

## **HUSH LITTLE BABY**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

Mother's Day, May 9, 2010

Scripture: John 14:23-29; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

In a small regional hospital that I know, there is an occasional announcement that comes over the PA system. It's not a code blue or an alert to a helicopter trauma case arriving. It's actually something quite different. And it comes several times a day, usually, when you least expect.

The announcement is actually a song. It's Brahms' "Lullaby," and whenever it is played it announces that there has just been a birth in the hospital.

If you think about it, it's a very nice, a very encouraging thing to do. With all that goes on in a hospital, day in and day out, the injuries from accidents, the heart attacks brought into the emergency room, the triage, the breaks and burns... it is a reassuring thing to hear a lullaby, and to know that life is beginning for a little one even as life is ending for others.

Mothers... and dads, for that matter, have for time immemorial used a lullaby as a means of calming a child, helping an infant fall asleep, cradled in loving arms. There are African lullabies, Asian lullabies, French lullabies.

One of the most familiar is the lullaby, "Hush little baby." You know how it goes,

Hush little baby, don't say a word,  
Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird,  
And if that mockingbird won't sing,  
Mama's gonna buy you a diamond ring.  
If that diamond ring turns brass,  
Mama's gonna buy you a looking glass.

And so it goes, on down the line, verse after verse, momma buys all kinds of things to calm and appease and quiet her baby.

I did discover on the Internet that there is a "daddy's" version of the same lullaby.

Hush little baby, don't say a word,  
Daddy's gonna buy you a mockingbird,  
And if that mockingbird won't sing,  
Daddy's gonna buy you a diamond ring.

Well, regardless of who does the buying, it's still a sweet tune whose somnolent and repetitive notes create a mantra that puts children into a trusting frame of mind and quiets their spirit.

Somehow I could not help but think of the same effect occurring in that Farewell Discourse from which we read last Sunday and again today. We are, of course, drawing farther away from Easter and closer to Pentecost. And this Thursday marks the Feast of

the Ascension, that day when we remember the risen Lord finally departed this earthly coil once and for all until that time when he comes again in glory at the end of time and history.

But in the meantime, we remember Jesus' final discourse to his disciples in John's gospel. It's a long dinner speech, five full chapters really, with none of the other gospel writers remembering such a long winded and circuitous commentary. But the Jesus of John's gospel has a lot to say on his final night, and the style and cadence of it is repetitive and somnolent.

*Whoever believes in me [he said] believes not in me, but in him who sent me...<sup>1</sup>  
Now these things I have said unto you while I am still with you. But the Comforter,  
which is the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all  
things, and bring all things to your remembrance whatsoever I have said unto you.  
Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives, give I unto  
you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.<sup>2</sup>*

Jesus is trying to prepare his disciples for his final departure, and he does so in quiet, reflective, confident and reassuring terms.

In these recent weeks after Easter we have remembered the ethereal appearances of a risen Lord who is not exactly flesh and blood, and yet not all spirit either, sort of a spiritual body, I suppose. He has breakfast with the disciples, shows them his hands and his side to touch as evidence. But elsewhere he forbids Mary Magdalene from touching him, because he has not yet ascended to the Father, he says. And yet, the gospel writers are at pains to tell us that Jesus comes to the disciples and is present to them in some more substantive way than as a phantom, some *far more* substantive way than simply memory or wishful thinking.

So in these last two weeks, we have read stories preparing us for Jesus' absence, for the withdrawal from that season when Jesus was more immediately present with his disciples. He wants to point us to the Holy Spirit, in this Farewell Discourse, and to reassure us of the nearness of God in our world even if he is not immediately present in it.

I think of the circling, repetitious and carefully phrased way that Jesus speaks as being almost hypnotic, certainly relaxing, a kind of lullaby that Jesus offers the Twelve who are nearest to him. "Little children" he calls them at one point in his words to them, "Little children, I am with you only a little longer."

