

WATCHING & WAITING  
ON OUR KNEES AGAIN

“Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom.”

Texts on Sunday, December 8, 2013

Isaiah 11: 1-10; Matthew 18: 1-5

Last Sunday morning, I offered my one hundredth Sunday morning sermon at Riverside. So this morning, we are going to summarize the whole three years' work. It will take several hours, but I'm sure you are all down for that.

Actually we are going to endeavor to say something critical and essential about our life together and I want to open it up with a reflection on two books. One, we all read when we were in high school, *The Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. The story teaches something simple and sobering about children, namely that they are not yet structured as civilized humans, and, left to themselves, might become something quite fearsome. But a different book sends a peculiarly mirroring message. It was published about twenty years ago; some of you have no doubt read it. It is called *The Children of Men*, by P.D. James. The first sentence starts like this: “On January 1, 2025, the last person born on earth died in a bar room brawl.”

It's a science fiction, if you will, based on one idea, that fertility across the world has ceased everywhere. There is no explanation as to whether it has to do with the men or the women or something altogether different. But child-bearing has stopped. The story traces what happens to a world of adults with no children. If we say that *The Lord of the Flies* teaches that adults civilize children, P.D. James's book *The Children of Men* teaches that the children civilize the adults. The message of the book seems to claim that if we had no children—now, I do not mean you as an individual woman or man who may or may not have been offered the chance to raise a child—I mean, if our species suddenly had no children, we adults would have no reason for being. Our whole understanding of culture, of government, of religion—everything would fly apart. Nothing would hold us together. Injustice would fly up out of our natures worse than anything William Golding ever thought of. The children, and our hope for them, are civilizing us all the time.

What is it we must hand on to them? A hundred sermons are there, and I won't try to fill them in. But I will ask this question. Although we cannot say short *what* we must hand on to the generations, we can say *how* we must hand on our treasures. There is an answer in the today's scriptures, and also in our extraordinary experience of Riverside's children and the guidance given them by their teachers. Put it this way. We learn by getting down on our knees again.

Now, to be down on our knees as an adult has certain meanings, hasn't it? There's the praying meaning, from which we rise. There is an anointing meaning, when one is being knighted or ordained to a ministry. There is a pleading mean-

ing, when we're vulnerable and someone has power over us and we must plead. There is a meaning of plain weakness in being down on our knees, when frailty has just dashed us to the ground.

From all those ways of being down on our knees, we want to rise. But there is one kind of being down on our knees from which we do not want to rise too soon. If you have been with little children, you know where they want you—there with them, down on your knees again! They are not trying to get up from there. And of course, down there is where they started. Their will really got going when they first moved off their little butts onto their knees and hands and started to crawl. So there is something in the humility of the child's desire to move down on her knees which is like the place Jesus is calling us to, and which we see wherever humility is rising.

Now clearly in Nelson Mandela of beloved memory, we saw humility. None of what is being spoken of him would move us were there not humility and joy in him. On the news last evening, I heard an interview in which he said that "it was a great privilege to be the father of the nation, but it was a great joy to be a father of children." And yet, he said, "having been called to be the one, I did not offer enough time to be the other." We know that 27 years of parenting were ripped away from him; at 90, still he felt the longing for the great joy, missed.

In the grown person's possibility of rediscovering the child's way of knowing, from down on the knees, there is something worth holding up to the light. I want to read an excerpt from *The Spiritual Life of Children*, a work by the great child psychiatrist and student of childhood Robert Coles. What follows is a verbatim transcript of a conversation kindled on a certain day about 25 years ago in a fifth grade class. Coles had already spent many months with this class and had earned their trust. As I read to you this verbatim of the day's conversation, think of our Lord calling us: to be like a child, to be humble, to receive a child.

The question Coles put to the class was, "Tell me as well as you can who you are. What about you matters most? What makes you the person you are?" The children began to write their answers on paper. One child wrote: "I'm like I am now. But I could change when I grow up. You never know who you'll be until you get to that age when you're all grown. But God must know all the time."

There were other contributions. Robert Coles report continues:

One boy's contribution was truly different. "I don't know what to say. I was put here by God and I hope to stay until he says. 'Okay, enough. Come back. Then I will not be here anymore. By the end, I will find out why I was sent down and not plenty of others. There must be a lot waiting. God decides."

This autobiographical paper produced silence among the children. It elicited looks of curiosity, even apprehension. A boy raised his hand to ask the only question.

"What does God decide?"

[Coles reports that he was in a quandary. He did not want to answer for the child or force the child to answer, because all the papers were anonymous.] In a dramatic

move—the only one of its kind during this long time together—the boy who had written those words raised his hand.

