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“Focus Candle”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

January 29, 2017

Micah 6:1–8; Psalm 15; Matthew 5:1–12

Absolutely, one of my favorite moments of the church year has to be that *brief period of hush* on Christmas Eve when we sit in the darkened silence of this sanctuary, lighting our neighbors’ candles as the strains of *Silent Night* begin to emerge. It’s one of those *kairos* moments, we might say theologically, when things of hustle/bustle human time, *chronos*, seems vastly secondary to the sharp focus on God-time, *kairos*, on God-perspective, on God with us, and on the in-breaking stunning light of God’s love made manifest in Christ. Not even a cough or sneeze can break the brilliance of that moment. But how do we capture and carry forward that clarity, that God-focus, once we step outside these doors and head out into the darkness of night, into the distractions of the day, into the dysfunctionality of our families, into the perils of politics, and into the jumble of our own emotions?

When I used to serve on summer staff at the Massanetta Middle School Conferences, one of my favorite high school enablers was a slight, dark-eyed young woman named Sydney.

Now Sydney took her responsibilities as a leader of a middle school encounter group very seriously, although she was barely feather’s weight bigger herself

than most of her middle school group members.
But when we would circle up in our small encounter group
to discuss the keynote speech of the day,
or to share reactions to the powerful worship we might have experienced,
or to respond to words of scripture, or to pray,
if one youth would start flirting with the person on the right,
or picking on the person on the left,
or plucking clover out of the grass, or staring at the sky,
Sydney would raise her index finger in front of her and say to the group,
“Focus candle, guys! Focus candle! This is important, so pay attention!”
I loved that about Sydney. I loved that she knew when to pull out that focus candle
and bring a moment of mindfulness and clarity to our group.
How do we do that now, on the far side of Massanetta and on this side of Christmas,
when distractions reign supreme and many voices vie for our attention?
What serves as our focus candle, as our still small voice, as our guiding light?

“What *does* the Lord require of you,” the prophet Micah asks
as Israel is called to testify before the Lord of all Creation,
charged with arrogant selfishness, with taking God’s generosity for granted,
with chasing after things of the prevailing secular culture,
with forgetting the source of their redemption,
charged with acting in uncaring and cruel ways towards their neighbors,
and then with the audacity of trying to curry-favor God
with excessive and even unethical rituals of worship?

Something is terribly *not right* with Israel, and Micah knows it.
But how does the prophet get people to focus, to take notice
and make appropriate amends before it is too late?

I was intrigued by an interview in the *Rolling Stone* (of all things) earlier this month
with singer/songwriter Bruce Springsteen, which included his comments about

the state of America as we head into this new year, this new era.
The prophet/artist said, "When you let the genies out of the bottle—
bigotry, racism, intolerance—they don't go back in the bottle that easily
if they go back in at all. Whether it's a rise in hate crimes,
people feel they have the license to speak and behave in ways
that previously were considered un-American or *are* un-American...
My fears are that those things find a place in ordinary, civil society."

(Daniel Kreps. *Rolling Stone*, January 2, 2017)

I found myself agreeing with Springsteen and thinking specifically about HB2,
the so-called "bathroom bill," which was passed last March
by our state's legislature,
defied a last ditch effort to be revoked in December,
and which now finds itself perhaps proliferating in other states
like Kentucky, Minnesota, Missouri, Texas, and Virginia.

(Ray Sanchez, *CNN*. "First Days of 2017 Bring New 'Bathroom Bills.'" Jan. 7, 2017)

Once that bad genie was let out,
it is not going back into the bottle that easily, apparently.
And I fear other "proliferations," and the really bad and harmful genies
that are being unleashed day by day, as well.

Focus candle, guys! Focus candle! Micah 6:8 is the focus candle
of the Old Testament, of the Hebrew Testament, of our Testament.
When our state or our nation seems to be poised on the
brink of self-serving, uncaring, unneighborliness,
what is important for us, for all mortal creatures
of every time and place, circumstance, and gender to remember?
What does the Lord require? To *do* justice, to *love* kindness,
and to *walk* humbly with our God. *Do, love, walk* is our call to action.
Justice, kindness, and humility with God are the gifts of God for the people of God.
These values and these acts are a lamp to our feet

and a light to our path (Ps. 119:105),
given to align our ways with God's ways and to rebuke and rebuff
all genies of injustice, unkindness, and arrogance that are out of their bottles.

Likewise, Psalm 15 serves as another focus candle for those who desire
just a closer, more humble walk with God.

And, surprise, surprise, what the Lord requires of us here,
what makes for a closer walk with God hinges upon

how we care for our neighbors: putting their needs before our own,

to speak *truthfully* without a hint of slander towards our fellow man or woman,

which requires us to think before we speak or tweet,

blog or post, write or whisper—

will this possibly harm them more than it harms me?

