

Steve Jungkeit
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Psalm 133; Zechariah 10: 6-8; Philippians 4: 4-7
June 13, 2021

A Story of Departures and Returns

During the colder months of spring, an interesting drama took place behind the parsonage, one that came to symbolize something of what I've felt as a minister during the pandemic. One chilly evening, Rachael and I watched as a red fox sniffed around the edges of the barn, and then soon squeezed into a hole beneath the base of the structure. There have, in the past, been possums living there off and on, and so we imagined the fox had gone hunting. We were surprised when, several moments later, first one, then two, then three, four, and five tiny gray baby foxes emerged from the hole. The mother fox stood in the driveway, and they all gathered around her, drinking her milk. In time, she shooed them away and stood off at a distance while they piled on one another, and chased each other in the small grassy patch there by the barn. It was a scene that was replayed most every morning, and every evening as well. Out they would come, with the mother regally standing guard a few paces away. If we emerged from the house, she would trot into the brush while the babies stood still, or scrambled for cover beneath the barn.

For a month or two, they became our honored guests. We felt glad to have them there, amused to see their antics every day. Once, one of the young foxes tried to drag an old yard toy underground with it, but it didn't fit. Other times the mother fox would become exasperated, shooing her children away when she didn't feel like feeding them anymore. There was also, I should note, a grislier aspect of their residency as well. Some mornings we would see the remains of a bird, or a squirrel, laying in the grass by the barn. One night, Augie was awakened by what seemed like a terrible screaming somewhere in the back of the house. In the morning, we found a pile of feathers scattered across the back lawn. Grisly or not, they were charming guests, and we hoped they would stay a while.

Late in April, we realized it had been a few days since we had seen the foxes. Initially, we thought our schedules may have been misaligned. Perhaps they emerged before we got up those mornings, or after we had settled down for dinner. In time, though, it was clear they had moved on, leaving an empty barn, and an empty yard. We weren't heartbroken or anything. But we were a little wistful. They were very nearly the only guests we had had in nearly 13 months of pandemic living.

Just this week, we were making dinner, and we were looking out the back kitchen window. A young fox trotted out of the brush out back. It wasn't quite full grown, and so it must have been one of the young babies we had last seen two months earlier. It poked around the garage, and then the barn, before finally disappearing into its old den for the night. One, at least, had found its way back, and seemed content to stay, at least for a while. What had it learned out there, I wondered? How had it changed? And what was it that made it return?

I share that story because it feels like a miniature version of all that's happened to us this past year. Say the Meetinghouse is somehow akin to the barn behind the parsonage. So ok, they're very different structures, but both function as a kind of protective enclave – one for the animal kingdom and the other for us. Within this space, here, we have felt sheltered and nurtured, and many of our needs have been met and fulfilled here. When a relationship needed to be formalized with vows, we gathered here. When lives came to an end, this is the place we brought our mourning. When we wished to bless a newborn child, we did within these walls. When we required a place to ponder something, often this was it. When it came time to mark the changes in the year – Christmas and Easter, Thanksgiving and Lent, the Meetinghouse was a part of it. When we needed encouragement, or solace, or to feel the support of others, we did it here. This room, both beautiful and simple, has gathered our lives.

But it's done more than that too. For some of us, this is the only space in our lives in which we regularly mixed with children. For others of us, it was the only space where we could get to know older adults. For some of us, it's the only space in our lives where we were invited to make music, not as a passive observer but as an active participant – where else are you encouraged to sing along to anything? There's more too: this is just about the only public space I know in which a television doesn't feature prominently, and so it is mercifully free of advertising and images designed to sell. It's a space in which something that transcends us is regularly addressed, something that extends beyond our material lives. Here is a space in which you're invited to consider. Just...consider. Some among us have been doing those things here for a few years, but some of you have been marking significant events in your lives here, in this Meetinghouse, for the better part of your sojourn on this planet. So it's not an exaggeration or an embellishment to say that this has been a space of profound nurture for all of us. I don't know that any of us necessarily feel that significance every moment we're here, but taken cumulatively, each of those small activities is a way of suggesting that, like those foxes behind the parsonage, we have found, each in our own way, sustenance for our lives within this space.

But then, like the foxes, we disbursed. The foxes had things to learn, important things if they were to survive, and I suppose we did as well. They learned how to hunt and find food. They learned how to create shelter and protection for themselves, and far more than that I'm sure. I wonder if the same is true of us. I wonder what we've learned in the time since we disbursed from this space. I wonder about the ways in which we've changed over the past 15 months. And I wonder if some of those changes might actually be good and necessary for us. Who have we become in our wilderness wanderings, in our exile, in our separation one from another? I'd like to take a stab at addressing some of the possible implications of the past year for our individual lives and for our community. I'll do so in the form of questions, recognizing that each of us has had our own experience and reaction to all that has occurred over the past year.

Here's my first question: How, I wonder, has the pandemic changed our relationship to the environment, and the natural world? There's evidence that this and future pandemics have to do with the proximity of human and animal life in tightly enclosed spaces. What has the pandemic done to our understanding of the way animals are raised for consumption, to say nothing of the purchasing of animal flesh in our supermarkets? Given what we've now lived through, and given what we now understand about the factory farming of animals and how damaging it is to the environment, I wonder if our dietary habits have changed at all. And I wonder if we sense a

greater urgency about the precarity of the planet, given the way one tiny airborne virus interrupted the entire life cycle of the globe.

