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“Because You Will Not Abandon Me”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Psalm 42: 1-7, 11; Acts 2: 1-21
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6:00 a.m. I shuffle downstairs in the half-light of morning,
stare blankly out the kitchen window into the back yard
as I fill the coffee pot with water.

I think I see two ears sticking up out of the grass: two big ears.
I blink. Rabbit? I wonder? Rather large ears for a rabbit.
I squint and detect a spattering of white spots.
Deer! It’s a baby deer, right in the middle of our back yard.
I call for Hedge and run to get binoculars.
As I stand adjusting the focus to get a better look, it tries to stand,
raising its hind quarters first, and then unfolding,
to flip its little white tail.

It’s front quarters are slower to lift: after all they support the head,
and the weight of those....huge brown eyes.
I don’t know that I’ve been so excited about a deer, of all things,
since I took my children to see Bambi when they were young.

But my excitement is tinged with concern.

Where is the mother, the doe?

Is our backyard her safe sanctuary where she feels protected from predators

by fences, woods, and crazy ministers?
Or has she abandoned her baby at our doorstep?

7:00 a.m. We catch a brief glimpse of Bambi's mother,
through the slats of the fence.

She's a good-sized doe, seemingly well-fed at a time when many of the deer
in our neighborhood are undernourished.

She's shy, though, and stays well away from the fawn,
in the cool darkness of the woods.

The two are separated by a fence,

but it seems like an even greater divide between mother and child.

Then slowly the doe vanishes into the shadow lands.

And the little fawn hunkers down in the grass, with ears alert,
to await her return.

Will she?

Will she return to claim him? To feed him? To nurture him?

To teach him how to cope with friend and foe?

Or has he just been.....abandoned?

I can't help but compare this situation to the disciples,
gathered in that one place; waiting, as told.

Their mother figure, Jesus, the source of their spiritual nurture,
has vanished into thin air, literally, some 10 days before.

They are newborns, too, brought to life on that first day of the week,
very early on Easter morning.

But now they wait in hyper-alertness, wondering whom they can trust.

With Jesus ascending into heaven, great gulfs now separate

the new community of believers from the source of their sustenance;

great divides of heaven and earth,

great gaps between past and future.

And all they have to hang their hopes on is a command to "wait",
a blessing of lifted hands, and a promised gift of Spirit
which will empower them to witness:

These words, gestures, and promises seem as ephemeral as wind.
So they hunker down like motherless children,
tamping down waves of separation anxiety as they wait.

10:00 a.m. Still no sight of the little fawn's mother.

He tries again to stand, looking awkward,
like a camel rising from its padded knees.

He takes no steps but collapses neatly back in his cool grassy crib.

I panic since Mom has been away for 3 hours now, with no sign of return,
and I place a call to the Museum of Life and Science.

What should we do? Move him into the shade? Give him water?
Bring him to the Museum?

Wait, they say, the doe has probably gone off to feed.

Chances are good she will return by dusk.

Whatever you do, don't touch the fawn. He will be okay.

Noon. A group of crows occupies the trees around MY fawn.

1,2,3,4,5 noisy fellows shake the branches,
calling out in their raucous chatter.

They drop to the ground near my fawn.

A group of crows is called a "murder" in case you don't know.

Are crows carnivores? Would they prey on my little defenseless fawn?

Hedge comes out and claps his hands together loudly, and they scatter.

You just have to make a loud noise and they'll stay away, he says.

Great! So now I'm prepared to keep vigil and make loud noises
the rest of the afternoon.

Plus, it's clouding up outside and looks like it might storm.

We have no idea about the weather *outside* the one place
where the disciples have gathered that morning.
Yet a storm seems to be gathering inside the house.
A violent wind begins to blow, its sound deafening to their ears.
And then a visible sign, too, tongues of fire, alight on each one of them,
like a flock of red birds, leaving no hair unmussed, no skin unwarmed.
And the believers inhale the sensation and begin to speak in new ways:
words of going out, instead of staying put;
words of presence, instead of abandonment;
words of awe, instead of doubt;
words of hope, instead of despair.

And those who observe them, some 1,2,3,4,5 of them; a “murder” of onlookers,
speak a different tongue in their raucous chatter,
“Ha-ha, he’s left you for good. He’s never coming back.
You’ve been duped again, and now you’re drowning your sorrow.
It’s 9:00 a.m., and you’re already drunk.
And all you can do is wag your tongues, babble, and prattle.
It’s nonsense. It’s over.
Why don’t you go back to Galilee, where you came from?”

At previous points in Israel’s history,
when the Hebrew children felt cut off from God,
with a rift the size of the River Jordan
separating themselves from the promise and the promised land,
God tells Moses:
“If you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him
with all your soul....For the Lord your God is a merciful God,
who will not abandon you or destroy or forget the covenant.” (Deut 4: 29-31)

And when the Hebrew children felt separated from God
with a divide as far as Babylon is from Jerusalem between them
and their promised home, God says to his beloved ones,
“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and not have compassion
on the child she has borne?” (Isaiah 49:15)

Did God abandon the Hebrew slaves to Egypt’s land?

Did God forget captive Israel while she was in exile?

Would the Son of God renege on his promise to the newborn Church:

to gift them with his continued presence in Spirit-form;

to empower them to witness;

to come back in the same way he left;

to bless them all along their journey?

6:00 a.m. The next morning.

Like a small crop circle, the grass lies flattened in a whorl in the back yard.

No sign of my little white-flecked friend, save this fingerprint in the grass.

Sometimes absence is an indicator of presence, though.

Can a mother not have compassion on the child she has borne?

Can she forget her baby?

Apparently not, because Christ’s Church is alive and well,

continuing to walk through this world as a viable witness
to the power of God’s love over things that try to separate us,
like disagreements, relapses, distance, failure, disease,
disorders of mind and emotion, even death.

And the Church is a viable witness to the power of God’s memory
over our tendency to forget God, or to forget
the claiming power of God’s covenant love.

We describe great mysteries that we don’t know and fully grasp,
like the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Church at Pentecost,

by the things that we do know and observe:

a fawn in the grass; a prayer quietly answered;
an incurable diseased, cured; a marriage, restored; a job found;
young confirmands taking ancient baptismal vows to heart;
church members raising \$50,000 in spite of a troubled economy,
to provide a Habitat House for their beloved custodian.

Peter, in his impassioned testimony on that windy day quotes Psalm 16

as a reminder to believers of the greatest wonder of God:
that God will never forget or abandon us.

He says, "My heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;

My body also will live in hope,

Because you did not abandon me to the grave,

nor will you let your Holy One see decay." (Acts 2: 26-27)

The events of Pentecost are a testimony that God has not

forgotten or abandoned her progeny, the Church;

nor will God forget or abandon any of her children, either...not one.

The Church and its members are inseparable from Christ, her Lord.

The mystery of Pentecost "confirms" the mystery of Christmas:

God is with us, Immanuel, Spirit of Jesus, still and always. Amen.