If so, then perhaps I/you/he/she/they should keep a lid on it
to keep a promise we have made to our neighbor, even if hurts us in the long run;
to lend money without interest, sacrificing our own possible benefit,
in order to accommodate our neighbor's well-being first.

"The one who can do these things will never be shaken," the Psalmist says.

So, sometimes the *word* of God illumines our lives and brings us to focus and clarity.

But at other times, *life itself is our focus candle* that narrows our field of vision,

illumines God's word, and likewise brings us into the light

of God's unconditionally surprising love.

A poignant, yet beautiful book that I read while on sabbatical is still haunting me
in this regard: *When Breath Becomes Air* by the late Dr. Paul Kalanithi.

Kalanithi was a renaissance man: educated in the arts and the sciences

with degrees in literature from Stanford, philosophy from Cambridge,

and in neurological surgery and neuroscience from Yale.

He was in the final year of his postdoctoral work when he received the devastating
news that he had stage IV metastatic lung cancer.

He was only 35 years old! He was just hitting the apex of his career in medicine when in a single gasp, a new future had to be imagined.

“There is a moment, a cusp, when the sum of gathered experience is worn down by the details of living,” Kalanithi said.

“We are never so wise as when we live in this moment.”

Life quickly becomes Kalanithi’s focus candle, and *When Breath Becomes Air* is his memoir about the reversal of roles when a gifted doctor becomes a likewise gifted patient.

While taking care of patients, he said, he acted “not as death’s enemy, but as its ambassador. Those burdens are what makes medicine holy, and wholly impossible,” he said.

“In taking up another’s cross, one must sometimes get crushed by the weight... The physician’s duty is not to stave off death or return patients to their old lives, but to take into our arms a patient and family whose lives have disintegrated and work until they can stand back up and face, and make sense of their own existence.”

I feel like that’s the church’s duty, too: to help us face and make sense of our existence, whether we are in a life-threatening crisis or not.

Kalanithi says his oncologist, whom he highly regarded, didn’t give him back his old identity; she protected his ability to forge a new one. She helped him discern that work was important to him, and so he continued to practice medicine as long as he was able. His family was important, so he and his physician-wife decided to have a child.

Writing his way through also was crucial—thus the book with an epilogue by his wife, putting closure on a life intentionally well-lived.

With that gift of focus, Kalanithi discovered his soul, even as his body wasted away.

His story is one of transformation into a new identity, which includes a return to faith.

“Science may provide the most useful way to organize the empirical, reproducible data, but its power to do so is predicated on its inability to grasp

the most central aspects of human life: hope, fear, love, hate
beauty, envy, honor, weakness, striving, suffering, virtue," Kalanithi said.
"To reckon with death, one has to understand both the science
and its incompatible complement," which I hear him articulate as faith.
(Solomon, Andrew. *New York Times Book Review*. "The Good Death: When Breath
Becomes Air and More." February 8, 2016)

Likewise, to any of us who find ourselves in a similar *kairos* moment
of excruciating clarity and focus
due to a brush with serious illness, to the loss of a baby, a child, or a loved one;
due to imprisonment, or to the loss of a job or change of career;
due to a divorce or to the break-up of a long-term relationship;
due to failure or to shame; due to natural disaster or national disaster,
the seminal words of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount can serve as our focus candle,
the lamp to our feet, the light to our path, and the guide
for our newly emerging identities in the light of Christ's love for everyone.
And by Jesus' words, the transformation of our lives can constantly occur
and recur *as life and word meet and kiss* in surprising new kingdom ways:
the anxious and depressed are blessed, the mourning comforted,
the shy inherit a world of a windfall, the overly sensitive are heard and honored,
the merciful reap what they sow, the pure-hearted see God,
the peacemakers become God's own family members,
and the put-down, profiled, and persecuted gain first access to God's kingdom.

Sometimes God's word to us helps us identify *and act* upon our cherished values,
and sometimes life's circumstances cry out to God for help in illuminating
those values so that we might *bask in the light* of our true God-given identities.

What is important to me now?

What do I want to do with my life? What gives me joy?

How do I want to live differently from now on?

How do I discern my values?

What and who makes my life worth living?

Blessed are those who, like Kalanithi, seek to discover our spiritual essence especially in the midst of crisis.

Blessed are those who need God at our side at such a vulnerable time.

God is with us as Jesus; we are never alone.

God's word and God's Word made flesh will guide us

Seek, ask, knock, and that door to clarity and to focus will be opened.

For to us, Jesus has come to bring good news

of the favor, the blessing, and the promises of God.

And as we sang last week in the hymn, *My Shepherd Will Supply My Need*,

"One word of Your supporting *breath* drives all my fears away."

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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