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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Mark 8: 22-26; I Corinthians 13: 9-12
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Deceptive Divines:
 Learning to See Through the Mud

There's a curious scene that unfolds at the end of a novel called *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, one I've never managed to forget. It was written by Jose Saramago, a Portuguese recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, and who, despite writing a novel about Jesus, maintained some strong objections to religion over the course of his life. In the scene, Jesus is struggling to comprehend why God the Father would ever need or want him to undergo crucifixion. What is it about that bloody spectacle that God the Father somehow desires, Jesus wants to know, and why should, he, Jesus submit to it? Throughout the novel, God the Father shows up from time to time as a walking, talking character, and so a conversation unfolds between the Father and Son. The Father rows Jesus out onto the Lake of Galilee, and there labors to explain that it is only through a sacrificial death that a new religion, soon to be called Christianity, can ever gain a foothold in the world's imagination. As proof, God the Father begins to list, in alphabetical order, the names of all those who will, as a result of Jesus's sacrifice, themselves choose to undergo a bloody torment for the sake of this new and emerging religion. It's because of you, the Father says, that they'll be willing to submit, to suffer, and to die. It's because of you that they'll build their churches and shrines and holy sites. Each death shall be a means of cementing the status of this new religion, and of standing against the false god, the god of death and destruction, who the Father says is yet to come.

And so God the Father begins in the A's, listing the names and the methods of each martyr, along with the means of their execution: Adalbert of Prague, Adrian, Afra of Augsburg, Agapitus of Praeneste, Agnes of Rome, Agricola of Bologna, Agueda of Sicily, and on and on, then into the Bs, the Cs, the Ds, all the way up to the end of the alphabet. It's a lot of names, a lot of bodies, a lot of lives. But then a strange thing happens: as God the Father unleashes his litany, a mist encircles the boat, and a voice speaks through the mist. "Perhaps this God and the one to come are the same god," the voice says.¹ The conversation stops for a moment, and then God the Father simply takes up his litany again, continuing where he left off.

That voice interrupting God the Father's litany of horror is the most important event in the entire novel. It lasts but an instant. But it suggests that there is a higher authority, as yet unheard and little understood, who stands over and against the figure in the boat who passes for God. It suggests the possibility that beyond the catalogue of atrocities performed over the centuries in the name of God, there exists another, a God beyond God, who has little to do with the blood and violence unleashed by the deity in the boat.

But the voice in the mist implies more still. It suggests the propensity among people of faith throughout the centuries to misidentify the voice of God, to mistake the fellow in the boat as a figure worthy of worship and love. It suggests the burden of Christian history, the burden of Christian theology, which, as Saramago informs us, is strewn with atrocities committed in the name of a loving God. How often throughout the history of the Church have leaders been

¹ Saramago, Jose, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1994), pgs. 328-329.

listening to the fellow in the boat? How often, as theologians have written the name “God,” has it been the fellow in the boat standing behind that name, rather than whatever, Whoever, it might be that speaks from the mist? How often have preachers and teachers done the bidding of the figure in the boat, rather than listening to that mysterious, destabilizing voice in the mist?

Saramago’s scene is a reminder that what passes for God, what speaks for God, what we imagine to be God, may be something smaller, and more destructive, than we had imagined. But it’s also a reminder that, however tarnished and damaged the name of God might be, there exists the tantalizing possibility of a God beyond God, a God other than the God in the boat who feeds on the body and blood of his adherents.

Saramago’s boat scene has asserted itself forcefully, at least for me, over the last several months. I confess that I thought of that scene earlier in the summer when tear gas and sound grenades were used to clear the way for a photo op of the President holding a Bible. It was an act performed at the behest of the God in the boat, but not a God I wish to recognize, still less worship or love.

But I’ve sensed the God in the boat in other moments recently as well. I’ve been reading a great deal about the history of New England, and how the Puritans, to whom we owe our very existence as a congregation, built the slave trade even in the earliest days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. A simple statement that I encountered from none other than John Winthrop, the Colony’s Governor, caused me to wince, and then to wonder how deeply embedded the God in the boat is even here, even in New England, even in Connecticut. Before sharing the statement that gave me pause, however, let me set the stage by telling you just a little about Winthrop, and about the Colony that he founded.

