

“A Strange Way to be Wonderful”

Isaiah 9:1-7

We have heard that a rose, by any other name, would still be a rose. I believe this statement is true for most of us because of the fact that somewhere in our lifetime, we have developed a relationship with a rose during a significant time or event in our lives. I have a rose petal from my mother-in-laws front yard inside my Bible that holds the memory of a summer day with Helen Hubbard and my daughters climbing in her pecan tree. This memory tells me that my rose petal, by any other name, would still be precious to me because I have a relationship, an intimate knowledge of this memory that changed me and helped shape me into the divine image of my Creator. Helen is currently in the care of a dementia homecare setting and most likely, she will not recognize me when I visit her this year. Still, I will take her by the hand and walk with her in the garden of her nursing home and whatever name she manages to call me will be just as sweet as hearing her voice pronounce my name, because it will be Helen, my friend, by my side, walking with me. And even if her mind cannot recall who I am, her soul will know my soul and that knowledge...that wordless knowing, will be more precious than anything Shakespeare could hope to pen. I do not have to hope that Helen will remember our relationship in human definitions because I know her soul will know my own and that will be enough.

In our text today, Isaiah has just finished declaring the doom and gloom of Israel’s walk in the park. Their choices, and the choices of others, have held hands and led them into captivity, rescue, and years of wanderings and wonderings. In chapter nine, the prophet finally has some good news to share, a glimmer of hope to offer a people who feel like they have been left behind by the Sacred to wander around in darkness, wondering if the promises of the Holy are true. In the first seven verses of Isaiah 9, we read eight promises that have made it through the mire of oral tradition. We can clearly see that the children of Israel need something to hope in because the story of the Promised One, the Wonderful Counselor, the Prince of Peace, is the story they share around the dinner table and at the bedsides of their children. It’s an old story with new adjectives and labels attached to it as their lives unfold and their histories are passed down to the next generation. The Creator of Israel, the one who made heaven and earth, a garden, all manner of creatures, even humans, a snake of an enemy and a need for redemption...this divine source of life has been labeled many things through human history. The one who created reveals the grace in the law by showing us we can never keep the law holy and reveals our need for redemption is coming! Each name Israel placed upon God ultimately came from a place of hope that they needed and shared in their journey to become whole...to become satisfied, to become a people who hoped to possess a place of milk and honey. This morning, I want us to become aware of something we need, something we see the nation of Israel missing over and over again. In fact, Israel, and many of us are still missing this

one key thing that has the power to unlock all of our potential to become just like the nature of our source. So here it is...more than anything we could ever hope for, what is life giving: and it is the *WHO...the source we place our hope in*. We hope for healthy children and wonderful spouses for them...we hope for economic stability and purposeful windfalls so we can share...we hope for peace in our relationships and a love that is incapable of ever letting us go. All of these hopes are noble and good. However, each of these hopes are circumstantial because life changes, we grow older, our bodies and our memories ultimately fail us in some way. So we are left to answer the deeper question which is: What is...who is our foundational hope in when all other hopes fail? In other words, who is God to us? What is God's name? When we are alone, who is God and who am I?

Jennifer's name means white wave and I have learned how to surf because the presence of Jennifer makes waves. To some, the waves she creates are welcome friends that long to teach and guide hearts into the mysteries of the deep divine. To others, Jennifer's waves are threatening and revealing because some of us have things we would rather remain hidden. My name means courage so I am drawn to the currents inside Jennifer and the push and pull of being in an intimate relationship with her. Together, our names have become oysters for the other, most times sweetly in current, but sometimes the current of our relationship is painful as we help make the rough places smooth inside of us so we may become more like the Divine. My mother has often said that "Pearls are not created overnight". Even though we know what our names mean, like all of you, Jennifer and I are more than a white wave and courage. Amy's name means "Beloved of God" and Sarah's name means "God's little Princess". I can't tell you how handy the meanings of my children's names have been when they have been less than beloved. I was once foolish enough to take a bath when Amy was 18 months old and Sarah was three. When I emerged from my calgon adventure, Amy had taken all of my coffee filters and spread them throughout the house and filled them with ten pounds of flour. During this same time, Sarah had taken a large jar of vaseline and covered every pot and pan in the kitchen, including Mozart, our cat, so I would be surprised at how nice and shiny everything was (because I liked the kitchen to be clean). My beloved princesses were so much more to me that day than just the definition of a name I had assigned to them...they were, in that moment, divine and precious because I knew them and that their intention was to please me, because they loved me.