And the cadence and the words and the promises and the simplicity of the thoughts are repeated again and again, ever so softly, ever so reassuringly, like the words Mother sings as we rest in her arms,

Hush little baby, don't say a word,  
Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird,  
And if that mockingbird won't sing,  
Mama's gonna buy you a diamond ring.

And yes, I know, there's no promise of a diamond ring or a mockingbird or a looking glass or a billy goat in Jesus' words... but there is the promise that there will be a Comforter, whom the Father will send, the Holy Spirit, and he will bring peace, peace not as the world gives, so... "Do not let your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."

That's not easy, of course. Not being troubled, not being a bit afraid in a world like this, a world where Jesus seems far away at times.

Last weekend we might have had a very sad and frightening Sunday morning after a very dangerous and potentially terrible Saturday night in Times Square. I keep wondering what it is about the human heart and mind that people can come to have such deep and enflamed hatred toward other human beings that they would go halfway across the world to obtain training on how to become agents of chaos and mayhem; learn how to make a car into an incendiary explosive device, and leave that car in front of a theater where children and their parents and street vendors eeking out a living, and passers by, tourists from around the world would be killed, or burned, or injured in the blast. Never mind the ineptitude of the perpetrator, it's the intent that I find hard to understand. What is it that a person suffers in life that their thoughts turn to such acts of despair?

And how do they suppose that such a thing will make the world a better place for themselves or for their children? How might such a desperate act move forward anything worth honoring or respecting or valuing?

How have such acts made Iraq a better place, for instance? Because the Iraqis go through this sort of thing all the time. Market places, villages, mosques blown up.

How has this made Afghanistan a better place, for all the lives that have been lost on both sides?

I am wondering how the people who died in Athens this week in a fire set by angry protestors served any purpose other than to bring greater suffering to a Greek nation that is already suffering a great deal.

How do you rest easy in a world like ours today? How do you keep from being anxious and fretful, angry and fearful in a time like this?

I know that these are naïve questions, but the world is a bit out of control these days, and somebody needs to be asking some *basic* and *fundamental* questions about the nature of our humanity and where all this violence takes us.

*Peace I leave with you, Jesus said, my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives give I unto you, let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.*

And if it's not the world that makes us anxious, then maybe it's our own families. Surely, even on Mother's Day we can acknowledge that family life is sometimes very anxiety provoking.

Anne Lamott, writes so poignantly about her own life as a single mother raising her teenage son, Sam. In her book **Plan B**, she describes the tensions that are sometimes there for her and Sam as a family.

I'm not sure how this happened [she writes] but Sam has become a young man, who needs to shave, who will be driving soon. Thirteen was shocking enough, but compared with fourteen, it was training-wheels adolescence, a much cuter sullenness... I can glimpse the man he is becoming. He's handsome, stylish, lean. He has great hair, and insists on getting haircuts in San Francisco now, instead of the twelve dollar cuts down the street.

[He's] the sweet person he's always been... but periodically Phil stops by for a visit, the alien who has chosen Sam as a host body.

Phil is hairy and scary and awful. He was here yesterday. When I asked Sam to take his dishes to the sink, Phil slid into the space behind his eyes and looked at me with patronizing disbelief – as if he'd heard wrong - as if on a whim I had just asked him to go fetch some rock from the quarry for me.<sup>3</sup>

Lamott tells the story of how, one day, she and Sam were on their way to Sam's friend Anthony's house for Sam to spend the night. Sam was angry because Anne would be picking him up in the morning and taking him to church. And Sam hates church. On the way to Anthony's house, Sam was sullen and withdrawn. There was lots of sighing and silence. Sam was frustrated at his mother's unwillingness to compromise on the matter. He had to go to church and he knew it. But it didn't keep him from resisting.

When they got to Anthony's house, the sullenness, of Phil, took over and Sam got out of the car, slammed the door and didn't say goodbye to his mother. Anne writes:

I lost it, and I shouted for him to come back and get in the car. He couldn't believe his ears. He gave me a withering look that turned to desperation, "No, no, please," he begged.

