

Sermon preached at The Church of the Holy Trinity,
Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia
Sunday February 22nd 2015
The Reverend Alan Neale
Homing Instinct – #1 The Primal Search

Today we begin the first of five sermons in our 2015 Lenten Sermon Series “Homing Instinct”.

For the 11th year our church creates an arena in which Holy Scripture is in conversation with the text of the glorious, and now much imitated, program One Book, One Philadelphia. The 2015 text is Orphan Train by Christina Baker Kline, a British native (who bravely studied at Cambridge, England) and now lives now in Montclair, NJ.

In elegant prose Ms. Kline tells the story of two characters who could not, on the face of it, be more different and yet share some very basic, primal psychic similarities. Vivian 91, and Molly 17.

Orphan Train is a specifically American tale of mobility and rootlessness; it highlights a little known aspect of American history when between 1854 and 1929 some 200,000 orphaned, abandoned and homeless children boarded ‘orphan trains’. They left Eastern coastal cities for adoption in the Midwest, or rather “indentured servitude”. Trains would pull into stations, townspeople would gather to inspect the children – scrutinizing teeth, eyes and limbs.

Rather like the train the ark, in our Genesis story, carries its occupants from deadly deluge to frightening future but it is, at least, an ark – a place of comfort, safety, respect. Not so the Orphan Train – a conveyance of little respect “‘Humphh’ says the thin scowling matron in a white bonnet, ‘red hair, unfortunate, and those freckles’”; a conveyance of little safety “if your behavior proves a problem, if you cannot adhere to these simple rules of decency, you will be sent straight back to where you came from... left to fend for yourselves”; and definitely a conveyance of little comfort “all wooden seats facing forward except for a few”.

The orphan train was definitely no ark. Poignantly what the children needed then, and what we need now, is an ark to carry us from loss and suffering; we need an ark to endure rough seas without sign land or safety.

Church/faith communities should be that ark... but are they? Families should be that ark... but are they?

The search for “ark”, for “home” is primal in our lives; it was definitely in the lives of Vivian and Molly.

Even when Vivian's birth-name (Niamh – Neeve) is discarded because of the challenge of pronunciation; she keeps it alive and fresh as she remembers her time with family and friends in Ireland. The memory, kept fresh by frequent visits, the memory is the ark that gives strength to endure and to survive.

In today's Gospel Jesus leaves hometown Nazareth; departing that place of security, safety, history he sets out for the dramatic, demanding and decisive adult phase of ministry, service and sacrifice. How is this done? The ark of Jesus is the declaratory, unequivocal, unchallengeable words of the Father, "You are my son, you are my beloved, with you I am well pleased and upon you my favor rests". Friends, this is the ark into which we enter for safety, courage and hope.

Talking with Jack (her beau?) Molly comments on the importance of turtles, "Turtles mean something very specific in my culture'. 'Oh yeah warrior princess, like what?'. 'Turtles carry their homes on their backs... they're a symbol of strength and perseverance'... (later) she settles in beside him on the bucket seat. The windshield is fogged and the night is dark, and in Jack's hard-domed little Saturn she feels cocooned, protected. Yeah, that's right. Like a turtle in a shell".

We search for an ark that carry us, a shell in which we can travel; and what more enduring, and more protecting an ark is to know this... we are chosen, beloved, favored by God and just when we might forget it... look there's a rainbow, here's an act of grace.

As the train journey begins Niamh and Duchy have this conversation:

"Do you believe in fate?" I ask.

I nod.

'What's that again?'

Duchy said, 'I don't like the plan much so far'.

'That everything is decided. You're just – you know – living it out'

'Me either'

'God has it all planned in advance?'

We both laugh."

It seems that most of us really expect very little from God. When we hear Mr. Cullen's words to prospective parents, "The child is yours for free... on a ninety day trial. At which point, if you so choose, you may send him back" – it resonates within us. Living under the shadow that we are always on trial, that we are rarely offered unconditional love provides no comfort of ark or "shell".

The poster telling of the train's arrival and its occupants contains this phrase "These children have been thrown friendless into the world". If you, or someone you know, feels like this – run with all speed and determination into the ark where posted on all the walls is this message "You are my chosen one, my beloved and upon you my favor rests".

Thanks be to God. AMEN