“I can tell you, I was—I was trying to say that it's up to God. He decides who is born. He puts us here and then he's the one who says we should go back and be with him.”

The result was absolute silence. Someone outside the school gunned a car. As I prepared to read another paper, a hand went up—a Puerto Rican girl. [Incidentally, the whole class was composed of children of working-class parents living in Lawrence, Massachusetts. If you know the town, no more need be said.]

The Puerto Rican girl said, “Well, how does he decide? How can he possibly keep track of everyone? I asked our priest, and he said all kids want to know—and you just have to have faith and if you don't, then you're in trouble. And besides, you'll never know because that's God's secret. He can do things and we think are impossible but he does them anyway. But I still can't see how God can keep his eyes on everyone. And my uncle says it's all a lot of nonsense.”

Hands started to shoot up. The children started speaking. One of the children said, “Your uncle shouldn't talk like that!”

“Why not?”

Then the others started speaking thick and fast.

“We'll never know about God until we die.”

“True, but we know something. He did come here once.”

“Yes but that was a long time ago. What's he been doing since he died and left?”

“If you go to church, he'll be there. You can go and get communion.”

“Right, but I still don't see how anyone, even God, keeps all those records on everyone.”

“No, there aren't any records. He just does. You can't explain it. God isn't a person like us.”

“He was one, isn't that so?”

“Yes but just for a while. Then he went back to being God.”

“I know, I know, but I still can't understand this business of God choosing people. Isn't that what we are talking about?”

“Yes but we never get the answers. We just have to have faith. That's what the priest would say.”

“Oh, do you think the priests know the answers?”

“No more than we do. They just know that nobody knows other than God.”

“I believe in God but it's hard to know whether you're doing the right thing, what God wants, or the wrong thing.”

“That's where the priests come in.”

“And ministers. I'm not Catholic.”

“But how can you say the priests can tell you—or the ministers—what's right to do, and what's wrong, if only God knows.”

“Who says the priests are right, or some minister?”

“Well, they pray a lot more than you and I do. Isn't that true?”

“How do you know how much they pray? Just because you're a priest doesn't mean you're praying more than someone who isn't a priest but just prays a lot.”

“Most people don't have time to pray. They have to work all day and they come home tired.”

“Oh, those priests, they don't work hard—not as hard as my dad. He says a lot of priests have got it pretty easy.”

“But you have to have priests and ministers.”

“Why? Why can't anyone just try being good and pray to God. You keep doing that, you get there, to heaven.”

This conversation proceeds remarkably for a good while. Coles reports that he never had a day like this with children before or since. Here I want to skip to the words of a little girl who had a stutter and spoke slowly. Children often made fun of her, but not this day.

One girl said, “We should talk like this more often. You think a lot when you're listening. And then you say what you're thinking and you don't forget what you've heard when it's this kind of talk. [Now, I would like to call *that* being “down-on-your-knees-again”—*this kind of talk*.]

“Right,” said the girl sitting beside her. “I hear my mother and my grandma and my grandpa talk like this sometimes. Especially when they've had lots of trouble. They try to figure out what they should do. They get upset, and then they calm down. You have these bad times, and you learn what to do. You think about God, how he had his bad times too. My grandpa reminds us of them. He says you should keep thinking of them. You march through life, he says—even though he's in a wheelchair. It's a long time you march, he says, if you're lucky. My sister, she died. She was only 4 ½.”

She had taken a long time saying these words, hesitating between the sentences and stammering. Two or three times, two or three children were tempted at first to snicker but by the time she was quoting her grandfather about the long march telling us that we must make it through life, she had the room quite still. Some faces tightened up. The girl beside her wiped tears from her eyes.

Children are down on their knees, learning to crawl in so very many ways. It often seems they are copying us, learning how to stand right and doing wonderful things that we love. So often, we forget how much evil they have already seen and begun to try to make sense of. Even in the homes most able to support and love them, still this world reveals so much evil which they are learning about and responding to in humble ways. When we are asked by our Lord to be like a child—not to be a child, not to go back, not to think like a child or reason like a child—but to be like a child, we are being asked to get down on her knees and crawl. To look up at a world we do not fully know and to talk with one another—yes, we're adults, yet talking like these children: learning, active, engaged and wondering always about the goodness of God in a world full of fears and dark nights to come. Advent is a watching and waiting time for that spirit. And in that spirit, come and come again to be God's church down on our knees again, playing with what we know and learning from what we do not. In that spirit, we are one.

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