"Get in the car," I said. "You do *not* slam the door and walk away from me."

I made him get in the car and close the door, and I drove away. He was furious and teary. He tried begging for mercy. I hate that.

They pulled over at a cul de sac at the end of the road and Lamott got out of the car and said,

"You will not treat me like [dirt]. I'm going to sit by that log. When you're ready to apologize with a contrite heart, you can get out of the car.

I went and sat down against an ancient fallen log, and smoldered.

I could feel Sam's eyes drilling into my head. I felt wrong, and wronged.

I... wanted to ask, “What on earth did Mary do when Jesus was thirteen?” ...even good old Jesus was thirteen once, a human thirteen year old.

...I thought of Sam’s most infuriating habits; how snotty he can act, how entitled, his clothes and towels always dropped on the floor; the way he answers the phone, sounding like Henry Kissinger and only pretending to take down messages.

What a mess we are, I thought.

...After a while I heard the car door open. ...I heard his footsteps approach, and I sat up. ...He sighed and began to speak, “I’m sorry I was such a [jerk],” he said. “Okay?”

I shook my head and sighed, “I’m sorry I was such a [jerk], too.”

He sat down in the dirt, and we talked in a stilted unhappy way. I practiced being right for a while, and he was sullen; then I practiced being kind. Things improved a bit. My friend Mark, who works with church youth groups, reminded me recently that Sam doesn’t need me to correct his feelings. He needs me to listen, to be clear and fair and parental. But most of all he needs me to be alive in a way that makes him feel he will be able to bear adulthood, because he is terrified of death, and that includes growing up to be one of the stressed out, gray faced adults he sees rushing around him.

“Now can we go back to Anthony’s?” he asked, petulantly. We got up and walked to the car. I draped my arm around his shoulders like a sweater.<sup>4</sup>

Let not your hearts be troubled, Jesus said, neither let them be afraid. And we all know from experience that that’s easier said than done.

So we do what we can wherever we can to try to relieve the anxiety of living. We pray for peace and we pray for our families. We protest the mistreatment of immigrants and the injustice of laws that rely on racial profiling. We remember the names of fallen soldiers each week so that someone besides their families will give thanks for their lives. We support our kids silk-screening t-shirts to raise money for Haiti earthquake relief. We plant some flowers and water the tulips in our window box, and while it doesn’t offset the violence done to the environment by an oil spill in the Gulf, it’s still a small mark in favor of the greening of the earth. We do what we can, and trust that between whatever we can do, and all that God can do, we finally have to accept the fact that God is God, and we are not, and God’s plans and abilities are better and greater than ours, and all the worry in the world does not help. Whereas sometimes faith does help in some measurable or immeasurable way.

Which is maybe why, among the last things Jesus said to his disciples before he left them once and for all, was to say, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Neither let them be afraid, because ultimately God's promise to us is that God will bring about the peace and security and assurance that the world cannot give. "Peace, I leave with you," Jesus said, "my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives, give I unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled. Neither let them be afraid."

You've heard me tell this story before, but it does me good to tell it again from time to time. It's a true story about Angelo Roncalli, better known as Pope John XXIII. And it is a story about not being anxious, about finally letting go and letting God be God.

After his devotions at night, when Pope John had had a particularly worrisome and difficult day, and after he had prayed for the church and all the nations at war, and all the leaders of the world, and interceded for the poor, the sick, and the dying, Pope John said that as he rose from his kneeler having called to mind all these monumental concerns, he would feel anxious, so he would ask himself the question, "Who runs the church, Angelo, you or the Holy Spirit?" And the answer that would always come back to him were God's words even more than his own, "Go and sleep, Angelo, go and sleep."

Hush little baby, don't say a Word,  
God is going to keep God's word.

Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

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<sup>1</sup> John 12:44 NRSV

<sup>2</sup> John 14:25-27 KJV

<sup>3</sup> Anne Lamott, **Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith**. New York: Riverhead Books, 2005. 193-194

<sup>4</sup> p. 100-102