For those who may not know or remember, it was John Winthrop who gave us what *Time* magazine once called the greatest sermon ever preached in America, “A Model of Christian Charity,” delivered in 1630 while still on board the ship *Arbella* as it crossed the Atlantic. In it, Winthrop argued that the forthcoming Puritan colony would be a city set upon a hill, a model community of mutual love and affection, whereby everyone shall look to the needs of others before themselves. Politicians quote that sermon with some regularity, as do ministers and theologians. I confess that when new members are learning about our church, I often quote Winthrop when I speak about the need for a public theology, one unafraid to confront the issues of the day, to become the city upon the hill. Our own church was born from Winthrop’s spiritual heirs, and we’ve been shaped ever since, for better and for worse, by the theology of our Puritan forebears.

What I never knew was that even as the Puritans were settling Massachusetts, another group of Puritans was busy settling a Caribbean island called Providence Island, intended to be a parallel community to the one in Massachusetts. While that settlement didn’t last very long, it was the first in a long series of alliances between the Puritans in New England and an English presence throughout the Caribbean Islands. That presence in the Caribbean had everything to do with the slave trade. Indeed, it was trade throughout the Caribbean that first sustained the colony in Massachusetts Bay, and then enriched it. Barbados, in particular, came to play an outsized role in the formation of the Puritan experiment in New England. Barbados is the easternmost of the Caribbean islands, and thus the island closest to Africa. It was claimed by the British in 1627, but by 1636 it had become a slave society. It wasn’t long before it became a depository for kidnapped Africans, who were used to turn Barbados into a monoculture, growing sugar. Sugar was the most labor intensive of any crop, and Africans were routinely worked to death within the space of about ten years on the sugar plantations of Barbados. It was more cost

efficient to work Africans to death and then to replace them with a continual flow of more enslaved people than it was to preserve and extend the lives of those who labored there. Barbados is about the size of Queens. But it took in more enslaved people than all of the United States.

Meanwhile, the island became entirely dependent upon the importation of food grown elsewhere in order to fuel that enormous labor force. It was agriculture grown in New England that fed the planters and the enslaved, allowing the unceasing and relentless production of sugar to continue. From the second half of the 17th century and all through the 18th century and into the 19th as well, New England shipped fish and pork and other food to Barbados. Barbados, in turn, would send back molasses and refined sugar. That would then be converted to rum, which would be sent to Africa in order to barter for human lives. Once a ship was fully stocked, it would then head to Barbados, or one of the other English controlled islands. I'll share that story in more detail one day soon, because it pertains to how Old Lyme came to thrive in 17th century New England.

For now, I simply want to note what John Winthrop wrote in a journal entry of 1648. Amidst complaints about New England being a poor and barren place, inhospitable to English settlers, and amidst descriptions of the beaver and fish trade that had been established with native peoples, he wrote this: "*It pleased the Lord* to open us a trade to Barbados and other islands in the West Indies."²

"It pleased the Lord." Let the words roll around your mind for a moment. What was it that pleased the Lord? That a group of struggling New England colonists would now prosper as the result of that trade route? That kidnapped Africans should be put to work on sugar plantations in Barbados? That New England should soon become entirely dependent upon a slave economy? That plantation slavery should establish itself so soon, and so fully, within the economic life of the Americas? That a few English transplants would soon thrive, while hundreds of thousands of Africans were worked to death on sugar plantations, which, make no mistake, were death camps? What precisely about that arrangement was pleasing to the Lord?

But the theologian in me wishes to ask a different question: which Lord was it that Winthrop imagined was pleased? If such a God, such a Lord, was indeed pleased to open a trade route between Puritan New England and the slave colony of Barbados, what are we to say about that God? Was it the same Lord that sent the Puritans on their errand into the wilderness in the first place? Was it the same Lord about whom he preached in his Sermon aboard the *Arbella*? The same Lord that led the Puritans to establish worshiping communities in places like Boston, and eventually, Old Lyme? God help us, was it the same Lord that we worship on Sunday mornings, in a more or less unbroken line of succession ever since the 17th century?

Or was it perhaps the God in the boat?

Say it was. Where does that leave us? What does that say about those of us who continue to gather in the name of God, those of us who continue to read the same Bible read by Winthrop and his shipmates, those of us who can't help but address ourselves to God in song and in prayer? Are we too under the spell of the God in the boat? Or have we learned to listen carefully in the mist, to that mysterious and alluring alternative voice, speaking a different truth? Might that voice still be available to us, and might it help us to right some of the wrongs inflicted by the fellow in the boat? Where do we turn for such wisdom? Where do we go in order to

² Warren, Wendy, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America*, (New York: Liverlight Publishing Company, 2016), pg. 50.

apprehend such truths, spoken in whispers, rumors, and shards of memory? Where shall we turn?

