

Living in Hope

Have you noticed how everything is “breaking news” these days? Every fresh piece of information gets the tag “breaking news.” The news “breaks” not just once or twice a day but minute to minute, across an infinitely expanding spectrum of social media. It used to be that “breaking news” was a label reserved for urgent developments of considerable magnitude. No longer. Now we have a 24-hour stream of negative news, with a fresh “crisis” every hour attended by spin doctors who calmly distort the truth and panels of experts yelling at each other. This narrative—that *this* is what life is—is harmful. Being immersed in the 24-hour news can leave us feeling under siege. Infuriating political developments and heart-wrenching news of global suffering and conflict can leave us daunted and depressed.

To change the narrative, literally and metaphorically, I watch a few minutes of Blue Planet or NatGeo Wild—any program about wild animals, or natural habitats, or the fascinating diversity of living creatures on this globe. The other day I saw a fantastic program about the coastal mangrove swamps of Borneo in Indonesia.¹ Do you even know what creatures live there? [It’s so cool!] I’ll tell you about three. First, there are apparently 17 species of fiddler crabs living in the intertidal zone on the beaches.² These tiny crustaceans display a rainbow of red, orange, blue, black and white, and yellow markings, the males with their one oversized claw that they wave in the air in stylized territorial dances. Then there are gobies—slender fish the size of minnows, schools flashing through the water in a spectacular array of bright

orange, cobalt blue, and yellow and black stripes (that last would be the awesome “Bumblebee Goby”). Third, I wish to highlight the outstanding primate known as the proboscis monkey, a sociable creature graced with such a prominent nose that some of us delight in calling it the “schnozz monkey.”

Each of these 3 creatures displays a special kind of resilience for living in the brackish environment of the coastal mangrove swamp. At low tide, the fiddler crab comes out to sift through the sand for algae and other food particles. Since it needs to keep its gills wet in order to breathe, it regularly ducks down deep into its sandy burrow—down to the saline level of the water table—quickly immerses itself, then scrambles back up to have more lunch. The goby in the mangrove swamp deals every day with hours of low tide during which it is trapped without surface water. It’s a fish, mind you—without surface water! It has learned to swim into tunnels that snails have bored into the roots of trees. As the tide drops, brackish water remains in those lateral tunnels. The goby swims in before lowest tide, then waits in the water-filled tunnel until the rising tide brings the water level back up. And the proboscis monkeys are just amazing. They eat tough mangrove leaves, which few other creatures can digest. With their partially webbed feet, they are excellent swimmers as well as astonishing acrobats, flinging themselves with abandon from tree to tree, sometimes leaping into the water from as high as 50 feet up. When I change the channel from CNN to watch footage of these beautiful, resilient creatures in their tropical habitat, it builds my capacity to change the narrative of crisis and conflict in which I would otherwise be immersed 24/7.

The Gospel has *always* countered the dominant narrative of crisis and conflict, in ancient Palestine no less than today. “Now concerning the times and the seasons,” Paul says in artful understatement, “you do not need to have anything written to you.” The early followers of Jesus would have been surprised to hear that.³ Christ had been raised from the dead, but that had been years earlier. Now Christians faced scorn from the Jewish authorities and a rising tide of persecution by the Roman empire. What were they to do? Guidance was, in fact, urgently needed.

They knew the risen Lord had spoken to Paul personally, back when he had been called Saul. Before his conversion, Saul had been a terribly violent man—brash, ambitious, proud that the Sanhedrin had given him a role in putting a stop to the Christian heresy. Saul had been remorseless. He had watched while a mob stoned Stephen and done nothing.⁴ He went door to door with his armed guards, dragging men and women alike out of their houses and throwing them into prison.⁵

That violent thug, Saul, had been traveling to Damascus so he could hunt down Christians and bring them in chains back to Jerusalem.⁶ On his way, “breathing threats and murder,” Saul was knocked to the ground by an impossibly bright light and a thunderous Voice. The risen Christ! Saul was baptized and immediately started preaching Jesus as the Son of God. Yes, indeed. Changed his name to Paul and didn’t go near Jerusalem for three years. Believers who had known him as a brutal enforcer for the Sanhedrin were “still afraid of him,” and he must have

dreaded facing them.⁷ After one stealth trip to Jerusalem to see James the brother of Jesus, Paul stayed away for 14 years before he dared show his face in Jerusalem again.⁸