Another question: how have the past 15 months changed our relationship to our own bodies, and our own health? It's no secret that while the United States is the wealthiest country on the planet, it is also one of the least healthy, which made us uniquely vulnerable this past year. How did the pandemic change your relationship to your body? Do you think about exercise and nutrition at all differently? Do you think about sleep and rest at all differently? While those may seem like questions better posed by the medical community, I'll simply note that when bodies break down, it's ministers, among others, who wind up showing up at the hospital for a visit. As often as not, afflictions of the spirit, like depression or anxiety, are connected to bodily well-being. Questions of bodily well-being, then, pertain to what we do in churches. How has the pandemic changed your relationship to bodily health?

Here's yet another question: how has the pandemic changed our relationship to work? Has it helped us to recognize the ways in which we're truly dependent upon the labor of others – in more than a sentimental way? Hearts on our lawns and thank you signs posted in windows are good things, but does that appreciation include a willingness to ensure the well-being of those whose labor we depend upon? Has the pandemic made us any more willing to pay more for goods and services, such that the true value of labor is accounted for? Put differently, has it made us any more committed to the well-being of low and medium wage workers who stock our shelves and deliver our packages? Those folks have helped get us through the pandemic. Has it changed our relationship to labor?

Then this question: how has the pandemic changed our understanding of race? It was the hideous nature of George Floyd's murder that captured the world's attention, but no doubt much of that was the result of the pause the pandemic had created in our lives. The pause, the interruption, allowed the horror of that scene – which was not unique – to truly settle in. Have we learned to see any better as a result of that pause? And also this: the virus hit black and brown communities at a far greater rate than it did predominantly white communities like our own. The word apocalypse, in its most literal sense, means “an unveiling.” Has this past year not been just that – an apocalypse, an unveiling of the ways life and death function in our society? How has the pandemic changed our understanding of race – to our own white privilege, and to our sense of responsibility to our neighbors?

But another, deeper, question begs for a response as well: how has the pandemic changed our relationship to God? I'm not talking about your understanding of God, or your thoughts about what or who God might be. I'm talking about your – our – relationship to God. I'm curious if you've prayed more than you might otherwise have done. I'm interested in whether you've sensed, from time to time, the peace that passes all understanding. I'm wondering if you've felt an encouraging hope when you've needed it most, and I'm interested to know if perhaps, just perhaps, you've felt the presence of God meeting you where you most need it. I've wondered if the way we've each been stripped of many resources we take for granted has opened a place in our hearts to perceive the hand of God in a way we wouldn't otherwise have been open to.

One of the things I'll remember most about the pandemic winter is rereading Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. I've grown jaded about the musical, but the book stands as a massive preachment. There's a scene in the first half of the novel where the orphan child Cosette is sent by her wicked caretakers into the winter night to fetch a pail of water with scarcely a frock to cover her skin. She's malnourished and weak, the walk to the well is long – more than a mile – and the darkness consumes her. The pail she hauls is nearly as big as her. Just getting to the well taxes her strength to the utmost. Cosette then fills the pail, shivering and cold, only to find that it is too heavy for her to move it far. She can go only a few steps before having to rest, and it she begins to despair that she will ever make it back. But in the darkness, a stranger's hand suddenly grips the bucket beside her own, removing the better part of its weight. She hadn't sensed anyone near, and so she is surprised when the weight suddenly lifts. The hand, of course, belongs to her benefactor, Jean Valjean, but in Hugo's novel it also represents the hand of God, silently helping the struggling child. It's a beautiful scene, and it's come to feel like a symbol of what we've experienced this past year, during our own long journey to the well and back.

Has it not been the hand of God that has been there all along, helping us to carry our own heavy burdens? Has there not been a stranger silently walking beside us all this time, especially when the way has been dark? Have we not, at certain crucial moments, experienced a lightening of the load that we hadn't anticipated, a lightening that we couldn't have seen coming? I could list half a dozen times, and maybe more, when I've felt that hand beside my own as I've hauled my own bucket. I'm guessing you could list just as many, or maybe more, if you cared to. Sometimes it was a song that caught me just so. Sometimes it was a story that stirred me enough to care. Sometimes it was watching how ordinary people were doing their part to save someone's day, and sometimes it was just a gentle assurance, born from who knows where, that even if the worst should befall us, somehow we would still be ok. You can explain such things in a lot of different ways, and faith doesn't have a corner on those explanations. But I'm content to call it God. And I'm content to breathe a prayer of thanks most nights. A lot of nights, it's all I can muster – just a sigh breathed into the folds of a pillow as I drift toward sleep. Thank you, for helping to carry the load.

You'll have wondered if I've ignored the Scripture lessons I chose for today, but I haven't. They each speak to the power of dwelling together as a community. "I will signal for them and gather them in," says the prophet Zechariah. "How good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity," the Psalmist writes. In our absence from one another, that hasn't ceased to be true. It's been so all along. I'll be interested to learn what the contours of this community shall be as we reemerge from this experience. I'll be curious to know if there are some who find their way to a community like ours after being absent for a long time, or if some might find their way into such a place for the first time in their lives. I suppose I'll also be curious to know if there are some who, for whatever reason, won't find their way back. No doubt we won't be the same as we were before. But our community has remained intact. We have remained strong. And it is precisely as the Psalmist says: whether scattered or drawn together, we are blessed to have one another. I hope there have been times during this whole experience that you've felt that. I have. Your encouragement has meant the world – to me, to all of us.

Many of us arriving here today are a little like that young fox returning to its den. We're sniffing around, wondering: is it safe? Is it the same as it was? Can I still find nurture and sustenance

here? Will others come back as well? Time will tell, I suppose. But I hope we each wind up doing something of what that backyard guest did this past week: getting the lay of the land, and then digging down into a once and future home.

Welcome back. I'm so glad you're here once again.