

March 19, 2023
“An Astonishing Thing”

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Psalm 23

John 9:1-41

I thought I would begin with a couple of astonishing things...well at least astonishing within the circle of my own recent experience. Firstly, and I had to pop a photo of it as evidence on Facebook so my Mum could see what I was talking about, happened to be what I wrote as I posted, “the strangest thing.” John and I have lived on Gabriola since June 2013 and suddenly, and unexplainably, a purple crocus has flowered in the moss that counts as our front lawn just off our deck. Quite excited, I dashed over for a closer look and a bit of a conversation with it. “Where did you come from?” I asked it. Of course, the crocus did nothing more than be exactly what it was where it was and happily there without explanation in the simplest of terms. Had it, I wondered, been lurking in the ground for ten years waiting to make an appearance? Perhaps one of you gardeners out there can offer a clue?



The second astonishing thing is a reappearance. The original statue of Buddha that for years had been tucked into a crevice in the rock cliffs on the trail at Descanso Regional Park suddenly disappeared a couple of years ago. It left a sort of bereft space in the walk as I usually did a kind of a check-in as I went by. Last fall or thereabouts, however, someone placed a new Buddha in the crevice and every time John and I did the walk after that there was a moment of revisiting as we went by, and, I will admit, a bit of apprehension until we actually saw it again

just in case it too might have been taken away. After quite a hiatus (snow being one of the reasons), we braved the walk in the late afternoon this past Friday to discover that the new statue has wintered over and is still there. For me it is a rather wonderful sign of a benevolent and compassionate and mostly unseen presence doing no harm and perhaps even some good. And, as I pause for thought, the statue is, in actual fact, probably doing more good than a good many people in the world who are actively acting out in ways that thwart peace and wellbeing.



Oh, how we love to complicate things. Having just finished “Life Is Simple: How Occam’s Razor Set Science Free and Shapes the Universe,” by Johnjoe McFadden, my head is full of a whole bunch of astonishing things we do as humans to create more out of something than we need to. William of Occam is an interesting fellow in history. He was born around 1288 in Ockham, a small village in Surrey, England. The circumstances of his birth and early years are unknown, but at the age of eleven he was given to a Franciscan order where he was immediately tonsured and donned the habit of the Franciscans. There he was subject to the regimented order of friary life, which included a rigorous prayer and chapel cycle along with reading, writing, and arithmetic. William, it turned out, was an adept pupil, and he became something of a scholar and deep thinker. His claim to fame is framed by his premise known as Occam’s Razor that posits: the simplest explanation is most likely the right one.

By 1328, William of Occam had been declared a heretic by Pope John XXII and was on the run, having wisely or not intimated that the Pope himself was a heretic. William escaped the

Pope's clutches, and with the help of friends persisted in his studies and promulgating his theories. If you follow the trajectory of theological and scientific history, Occam's Razor (the cutting away, if you like, of extraneous information) assisted in the separation of the disciplines of religion and science, and is continuously applied in the renewal of human understanding of the universe as we increasingly come to know it. We have gone beyond, for example, viewing Earth as the center of the Universe to theorizing universes within universes within universes. Even as our worldview reaches further and further into infinite space, Quantum Physics is enabling us to observe the absolute minutiae of existence. The Standard Model theorizes the breakdown of atoms, electrons, protons, and neutrons into quarks and a whole host of elemental particles with some rather strange names. The upshot is that while it is complicated, it leads to the simplest explanation for the origins of the Cosmos. At its origin everything in the vast Cosmos is apparently created of elemental "stardust" with shared properties. In science, or in religion for that matter, such revelation makes it hard to be astonished by anything.

I wonder, for example, whether you find today's Gospel healing story at all astonishing. Somewhere recently I read that religion and science are good companions, but are astonishing for different reasons—it comes down to faith in company with fact, and each has its place in the wholeness of knowledge and wellbeing. I know there are groups out there that persist in trying to perpetuate erroneous fact out of faith, but with the photographic images from NASA's James Webb Space Telescope and the anticipated next landing of a man, and this time a woman, on the moon, we can no longer factually state that the earth is flat or at the centre of the universe. What we can say is that astonishing things do happen and are caused by actions we cannot adequately explain or have yet been able to discern scientifically. Sometimes we simply need faith to live well with the unexplained to keep things less complicated. Faith is a very present strength in the

face of the unknown. But there is more to keeping it simple. Even the most dogmatic amongst us can synthesize the premise of active faith to one phrase: treat others as you would wish to be treated. I probably stated the same last week in one way or another, and will probably raise it again next week, but good faith practice is that simple.

John's Gospel story of the healing of the man blind from birth is complexly simple. It is arguable on the one hand that a miracle happened and Jesus was endowed with miraculous healing powers as a gift from God. It is also arguable that there was some inherent healing property or bacterium in the mud Jesus placed upon the man's eyes that washed the scales of disease away. By the end of the story, by today's standards, the good outcome is almost buried in conspiracy theories—who sinned to cause his blindness? who has the right to heal and who doesn't on whose say so? who is at fault for healing on the sabbath or not healing on the sabbath? what is believable despite the irrefutable proof that the man born blind now sees? he can't be your son can he? And then comes the fear-laden declaration that "we know this is our son, born blind, but we do not know how it is that he now sees." In the midst of complexity, doubt is easier.

Ultimately, the community that has known the re-visioned man since birth casts the blame on him and he is driven out. Now ostracized and barred from engaging with all he knows, Jesus reaches out again to him: "Do you believe in who I am and what I can do?" "I believe," he replies. And Jesus' completes the discourse with a philosophical declaration: "I am here so that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind." The irony is not lost on the overhearing Pharisees, but the will to see differently, even though it is the simplest thing, is slow to come. They turn away and shepherd their flock back into the fold.

There are good explanations for most things. I don't know how the surprise crocus came

to be in our front yard, but the gift of its flowering gives me renewed faith and is a sign of hope as I wrestle with the complexities of sin and evil made manifest daily in the world. I don't know who put the original Buddha statue in the rock crevice at Descanso Regional Park, why it was taken away, or who replaced it to fill the perceptively empty gap left by its disappearance. I do know how I feel as John and I greet the statue each time and stop to acknowledge its presence. It is like greeting an unasked-for blessing—a miracle-in-waiting—and it reflects possibility beyond our full knowing or reason that is simply discernable by its presence. Such feeling similarly engages me in having faith in Jesus—in the Christ that amplifies the actions and wisdom of a singular man and makes of it a Cosmic good, and a presence that has the power to speak to us of justice, healing and peace. Such faith in Christ has the power to transform us and all humankind by the very fact we are all connected in a good and vital way. Indeed, our whole earth wellbeing is sustained by our feeding the good as we respond to injustice, suffering, and war—turning sin and evil on its ear to create better out of what we see.

Week by week through these Lenten Sundays, I believe we are getting glimpses of the ways in which faith and fact come together to turn things around to make good in people's lives. Today's theme of "Home-cooked Hospitality" is no exception. It can be as simple as seeing a need and feeding it. For me, however, it goes deeper into the reaches of what hospitality is all about, "the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers." (Oxford). No one is left out, everyone has a place at the table, and all are fed. The fact is we are made of the elements of stardust, and with food and water we can survive. To truly live, however, we need more than that, and with our visioning intact, this community of faith has much to give by way of faith-infused hospitality. May we continue therefore to cut through the

complexities and keep to the simple pathway of expanding God's love in Christ. It just may become cause for astonishment. Amen.