In this room today we have many names that have worked very hard to attain certain labels. We have doctors, nurses, lawyers, accountants, bankers, ministers, teachers, mothers, fathers, and the list goes on and on. However, each one of us is so much more than any label we have earned. How strangely wonderful that the Sacred chose to create all of us and how strangely wonderful are the stories and experiences we all bring to this place today. How strangely wonderful that God chose the most misunderstood nation in our history to be the people to tell the story of the relationship between the Holy and the human, the Creator and the creature. How

strangely wonderful that the Divine chose a 14 year old girl and a 30 year old carpenter from a disrespected people to believe a message from an angel and then flee to Bethlehem to give birth in a stable full of animals and poop. How strangely wonderful that educated people journeyed away from all that they understood and trusted an unknown tugging at their souls that lead them to find Jesus, the holy extraordinary in the human ordinary. I wonder what the wise men thought when they looked upon Jesus the bouncing toddler? Did they think we have found God...our wonderful counselor...our peace...our redeemer...our king? Did they quote the promises of Isaiah and the names of God that Israel placed upon their hope?

Today, in India, a woman who has a doctorate in medicine is hiding in her parent's home with her five year old twin daughters. Her husband and mother-in-law tried to kill her children when she was pregnant by means of poison and physical abuse. They tried to kill her children by hurling them down a flight of stairs at four months of age. Females in India are labeled merely property that can birth children. Children are treated humanely *if* they are males. Now the males in India are having a tough time finding women to marry because so many are aborted before birth. This woman has chosen to stay and fight her government in order to change the label that has been placed upon females in hopes that her daughters may inherit a different future that will provide them freedom to be considered equally human with males. This woman lives with hope in her Creator that one day all people in India will be considered worthy to be human and alive. Like this woman, Mary must have thought why me? I'm just an ordinary girl? And why my son with all of the other rulers in the world to choose from...and why Joseph, he's just a man that works with wood? Why me? I'm just me? God, why don't you choose someone else to accomplish great things! Friends, all the Sacred needs to do great things is the ordinary to surrender itself into His/Her hands.

By nature, a name brings along with its definition a lot of pressure to live up to what we and others believe it means. If we could get down to the essence, the core, the true meaning of who God is and who we are today, we would find we share the same name, the same definition, the same source of hope and that is we all share the same name...the name of "I AM". You and I have been created in and are sustained by I AM and there is nothing better than this promise, this hope, that by nature cannot disappoint. I AM is inside of each one of us and we are always in the loving presence and care of I AM. When we choose to believe this...when we choose to trust in this truth...we are stripped of all labels and completely free to be fully present to our lives.

Jennifer is white wave and I AM. I am courage and I AM. Amy is beloved and I AM. Sarah is Princess and I AM. Jesus is the image of I AM. This advent, who will we find in the manger? What name do we know and understand God to be? Our answer will determine what we trust and how we live. A little boy was overheard praying: "Lord, if you can't make me a better boy, don't worry about it. I'm having a real good time like I am!"

Howard Hendrick's said, "There was no identity crisis in the life of Jesus Christ. He knew who He was. He knew where He had come from, and why he was here. And he knew where He was going. And when you are that liberated, then you can serve".

This advent, may we give ourselves the gift of understanding that there is nothing better on earth than I AM. May we dare to be divinely human and courageous enough to celebrate the strange for when we do, we might just discover the Holy among us. We can call God by any other name but nothing can change the essence of who God is and who we are in God and this is strangely wonderful.

Amen and amen continually.