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## “The Other March Madness”

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Third Sunday in Lent (Year B)

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Exodus 20:1–17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18–25; John 2:13–22

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What if I told you to go fly a kite?

Would you be highly offended that I had given you the brush-off?

Or would you take it literally, go outside,

raise a finger to measure the wind,

and look around for a clear, open field

where we might be able to run free and launch our kites?

’Tis the season, you know, for *that other March madness*: kite flying.

The late Seamus Heaney, the brilliant Irish poet,

has a marvelous little poem about kite-flying that goes like this:

Air from another life and time and place,  
Pale blue heavenly air is supporting  
A white wing beating high against the breeze,

And yes, it is a kite! As when one afternoon  
All of us there trooped out  
Among the briar hedges and stripped thorn,

I take my stand again, halt opposite  
Anahorish Hill to scan the blue,  
Back in that field to launch our long-tailed comet.

And now it hovers, tugs, veers, dives askew,  
Lifts itself, goes with the wind until  
It rises to loud cheers from us below.

Rises, and my hand is like a spindle  
Unspooling, the kite a thin-stemmed flower  
Climbing and carrying, carrying farther, higher

The longing in the breast and planted feet  
And gazing face and heart of the kite flier  
Until string breaks and—separate, elate—

The kite takes off, itself alone, a windfall.

(Seamus Heaney (1939–2013) After “L’Aquilone” by Giovanni Pascoli (1855–1912))

When I was in high school, the youth at my church regularly hosted  
a Saturday morning childcare program near downtown Charlotte  
called the Tiger Rose Club.

This was before the days of childcare and preschool,  
and the Tiger Rose Club was much like a weekly Vacation Church School,  
which gave inner-city parents a three-hour break while we  
cared for their young children at the church with Bible stories, songs,  
crafts and supervised play time.

It was quite a commitment for youth to make  
and a wonderful outreach ministry of our church.

So one year, during March, we decided to make and fly kites together  
as visible symbols of God’s love for us.

With a cross at its center, at the very heart of its structure,  
and with a string of love which plays the kite out from our hands  
like a prayer towards God, the kite silently seems to preach.

As Seamus Heaney said in his poem, *air from another life and time and place*,  
*pale, heavenly air* ... we wanted the children to experience  
that pale, heavenly air as God’s air.

However, children in the inner city, we found, didn’t know much about flying kites.  
It’s hard to find a patch of sky large enough to welcome a kite,

and it's certainly difficult to have the materials at hand to make their own. They might know a great deal about the March Madness of basketball, we discovered, but they had hardly entertained the notion of catching the wind of God alongside other children of God on a wonderful kite-ish blustery day. *We thought* it would be the perfect teachable moment *for them!*

So, with about twelve highly-energetic children and a near equal number of youth and adult supervisors, we helped them lash light wooden dowels together in the shape of a cross and showed them how to run a length of string around the periphery, tightening it to form the kite's classic diamond shape. Once that was secure, we had brought newspapers, which we cut, folded and taped around the frame, to which we finally attached a rag-bow tail. We were all having a wonderful time, reveling in *our* clever way of teaching *these children* about God's love with this tangible, hands-on project, eager to take them outside on the church lawn and launch the kites to God together, like prayers.

And all was going perfectly well *until...* we decided to let the children individualize their kites by cutting out magazine pictures that they liked to paste on their kites as identifiers.

*We thought* that being children, they would select cute pictures of puppies, kittens, little lambs, ponies, hearts, clouds, and birds to adorn their kites.

And a few of them did that, a few of the girls, especially. But the boys, to our dismay, even the little boys, preferred to plaster their diamond-kites with pictures of men and women, predominantly women, in all states of undress—the skimpier, the better.

Oh my gosh—it was going to be an X-rated kite fly on church grounds, no less! More like a promotional event for Fruit of the Loom or Victoria's Secret! And as we hustled them along and hurried them outside to catch the breeze, I confess that we spoke with double entendre when we said to them,

“Now, run along and go fly a kite!”

The kite strings that tug at God’s heart are far easier to manage, it seems,  
than the strings that entangle us with other people.

And maybe this was one of those Gospel reversals and *our* teachable moment!

But God surely knows that.

And so Yahweh/God who recently has delivered the children of Israel  
from oppression and slavery through the churning waters of the Red Sea  
gives a set of rules to live by, to guide our life together,  
in covenant relationship to God, and in covenant relationship to one another.

In Godly Play language, we refer to the Ten Commandments as The Ten Best Ways.

These guidelines are *so important* to our life together

that the biblical redactors give voice to them twice in the Old Testament:

once in Exodus 20, as we read them today, and again in

Deuteronomy 5, with a few minor tweaks, but essentially the same.

The first three guidelines are about our relationship with Yahweh/God:

- no other God, only me (as Eugene Peterson says it in *The Message*)
- no carved gods in any size, shape or form
- no using the name of God, your God, in curses or silly banter

And the final six guidelines are about our relationships with one another:

- honor your father and mother
- no murder
- no adultery
- no stealing
- no lies about your neighbor
- no lusting after your neighbor’s house or wife or servant or maid, etc.

That’s nine of the ten guidelines that we read in worship every Lent.

