

the Rev. Dr. Paul Tellström
“Nibbled to Death by Ducks”

Irvine United Congregational Church
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1 Peter 4: 12; 5: 6-8
Matthew 6: 25-34

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I am off lectionary this week. It is the story of the beheading of John the Baptist from the Gospel of Mark. Since we just had the beheading of Goliath by David, I felt that two decapitations in a month was at least one too many.

I have also been feeling the cumulative stresses and strains of this recession with all that entails. I am constantly reminded of the persistent, sharp cultural divide in our country that sets us on opposite sides. I don't like how the dominant religious voice has framed what it means to be a Christian in America; it is not something I recognize as “Christian,” at all.

Leave the “head on a platter” story for another day. We are living in a prolonged, difficult and uncertain time, and it is affecting us, each in different ways. My family is affected by it—is yours? There is news this week about University salary cuts that must affect some of you, and I know that others of you have either lost your jobs or have been put in the terrible position of having to let people go from theirs. We have watched property values go down at the same time we have witnessed our own state government become incapable of creating a budget. There are health insurance issues, education issues, civil rights issues, infrastructure issues, ethical and moral issues; all compounded by the financial crisis in the world. Certainly there must be personal and relational concerns going on in our closest circles as a result? God forbid we should be dealing with illnesses.

Is it any surprise that people are worried? Do you feel a certain stress that follows you around—or are you seeing it in the faces of people you know and love? Can you name a particular worry, or is it all wrapped up in the collective unease that is present in today's world? I become aware of my own stress when I try to read: No focus! I suddenly realize I have read five pages and I don't have any idea what was on them. Does that happen to some of you?

Today's scriptures address worry. The writer of *1 Peter* is talking to a church community where people are beginning to be persecuted at a time when the world appears to be unraveling. He says, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to *you*.” The writer goes on to talk about how people need to discipline themselves to be alert because evil is happening in the world. The translation you have this morning goes so far as to personify that evil.

For the community of Peter, there was a longing for more stable times. There was a constant question of “What next?” for his community as it faced persecution.

I think there is a question of “What next?” for us as well. Information is exploding all around us. The Cosmos is much larger than the small, flat world the ancients recorded, and it eludes precise definition. The spiritual glue that holds us together is bigger than the story of the clash of good against evil portrayed in our texts. Evil cannot be personified, nor God described—we simply stand on the ground of all being, and we have no choice but to understand God and our place in all of this in new ways.

We try to honor our own sense of self, family and friends. We want to build a fair and ecologically sustainable system for our world. What we do to support our families and how we choose to live within them in trying times is another focus. And the things that distract us from all of these pursuits are other foci that grab at us. We are like the community to whom the writer of *1 Peter* is speaking—people who wondered about what will happen next, when they were assured that God had called them for a purpose and would “restore, support, strengthen, and establish” them.

Distractions have a way of grabbing our attention. Haven't some of you had the experience of being weighed down by the extraneous "stuff" that pulls us away from communion with the spiritual, personal and familial parts of our lives? Are you feeling it?

About ten years ago, a neighbor of mine met me in the elevator in our condominium, and asked me how things were going. I gave her the usual "thumbs up," but went on to talk about a small annoyance that was pulling me down. She listened, smiled, and said, "We go through life trying to rise above it all, while being nibbled to death by ducks."

I never heard this expression before, but I like it. We are all nibbled to death by ducks while we are just trying to do our best. And the ducks that nibble at us pull us away from the things that are important. Our well-being, our sense of connection to the ground of all being we call, "God," and our desire to function within our families and communities as best as we can.

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Shortly after my neighbor gave me that metaphor, I had a close encounter of the duck kind for real. I had been very serious and dry for some time. I see myself as an optimistic person who likes to laugh, and yet I noticed that I was anything but fun to be around.

I needed to break away and spend a little time catching up with myself and with friends. I decided to start the week by going somewhere to recharge my batteries and lighten up. Something told me when I pulled into the "Hollywood Forever" Cemetery, that I had a ways to go in learning how to lighten up just in my choice of places in which to unwind. But hey, I was here, and it was a park-like setting to walk around in, and it was probably the third time I had visited there.

I remembered where Valentino was buried, so I parked my truck across from a pond with a mausoleum that looked like a Roman temple on a small island in the middle. There were ducks and birds around, and I noticed a big white duck that started to quack, as ducks do. I walked away and into a big building and found Rudolph Valentino. While inside, I was vaguely aware of some noise belonging to wildlife, but didn't pay much attention. When I came out, I walked down to the pond.

I wasn't half way across the grass, when the big white duck, much bigger and noisier than all of the others, came streaking past the other ducks towards me. It was cute. Here was a beautiful white duck that wanted to visit. I knelt down to let him know I was friendly.

That's when I saw that there was something wrong with this duck. He was an *angry* duck. He bit the other ducks in his way, and waddled at me with a vengeance. Here was one bossy duck. I looked at him and saw that this was a duck that had woken up this morning, shook his beak at the heavens and said, "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore." This was a duck whose synapses had fried and fused in a ganglion of unanswered grudges against the world that were all to be personified in *my presence*. I had entered the world of a wrathful and embittered duck, whose sole purpose was to come and seek his revenge upon a world of disappointment by doing me ill.

I am not one to be panic-stricken by poultry. I saw that this was not a duck to be dealt with, so I stood up and walked away towards the pond. After a bit, I stopped to look at some of the monuments. Looking back, the duck was waddling toward me. "Quack, quack, quack," it warned me. I was not to be intimidated by a duck, so I looked some more, then moved on, a little more quickly than I might have walked otherwise. I found Cecil B. DeMille and stopped to pay my respects. Around the reeds came the duck, continuing to quack at me. There was no one else around, and I was beginning to feel persecuted. I moved on, and found Tyrone Power's beautiful monument—a white marble bench with a quotation from Hamlet, "flights of angels sing thee to thy rest." I looked back. The duck was now running with its wings raised.