With what darkness might Paul have struggled during his time in exile? Did he lie awake at night shuddering at the memories, his ears filled with the screams and sobs of Christians he had harmed? He knew full well that he had done horrendous things—in Galatians 1, Paul confesses, “I was violently persecuting the church of God, trying to destroy it.” The memory of his earlier brutality surely would have shamed him. It was during this time that Paul started writing. The earliest written letter we have from Paul is First Thessalonians, from which our lesson this morning is taken. The earliest written word in the whole New Testament—about 51 A.D., years before the Gospels would be written! In his first canonical words, Paul, who had been so brutally repressive to believers, tells them about the “God of peace,”⁹ counsels them never to repay evil for evil,¹⁰ and urges them to put on spiritual armor: “the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.”

This man who used to hold the cloaks of those who were stoning Christians—this man figured something out during what must have been a dark 14 years. And this is what he learned: *faith* and *love* and *hope*.¹¹

Not a plan for armed insurrection in the name of King Jesus.

Not a scheme for vengeance against the Sanhedrin or the Romans.

Faith and *love* and *hope*—“for God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹²

These days, it feels like we need to fight all the time for what we believe in. Our other Scripture lessons reinforce that unhelpful narrative. I cherish all Scripture, but I’ve been working on Joshua all weekend—the Old Testament book that promotes the extermination of the Canaanites—and I’ve *had it* with stories of conflict and slaughter. This morning I’m going to go ahead and say “NO” to Judges 4 with its celebration of holy war and “NO” to our Matthew parable, which gives us God as a harsh master who calls someone a “wicked, lazy, worthless slave” and commands that he be tortured in “outer darkness.”¹³ NO. No more imagery of war and violence.

We can re-imagine Paul’s spiritual armor.

For the breastplate, we can ask,

How do we protect our spiritual core with *faith* and *love*?

For the helmet, we can ask,

How do we protect our spiritual imagination and our vision with the
hope of salvation?

Tell you what: let’s read the *sacred text* of the natural world, the world that our gracious God has created for our instruction.¹⁴ Let’s think on the coastal mangrove swamps of Borneo.

The plucky fiddler crab ducks down deep into its burrow to keep its gills wet when the tide has receded. Just so, we can go deep in prayer, down to the core of our relationship with Christ, so that *faith* can protect our spirits, helping us breathe when we find ourselves embattled.

The iridescent goby waits in water-filled tunnels until the rising tide floods its habitat once again. Just so, we can immerse ourselves in actions of justice, compassion, and love even when the tide has fallen away, creating zones that are habitable even when the broader environment is inhospitable. The tide *will* change!

And the proboscis monkey: digesting what is virtually indigestible, flinging itself exuberantly from tree to tree, swimming like no other primate, this wondrous creature helps us to imagine our own capacities for living in *hope*. Use your talents, beloved in Christ!¹⁵ Make nourishment out of what is unpalatable. Fling yourself into the Gospel work of peace! Become an expert swimmer in all kinds of tides. For we “*can* do all things through [Christ] who strengthens” us.¹⁶ Amen.

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Proper 28A

Judg 4:1–7; Psalm 123; 1 Thess 5:1–11; Matt 25:14–30

Preached at St. Thomas’s Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut

¹ Borneo is the third-largest island in the world—it’s bigger than Texas! (Borneo is about 287,000 square miles and Texas is about 268,000.) Borneo’s territory is zoned politically within three different countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei.

² This number of species of Borneo fiddler crabs is from a NatGeo Wild broadcast on 17 November 2017. I failed to note the name of the program at the time; it may have been “Borneo: Island in the Clouds.”

³ With the rhetorical move, “you do not need to have anything written to you,” Paul is skillfully building his audience’s capacity to receive what he is about to say, creating sympathy by commending their knowledge of Christian tradition. This would invite their attention in a non-adversarial way as he prepares to tell them things they do urgently need to know.

⁴ In *Acts: A Commentary* (New Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016, p. 176), Carl R. Holladay rightly emphasizes Saul’s complicity in the execution of Stephen, translating Acts 8:1a in this way: “And Saul fully supported his execution.”

⁵ See Acts 7:54 – 8:1–3.

⁶ Intoxicated by his authority to bind and imprison believers wherever he could hunt them down, Saul had proposed the Damascus journey to the Jerusalem authorities on his own initiative (Acts 9:1–2).

