

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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Small Wonder

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. – Luke 2:1-20

“I believe in parables,” the author Barbara Kingsolver writes. “I navigate life using stories where I find them, and I hold tight to the ones that tell me new kinds of truth.” She came across one such story back in October 2001, the day that NATO forces started bombing Afghanistan. It was a true story, that she read in a newspaper, and verified later, the story of a little girl from Iran, a sixteen-month old toddler who disappeared from the home of her parents. The family was part of a nomadic tribe, and their home was a yurt, a round tent. The parents were working in the fields one day while a teenaged girl watched the toddler. Just a moment she was distracted and the toddler disappeared. You know how it can happen – in a blink of an eye. It has happened to me. It may have happened to you.

When the parents realized their child was missing they began to search. They scoured their yurt and the compound and the immediate area, but as the obvious explanations were eliminated, they became increasingly desperate. Night fell and the child had not been found. The next day, they organized search parties, which scoured the surrounding region. The toddler was not found. Someone speculated aloud that perhaps a bear had taken the toddler, and was swiftly reprimanded for raising such a horrible prospect.

Another night and some began to give up hope. But not the father or mother, because they had no choice. “We all have done this,” Kingsolver writes. “We bang and bang on the door of hope, and don’t anyone dare suggest there’s nobody home.” On the third day, the father led a search team up to search the mountain caves, five kilometers away. The mother thought he was mad. This was a sixteen month old. How could she have wandered five kilometers on her chubby legs? But they had searched everywhere else. It was worth a try.

At the mouth of one of the caves, they heard a cry, a child’s cry. They entered cautiously, because these caves are home to more than bats. They saw the child, sitting in a shadow, and then the shadow moved. It was a bear, a female bear. The child was alive, unscarred, perfectly well after three days—and well fed, smelling of milk. The bear was nursing the child. Remember: this is a true story. Kingsolver asks:

What does it mean? How is it possible that a huge, hungry bear would take a pitifully small, delicate human child to her breast rather than rip him into food? But she was a mammal, a mother. She was lactating, so she must have had young of her own somewhere—possibly killed, or dead of disease, so that she was driven by the pure chemistry of maternity to take this small, warm neonate to her belly and hold him there, gently. // You could read this story and declare “impossible,” even though many witnesses have sworn it’s true. Or you could read this story and think of how warm lives are drawn to one another in cold places, think of the unconquerable force of a mother’s love, the fact of the DNA code that we share in its great majority with other mammals—you could think of all that and say, Of course the bear nursed the baby. He was crying from hunger, she had milk. Small wonder.¹

“I believe in parables,” Barbara Kingsolver writes. “I navigate life using stories where I find them, and I hold tight to the ones that tell me new kinds of truth. This story of a bear nursing a child is one to believe in. I believe that the things we dread most can sometimes save us.”

Kingsolver, as I said, came across that story on the morning that the NATO bombing campaign of Afghanistan began in the fall of 2001. That bombing campaign was a response to the attacks of Sept 11, and in our time terrorists have become the things of dread which wolves and bears symbolize in fairy tales. The NATO campaign promised peace through the destruction of our enemies, peace through victory, peace through violence. And eighteen years later, after much cost in human lives, money and material, and moral authority, peace remains elusive.

It is an old story: divide the world into evil bears and innocent infants, into us and them, into the virtuous and the corrupt. But perhaps in our time, that old story, the story that still frames so much of the way we see the world, is the worst one to pin our hopes on. We need new stories, stories that remind us that we are all part of one human family, we are all children of God, we are all simultaneously corrupt and virtuous, flawed and glorious, sinners and justified. We need stories that speak of peace through justice, peace through compassion and empathy, peace that comes through breaking the stereotypes, peace that comes in ways as unexpected as a bear nursing a human child, peace that comes in places as unexpected as manger and stable.

This Christmas Eve, as we sing and pray and long for the peace on earth of which the angels sang, let us choose our stories carefully, looking not to the old story of peace through division, but to the ever-new story of the small wonder born in a stable and laid in a manger, on this O so Holy Night. Amen.

¹ “Small Wonder,” Orion Magazine, Summer 2002, www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/113/