I confess that in preparing for this morning, this is the turn that gave me difficulty. Initially, my instinct was to marshal the best theological resources that I knew. I might have turned to Paul Tillich's "Protestant Principle," where all that is considered sacred or divine is subjected to continual scrutiny and revision. Or I might have called forth another favorite, John D. Caputo, and his helpful notion of a "religion without religion," using the most vital pieces within a religious tradition to deconstruct the confining and deforming accretions that occur within that same religion. I thought of turning to some feminist theologians, who level powerful and persuasive critiques against the patriarchal God, the God in the boat. I thought of turning to the prophets, who well understood the necessity of criticizing religion in the name of religion, or to Moses, who understood the need to guard against the worship of golden calves in religious communities, even and especially when those communities still exert influence 400 years later. They all present noble and helpful guidance for negotiating the quandary of devils who pass themselves off as gods.

In the end, I found myself turning toward something that I hope is softer, and a little more pastoral. What I've laid out for you this morning is a problem that's real, and one that we'll always need to grapple with at some level. But in the midst of a global pandemic, it feels cruel, and maybe mean, to suggest that when we reach for God, for the divine, for the trust and assurance that we do sometimes feel from something beyond us, that it might all just be an elaborate ruse, a case of mistaken identity, a brutish fiction spun by the God in the boat. That's not what I believe, and I don't want you to leave today without some assurance that the voice speaking from the mist, however mysterious, is available to us.

And so it is that I come late to my text. It's the story of Jesus giving sight to a man who was blind. His sight is restored in stages. In the version of the story we heard, Jesus puts his own saliva on the man's eyes initially, while a different version, found in John, has Jesus making a paste that he rubs on the man's eyes. Initially the man merely sees the forms of life, but he does not see, not fully, until Jesus intervenes again, at which point he is given sight.

Let's say that man is each of us. Let's say that when it comes to questions of God, we're most of us stone cold blind. Let's say that because of that blindness, we have an all too human tendency to follow the God in the boat, or simply the deposit of historical tradition. Let's say, let's confess, that we're prone to it every bit as much as Winthrop, every bit as much as those who continue to misuse religion today. Let's say we're all born blind.

But let's go further. Let's say that the mud smeared upon the man's eyes is the muck and mire of history. Let's say the mud, strangely, enables him to see human forms for the first time, to see people, however dimly, after a lifetime of blindness. Let's say the mud, the muck, the mire, the stuff that makes us tremble and weep, is what helps us to see human lives that we've never seen before, even if imperfectly. Sometimes, in other words, we need someone to smear mud on our eyes. (That is, by the way, why we maintain partnerships in Green Grass and Haiti, in Palestine and Africa – we need to grapple with the mud of settler colonial history if we are to achieve any kind of wholeness.) We need one like Jose Saramago to help us reckon with the shadow side of Christian faith. We need Winthrop's casual mention of the Lord's gladness to discern the monstrous uses of religion, and to begin to see the human forms behind that utterance, heretofore concealed from sight. In truth, sometimes that's all we perceive for a long time – the vague traces of insight, the dim outline of a solid form. Sight, and insight, are like that. Most often, as the Apostle Paul affirms, we see through a glass darkly, the glass of our eyes

smearred with mud. Let's affirm that we need Jesus to smear mud on our eyes if we are ever to gain true sight, true insight.

But let us, finally, affirm this. If we can withstand the mud, which is acutely uncomfortable, and if we can learn to see through the mud to the human forms who once were hidden, there comes into focus another form, this one more distinct. This figure is the one whose hands have touched our eyes, whose voice has cut through our blindness, and whose presence invites a wholeness and a healing that we yearn for with all of our being. This figure is in love with humanity, with you, with me, and with all the lowly and shapeless forms too often concealed from our sight. It is a figure dark in complexion, gentle in spirit, who offers the saint and the sinner a grace that none of us, finally, deserves. It is a figure who has wept alongside the castaways, who has carried the burdens of the lost, the displaced, the forlorn, the blinded. In his voice there is strength. In his touch, there is tenderness. In his presence there is visionary insight. He's been there all along. Blind though we are, he's been there. Eyes covered in mud, he's been there.

And now it's you, and it's me, and our eyes are still shut tight. The healer touches our eyes once more. We wait a beat, hoping that it's safe to look.

Now look. What do you see? Can you see him?