

19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

October 15, 2017

### **Not According to Plan**

How often, even with the best of intentions, does life go according to plan—even when the plan is a good one, filled with energy and excitement and promise, and created to make someone else happy? Some days it seems the answer is not very often, present company not excepted. I was reminded this past week of one of those times when things did not exactly go according to plan, and it still makes my heart race to think about it. My mother, who God rest her soul would be 103 today if she were still alive in this world, asked for something way out of her box for her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday—she wanted to go on a hot air balloon ride. And her six children were determined to come together to make that happen. So we gathered family reunion style, inviting aunts and uncles and cousins, and brought our kids together at Callaway Gardens for a weekend, and hired a balloon guy. Well the winds and the weather did not cooperate, so there was no balloon ride, but we made the most of it and had a pretty good weekend with no major catastrophes, which is good for a family reunion, right? And you might think that would be the end of it, but of course it wasn't. My sister rescheduled the balloon ride a couple of months later when at least a few of us could be there, so early one Saturday morning we met the balloon guys at the Chick-fil-a in McDonough to follow them to a field in the middle of nowhere where the balloon could be safely inflated and take off. It was a little disturbing to have to wait for one of them to hit a local liquor store to buy the champagne for the romantic picnic basket lunch that was part of the hot air balloon ride package—and not just because my mother did not drink and lunchtime was a long way off. We piled into as few cars as would hold us all and followed them to a vacant hill where powerlines were scarce but mud was plentiful and then stood around waiting for the balloon to rise out of a mound of color pushed off the back of a pickup truck onto the ground. The guy in charge was charming and reassuring, while his helpers who would drive the chase car looked and acted like something out of Bevis and Butthead, shooting paintball guns at each other while they were waiting, and acting like they had already been in the champagne. Then we lifted our 90# mother and her oldest grandson into

the basket and off they went, leaving us to scramble behind the chase car, speeding everywhere, watching the chase car dudes looking out their window at the sky while driving through stop signs and constantly changing directions in the moment, following the pilot over a 2-way radio crackling about wind speed and direction. After about an hour of this—with two very bored young children in the car—we turned down a rutted dirt road and barely made it to the edge of a waist-high grassy field in time to see the balloon coming down with multiple violent bounces, and no semblance of control. We all took off running to catch and tether the ropes dangling over the basket, to rescue my mother and nephew from what I expected would be spinal compression fractures and severed tongues. In a storm of emotion somewhere between fury and terror, we carried my mother across the field, buckled her into the car and got out of there before I could do serious harm to those idiots. Needless to say, we skipped the champagne lunch. Some things just do *not* seem to go according to plan.

Today's stories from scripture are all about planning and disappointment in the outcome of those plans. We are back in the desert with Moses, who has climbed up a mountain at God's command to receive what we now call the Ten Commandments, representing the covenant between God and his people. Moses had been having one of several direct conversations with God that had convinced him that God meant what he said about leading his faithful people to the Promised Land. This trip up the mountain took a while—by one account Moses was gone for 40 days. It was so long, in fact, that the Israelites had given up on Moses coming back at all, and were getting anxious about what to do. They began to look for some direction from his brother Aaron, who had been left in charge. Aaron was under a lot of pressure, and it seems that he let the power go to his head. He helped the Israelites come up with a plan to melt down all their gold jewelry and make a golden calf to worship, hoping this fake cow would then tell them what to do. The Lord their God had brought them out of Egypt, saved them from Pharaoh, fed them manna in the desert, and was preparing for them a life in Canaan, and yet they were ready to give all the credit for their deliverance to a hand-made golden calf. Turns out God was pretty upset about this, calling them “stiff-necked” and ready to wipe them out and let Moses start over with a new crowd. But Moses climbed back up that mountain again to remind God of his promises, of their relationship, and things

calmed down a bit. What today's story doesn't tell us is that Moses himself, after saving their stiff necks from the wrath of God, was so angry with the Israelites that when he came back down the mountain again, he melted down that golden calf until it was liquid, and made them drink it. Some things just do *not* go according to plan.

