

## **Anchors, Doves and Determination**

Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Viki Brooks

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Scripture: Gen 8:6-12; Hebrews 17-20

A Protestant, a Roman Catholic, a Muslim and a Jew walked into a.... restaurant on Western Ave in Albany. This wonderful scenario is one of the post-retirement benefits of my service at Union College. I have been greatly blessed by the occasional reunion with my former students. On this rainy day less than three weeks ago, these women, all graduates in 2008, were gathering for their annual Mom-cation. One hails from Oregon, another from Missouri and another from Albany. They are a physician, a psychiatrist, and a lawyer. It is an awesome honor to be in their presence. In the hours that followed I was drawn back into their stories from their college days while I remained attentive to talk of the busy days of their present reality. I will return to their stories momentarily.

Our reading this morning from Genesis speaks to us of the dove from Noah's ark. This bird has many backstories about its meaning to ancient people. The image of a dove appears in art that predates the time of the wars we hear about in the prophets. Doves have been a sign of peace, of divinity and the mark of one chosen by God for a particular service. For some ancients, the dove was the form of a priestess or even the consort of the gods. Many ancient sailors employed doves as Noah did, as a way to find land. According to archeologist Dorothy Resig Willette, images of the dove helped countless people to envision and understand the many aspects of a God who could not be embodied by an idol or a statue. Willette goes on to say the dove continues to be a favorite way to show the hand and presence of God in the world. This is an ephemeral representation of God; the fleeting, the airy idea of spirit as opposed to substance.

In our New Testament resource this morning, from the book of Hebrews, we see a different sort of image for divinity. This writer invites us into the unchanging, rooted, anchored if you will, ways of God. I am sure there are a few boaters sitting here this morning. Many of you may have a working familiarity with boat anchors. My primary watercraft these days is a pack boat or open kayak. During my young adolescent years, however, sailboats carried me in the waters of Lake Erie. Now *these* boats required anchors.

Let me share some of the different functions of an anchor. The kedge anchor, the shape we most associate with this word, with a double hook on one end and a cross bar at the top set at the opposite plane from the hook, is designed to hold a boat when embedded in sand or vegetation. A plow type, shaped like a claw, is designed to dig itself deeper into the substance

beneath it, eventually offering a solid mooring despite movement above, by dragging along the bottom until it catches. And a mushroom anchor, a favorite for the sailors I knew in the day, tends to drop down immediately below the boat and fills with sediment increasing its staying power.

Depictions of anchors fill ancient tombs and artwork. During Christian persecution, the anchor was the symbol of God's steadfast presence during turbulent times. In addition to bringing forth images of Christ as a fisher of folk, the anchor also resembled the Chi Ro or first Greek consonants of the name of Christ. The anchor became part of the secret language between the persecuted ones.

The author of Hebrews was most likely familiar with only the kedge anchor: the anchor that grabs hold of the bottom surface with strength and immobility. This text emphasizes the unchangeable nature of God's promises and the security they offer. The author describes God's desire to demonstrate the certainty of God's promises. The anchor here points to a confirmation of God's word, guaranteeing that God's word, like God's character, cannot be broken. This provides a strong and secure anchor for the soul. This is the stuff of physical hard certainty that provides the ground for a hope that carries us into the future.

Anchors and doves populate parts of our scripture both as images or symbols of hope. One image points to the certainties, the solid aspects of our relationship with God that keep us grounded and moving toward a better time despite the storms that might brew around us. The other suggests the more fluid aspects of hope. The times when imagination and an openness to new possibilities lifts our soul toward circumstances that nurture new surroundings and the fulfillment of our best selves. Any bridge to the future, if it is to serve us now, must involve hope, both the concrete and the ethereal.

Remember the Roman Catholic, the Muslim and the Jew? Three amazing and gifted young women? Each one knew a life-changing loss while at Union College. In her own way, each was significantly out of place in a college where getting drunk on the weekend was often a goal. All three practiced her faith by observing prayer spaces, dietary restrictions and abstinence from many of the norms of college life. Each one had more than one crisis of being that threw her into uncertainty about all that mattered to her. Each were also anchored in a variety of certainties and rehearsed the possibilities that served as doves in their flight to the future. Three weeks ago, they sat with me in a small space in Guilderland and by their very presence told the tale of hope lived into reality.

Their bridges to the future that they are now living grew from the hope that it was possible. Grounding themselves amid the rocks of their respective faith affirmations, they held onto the good in their life of faith. Despite the fact that, without exception, their religious traditions challenged the roles they hoped to achieve with an underlying sexism. They moved toward the future with the possibilities of ethereal hope and the tangible promise of divinity that gives reason to hope. AND, AND, they had each other. They still do.

The pages of their journeys offer a way through our current divisions and reasons for despair. We too have some rock-solid affirmations upon which to base our hope as a nation, as a church and as individuals. Haven't we all experienced God's goodness, in a sunset or a life saved or an effective humanitarian organization? Haven't we experienced the promises of a community that cares and a nation that nurtured leaders like Eleanor Roosevelt and Martin Luther King? There are things we know to be good. These are our anchors. We also know the power of exploring the possible. Of giving flight to a direction that might alleviate hunger in our community or assuring justice to one without a place to call home. We can step into the spaces that seem more like clouds than roads by pursuing a path that takes us beyond ourselves to the good of another, or many others or even a community of others.

AND, AND, we have each other.

Following the sermon, we will engage in an act of hope. It is grounded in scripture and in the history of the Christian Church. It carries with it the symbol of a dove that suggests possibilities for the future: We will be ordaining and installing a new elder of the church. More simply, and perhaps preferable to Marcus, a good human being is being acknowledged as a leader in this church as well as taking on the mundane chores of this body. It is the marking of a journey from today's reality to some new ways of being. Listen in the words of this ritual for the tools for building a bridge to the future that is grounded in certainties and given life in the possible.

There is one more element that grants our bridge to the future a plan. That element is determination. The rabbi suggested in his sermon three weeks ago that optimism is a choice. I am generally an optimistic person. I am one who tries to find the good in people, circumstances and even institutions. In January of this year I lost much of that optimism. In fact I became mired in the sensationalized negativity that seemed to surround every news story that I read. I am trying to turn a page from those days. I am not talking about burying my head in the sand, but rather filtering out some of the doomsday talk and trying to find some good. I am rehearsing the certainties that inform my sense of hope and I am listening for the whispers of God's activity in new and inviting ways. I am determined to choose optimism whenever I can do so with integrity. And from there, begin the building of a bridge beyond what often turns me to despair. AND, AND, we have God in our midst as the master architect of what is coming.

May it be so.