⁷ On Christian believers continuing to fear Paul after his conversion, see Acts 9:26. The subsequent account (9:27–28) of Paul speaking “boldly” in public or semi-public (“he went in and out among them”) on his first return to Jerusalem is hard to reconcile with Paul’s own account in Galatians.

⁸ See Acts 9:3–22 and Galatians 1:13 – 2:1.

⁹ 1 Thessalonians 5:23. Paul repeats this beautiful phrase, “the God of peace,” in Philippians 4:9.

¹⁰ 1 Thessalonians 5:15.

¹¹ Faith, love, and hope come up in the opening of Paul’s letter, where he commends the believers at Thessalonica for their “work of *faith* and labor of *love* and

steadfastness of *hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 1:3). Paul speaks of their “faith and love” also in 3:6, and mentions “faith” or “love” alone in a number of places in the epistle. But our three key words in the same order occur in 1 Thessalonians only in 1:3 and 5:8, creating an *inclusio* (framing) structure that may be argued to highlight the importance of the sequence.

¹² I am aware that the “wrath” (ὀργή) in this phrase refers to eschatological judgment. In this sermon, I seek to connect the *hope of salvation* that we have through faith in Christ to believers’ declining to participate in the violence perpetrated by empires of this world and the spiritual principalities and powers that oppose the purposes of God. On the principalities and powers, see Ephesians 6:10–17, a passage in which the metaphor of spiritual armor is elaborated in more detail.

¹³ The trauma perpetrated by enslavement was not somehow less severe or more excusable in the ancient world. I confess to impatience with Christian apologists who seek to ameliorate or explain away the disturbing nature of the Parable of the Talents and other Scripture passages that trade on repellent associations. On the Matthew 25 parable, see William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 150–168; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), pp. 246–262 and the section entitled, “Summary and Excursus: The Understanding of Judgment in the Gospel of Matthew,” pp. 285–296. In the opinion of Luz, the parable is weak for two reasons. First, it seems to postulate a connection between Christian love and the “risk-taking behavior of small capitalists,” yet such a connection is “only formal” at best. Second, the parable does not resolve whether the third slave’s view of the master is accurate, that is, “whether God is indeed greedy and hard as the third slave thinks he is” (255). I disagree on the second point: the master’s cruel response to the slave bears out precisely the characterization that had just been offered. Luz offers that when we read the parable with Jesus as “the parable’s signature and the definition of its contents,” the parable cannot be misused. I very much appreciate what Luz writes: “The parable of the talents is theologically true only when it speaks of the God of Jesus Christ, who loves people in such a way that they are indebted to him for everything that they are and that they can achieve. It is theologically true only when it speaks of his commission to love and of the gifts that are used *for that purpose* and not for just any human activities. It is theologically true only when it is related to the community of love that Jesus wanted” (261–262; emphasis original). In this sermon, I seek to expand the notion of the beloved community to include non-human creaturely life.

A final thought on slavery in Scripture texts. That economic destitution may have compelled individuals or families in ancient, medieval, and contemporary global contexts to offer themselves as indentured servants does not in any way excuse the practice of enslaving other human beings and commodifying their bodies and labor. As has been widely reported in recent days (this is just one example of many that could be cited), active slave markets have emerged in numerous locations in Libya that are currently trafficking migrants from West African countries. (See the *New York Times* article on 20 November 2017, p. A9, a CNN report [here](#), and

a *Guardian* report [here](#).) In our time, enslavement of human beings remains an abhorrent reality. I believe it is important for Christians to decline biblical tropes that are built on ideologies of enslavement and genocide, even when such tropes are treated as “only” metaphors or are deployed in allegorical readings. Metaphors and allegories that trade on violence reinforce distorted theology and poor ethical thinking in our sacred traditions. We need to redirect our theological discourse, funding and replenishing our spiritual imaginations with tropes, narratives, and ideologies of love that promote the flourishing of all living beings.

¹⁴ Wisdom psalms (such as Psalm 104) and passages throughout Job and Proverbs implicitly and explicitly confirm that the natural world is a gift of God for our growth in wisdom. For a marvelous exploration of the ancient Israelite perspective on creation as an instructive resource, see William P. Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

¹⁵ At this point it may become clear that I have been reflecting on our Matthew 25 parable, declining its violent theology while seeking to explore its persuasive force re: believers using with creativity and daring the gifts and resources with which they have been blessed. That is, I have sought to preach the message of the Parable of the Talents without citing it directly and without replicating its discursive violence.

¹⁶ Philippians 4:13.