I walked very quickly back around the pond again until I came to a bridge that led onto the island in the middle. I was far from the persecutory duck now, and so I did something stupid. I let

down my guard and crossed the bridge. As soon as I started, the duck ran as fast as its little webbed feet could carry it. By the time I was on the island, it was approaching the only way on or off; the single bridge. It crossed, stopped at the end, and quacked angrily at me.

It was high noon. The duck and I had a date with destiny. This island was just too small for the two of us. Now, I started to experience a little panic, and I was ashamed of it. Was I really afraid of a duck?

It was like Cerberus, the three-headed hound from hell, guarding the gate to the underworld from all who would try to pass. This was good—behind me was a mausoleum in the ancient Roman style, surrounded by Calla lilies. In front of me was the gateway, and there was Cerberus, the three-headed duck from hell, quacking its warning to the living.

You know, it is good to understand the mythological connections to current situations, but it is not always helpful.

Two workmen were crossing the road. This might be the distance from this lectern to the parking lot outside. The duck was now lowering its head and practically barking at me. I had a decision to make. Should I make a fool of myself and call for help? I've made a fool of myself before, (I might even be doing it right now) so why should this be any different? I called out. In a voice not quite full of conviction, I said, "Excuse me.... there seems to be a problem with this duck." It sounded idiotic even while I was saying it.

I saw that the workmen stopped their conversation and looked at me, but by then I was too busy watching the duck. If it hadn't liked me before, its first hearing of my voice braying across the pond with some complaint about its mental condition only enraged it to the boiling point. It made a kind of hissing sound and ran at me.

Carl told me later that I should always remember that your belt can be a weapon, but the thought of anyone seeing me chasing a duck on an island in a cemetery while brandishing a belt was unthinkable. I thought about kicking it, but I don't think I could kick an animal, even *this* one.

I stood my ground. I wasn't about to give in to a duck. I walked toward it. It made nipping gestures at me while quacking up a storm. I had an audience—the two workmen and a woman with a bicycle, who seemed to have come from nowhere, watched me. They did not help me in any way, but they watched. I walked calmly and resolutely to the bridge, and got about half way across with this duck nipping at me, when I finally lost my temper and turned to the duck and said several things I won't repeat here. Temporarily stunned by my verbiage, it let me get ahead a little before following me back to my truck. I got in and drove away.

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We are all nibbled at by ducks from time to time. So what is the worry that you brought in with you today? Or, is it too complex a mixture, stuffed in a blender along with other worries, and garnished with pieces of what is happening in the world today? There is a Chinese proverb that says, "That the birds of worry and care fly over your head, this you cannot change, but that they build nests in your hair, this you can prevent."

Mary Crowley, a cervical cancer survivor who began a foundation to empower other women, once said during her battle with cancer, "Every evening I turn my worries over to God. He's going to be up all night anyway."

What worry is on your mind? Someone once said, "Today is the tomorrow you worried about yesterday." Was it worth it? We're stronger than we think.

Still, we are all nibbled to death by ducks.

Advertising and marketing invades our privacy at every turn and gives us images that tell us we are too this or too that—our bodies are too large, we need to smell better, our wrinkles need to

be smoothed over, our hair needs to be colored, our whites need to be whiter as do our teeth, and then there are those pop-up ads on the computer for Viagra.

Propositions are devised by special interest groups claiming to “Save our children,” “Preserve our environment,” or, “Protect Marriage,” that have hidden agendas that belie their claims. We are expected to vote our consciences on people and matters that have been packaged and marketed in ways that do not accurately represent what they are about, and again, we are played shamelessly.

The writer of *1 Peter* tells the faithful to be alert for that which tries to pull you away from what is good. In a time of great persecution, the faithful really wondered what would happen next, but were assured that they were called for a purpose, and God would “restore, support, strengthen, and establish them.”

In Matthew’s account of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?”

A key word in this passage is “worry.” The Greek word means *be preoccupied with* or *be absorbed by*. To be preoccupied with the stuff we have grown accustomed to thinking is important is to view life much too narrowly.

Worry and the preoccupation with it, is futile: people desire a long and happy life, but excess concern for it will not lengthen it, nor is it possible to reach out and stop the world from its course. There is a fine but important line between working to resolve a worrisome situation, or even to be the change we want to see in the world; and knowing our human limitations. For peace of mind, resign as general manager of the universe. On the other hand, as congresswoman Pat Schroeder once said, “You can’t wring your hands and roll up your sleeves at the same time.”

I have to remind myself to keep my focus forward. We have to keep at the task of building and maintaining our spiritual, family, and communal lives, and let’s not get nibbled to death by the ducks around our feet.

Being successful is always secondary to being faithful, and this is a time when our successes are being pummeled by what is happening all around us, and it is made evident that being faithful is more important than ever.

Don’t believe the ducks. Don’t give in to that which pulls your focus from the path that you are on. Don’t let fear or anxiety about the future nibble at your heels. “What will happen next?” is a question that rang out among early Christians whose leader had gone on, who were persecuted, and who began to feel the presence of the Spirit among them. For some, it was a fear-filled question, and for others it was a signal that there was a new way of experiencing God that promised hope. Those are the choices. Fear or hope. Don’t be nibbled to death by ducks.

Choose Hope,

tune out the ducks,

and live life. AMEN.

Scripture for Sunday, July 12, 2009

1 Peter 4:12, 5:6-8

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary Evil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.

Matthew 6:25-34

25 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? **26** Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? **27** And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? **28** And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, **29** yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. **30** But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? **31** Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" **32** For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. **33** But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. **34** "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.