And nestled right in the middle of the nine at the cross section between

our relationship to God and our relationship to neighbor

comes the wonderful invitation to Sabbath:

*Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.*

*Work six days and do everything you need to do.*

*But the seventh day is a Sabbath to God, your god.*

*Don't do any work—not you, nor your son, nor your daughter,*

*nor your servant, not your maid, nor your animals,*

*not even the foreign visiting guests in your town.*

*For in six days God made Heaven and Earth, and sea and everything in them;*

*and rested on the seventh day.*

*Therefore God blessed the Sabbath day;*

*and set it apart as a holy day. (Exodus 20:8-11)*

It's a gift; it's a gift of God for the people of God, if we accept it as such:

to take 24 hours off each week and focus not on the work of our hands

and our agendas and our accomplishments,

but to focus upon *making right our relationships with God and neighbor.*

One extraordinary mention comes in Exodus 31:16–17,

where Yahweh says to Moses, "The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath,

celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant.

It will be *a sign* between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days

the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day,

the Lord abstained from work and rested."

In this instance, the Sabbath is declared to be a sign, what we might call a sacrament:

a visible sign of God's invisible grace to be observed forever.

It's a sign and a sacrament for us to put down the work of our hands

and to take up the tangled kite strings of our relationships to God and others

and make something more beautiful out of them.

Our observance of Lent, our preparation for Easter is along these same lines.

Lent, at its best, invites us to journey towards a deeper exploration

of both the transcendent wonder of God and the earthiness of our humanity.

In seeking to enhance our own spiritual lives

by deepening our relationships with God and others,  
we are encouraged to "go fly a kite" *into God's pale, heavenly air*  
*while all of us troop out among the briar hedges and stripped thorn,*  
as Seamus Heaney suggests.

Or, in the words of Emory's Don Saliers, "The church's Lenten journey is  
a double journey: into the mystery of God's unfathomable grace  
and into the depth of our humanity. Both are required."  
(Don Saliers. *Keeping Time in Lent*. "American Organist Magazine 47, no. 3 (March  
2013): 12)

Beginning with the ashes that mark the start of our Lenten venture  
with the shape of a cross on our foreheads,  
we practice repentance during Lent, turning our hearts toward God  
*by turning them towards others*, to forgive as we have been forgiven.  
Both are required.

Sabbath is God's gift of one twenty-four hour patch of blue each week  
to practice as we preach: to untangle those strings of connection,  
to give someone a call, to write a note, to spend precious time together,  
to remember, to restore, to renew.

I spent Valentine's Day this year with 10,000 of my North Carolina neighbors  
gathered on the urban streets of Raleigh beneath a large patch of sky  
to fly our various banners for the 9<sup>th</sup> annual HKonJ People's Assembly.

As a prelude to the actual march, we huddled in the early morning chill before  
Raleigh's Memorial Auditorium to hear speakers and singers  
warm us up and rally us before the actual march began.  
Kate Busa, Caroline Pritchett, and I were together, blowing into our cupped hands  
and stomping our feet to keep warm while Kate's husband, Bill,  
threaded through the diverse crowd, capturing images with his camera.

A representative from Jews for Peace stood at the podium and blew  
the shofar, which resonated far and wide through the morning air.

Then Farris Barakat, the brother of Deah Barakat, one of the three  
Muslim students murdered recently in Chapel Hill, addressed the crowd.

"Yesterday, we buried three bodies," he said as the crowd pressed closer  
to see, to hear, and to be warm.

"Those bodies—Deah Barakat, his wife, Yusor Abu-Salha, and her younger  
sister, Razan Abu-Salha, were fatally shot this week.

"We buried Yusor and Razan together and we buried my brother,"  
he continued, his speech measured and to the point.

"I've been telling people we just came from their wedding," Farris said.

"My brother took his wife, Yusor, and they took their bridesmaid, their best friend,  
to the next world."

And then a Muslim crier stepped to the podium, explained what he was about to do,  
and what the words he would chant in Arabic would mean,  
and he issued to all the Muslim call to prayer.

And we prayed silently in its echo: sad, humbled, haunted, shaken,  
connected to God and to one another by strings we could not have imagined.

It was one of those galvanizing *kairos* moments when eyes actually see,  
when ears actually hear, and when hearts are moved.

And I remember thinking to myself as steam rose from the many lips moving in prayer:  
we are going to have to learn to share God.

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We are going to have to do as scripture suggests and  
refer to God as *your God*, not our God.

God is not an exclusive commodity to be claimed as ours, to be owned,  
but rather a creative force for good, to be shared for the common weal.

I am going to have to learn to share God with my neighbor.

Perhaps that is my Lenten discipline this year.

Seamus Heaney found inspiration for his kite poem in translating an earlier piece  
by Italian poet Giovanni Pascoli.

He added to his original poem later in his life, in celebration of the birth of his  
second granddaughter, Aibhin, because any celebration of new  
life brings with it the revelation that eventually in our mortal state,  
*[the] string breaks and—separate, elate—*  
*The kite takes off...*

Life is short. Life is precious. Honor the Lord of the Sabbath  
and the neighbors of the Sabbath, all of our neighbors of the Sabbath,  
and consider and keep them closely tethered, as holy. Amen.