In the Gospel today, Jesus tells a parable to the people about the Kingdom of Heaven being like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. On the menu were oxen and fatted calves—quite a feast back then. As might be expected for such a party, he first invited his higher-class subjects. He was so mad when they didn't bother to come that he sent troops out to punish them and destroy their villages. He then sent his servants out to invite just about anyone they found on the streets—*good and bad*—including those who would *not* have been accustomed to being invited to the wedding of a prince and princess. These guests must have been a little nervous, but their curiosity helped them overcome their fear and they showed up at the door, probably gawking at their surroundings and closing their eyes to take in the delicious smells of a meal they rarely saw the likes of. The stewards were even handing out fancy garments to put over their common street clothes, in fabrics and colors that had never hung in *their* closets—if they had closets. As Jesus tells the story, one guy refused to put on a wedding robe, and came into the great banquet hall anyway. Who knows what he was thinking? Maybe he thought it was too nice, that he wasn't worthy of it. Maybe he thought it was putting on airs, and he was too proud to put it on. Maybe he was so anxious that he just wasn't paying attention to the one task asked of him to be part of the event. In any case, the father of the groom, calling him "Friend," asked him how he got in without a robe. Only when the guest was speechless did he send him away into the outer darkness. Whatever his reason for not putting on that robe, I can imagine him regretting his failure to do such a simple thing and losing an opportunity to go the party of his life, the kind of opportunity that would not likely come around again. The outer darkness would have paled in comparison to having to listen to his friends tell him about how great that banquet of fatted calves was—and how he should have been there—for the rest of his days.

What is the Spirit of God saying in these stories? Why is it that when something that is both unsettling *and* potentially wonderful is about to happen in our lives, we can become so impatient, so anxious, so fearful, or so untrusting that we miss the joy and the blessing in the moment? Is it possible that it is our fear of the unknown keeps us from imagining a deeper covenant with God? When things don't go according to plan do we not seek to soothe our anxiety with our own versions of golden calves—offering a temporary distraction and false promise that all is well? When we become overwhelmed by the unexpected, why do we allow our resistance to change lead us to disregard an invitation to the great banquet table that is repeatedly laid before us—spread with good things beyond our experience and imagining?

Five or six years after the great hot air balloon escapade, my mother was living in a nursing home, adjusting every day to the changes and losses of dementia. She was often confused and sometimes lost even in her own room, but the pictures of that hot air balloon were framed on her wall, and for as long as she could speak, she would tell anyone who asked about that day through her eyes: the wonder of it—of gliding silently near the tops of trees that she wanted to reach out and touch, of flying with birds, of listening to the wind—the only sound besides the stoking of the helium that disturbed a profound quiet up there in the sky. Her face would light up in a way that was rare at that time in her life. Watching and listening to her tell her story, I saw how that the way I had measured that same experience in irritation and anger, and anxiety bordering on terror—had caused me to miss its true gift and lesson—that life is full of fleeting moments of beauty and wonder and mystery and celebration. Even when we find ourselves overwhelmed by chaos and destruction as our worlds are rocked by change and loss, powerful moments of courage, and healing and grace are always breaking through in new ways, opening our eyes, strengthening our resilience and giving us a way forward. Sometimes the *only* time we are aroused from our anxious self-focus to see these special moments of God's blessing is when things don't go according to plan.

It was the 20<sup>th</sup> Century contemplative theologian Thomas Merton who said: *You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment,*

*and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope.* May we be blessed with both courage and wonder, to embrace all the changes and challenges of this life with gratitude, and the certain hope that our God of blessings can be found anywhere and everywhere—in the broken tablets, at the wedding banquet, in the anxiety and uncertainty of all change and transition—even in the misadventure of a frail little old lady riding in a hot air balloon. AMEN