law of love and forgiveness lead us forward, we will be baptized into new life with Christ and will fly toward a home "with firm foundations, whose architect and builder is God" [Heb. 11:10].

As cryptochrome and magnetite cause cranes to fly away and return at their appointed time, how much more does God lead us, this flock of perhaps strange birds, with the spiritual direction to fly on from this place out into the world. Out there we live and listen, forgive and are forgiven. From there we migrate back here, we gather here with new insights into who we are and how we can serve God together. What a joy it is to find our spiritual direction together and to migrate back here again and again until that day when we'll fly away to God's celestial shore. In Christ's name I pray, Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Based on the speech given by Clifton Truman Daniel in Portland, Oregon, and broadcast on the Moth Radio Hour

in June 2016: <https://themoth.org/stories/clifton-truman-daniel>.