

An Advent Fish Story

Isaiah 9:6-7

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On this second Sunday of Advent,
wreaths on the front door as you came in,
a Christmas tree in the Narthex,
bright poinsettias up here,
on this Christmasy-looking Sunday, I'm going to start this little sermon in a way
that probably seems a little odd.

I'm starting with a fish story.

A story about a fish.

It'll make sense soon.

I have to begin by telling you about a dear friend, a church member and a
neighbor,

who left us twelve years ago now.

Hume Cronyn, one of the most beloved actors of the 20th century,
moved onto Bronson Road in 1996 with his wonderful wife Susan Cooper,
herself a renowned author.

Hume promptly joined the church,
and every Sunday sat right over there,

listening intently to the sermons,
on which he would also comment at the front door,
or over a gin and tonic at their home later.

I adored him -- he was charming, witty, faith-filled and deeply compassionate.
He also had a neat trick where he'd take his pipe,
his ever-present pipe, and tap it on his glass eye, just to make people shriek.

When Hume died,

his wife Susan gathered all his many friends from Hollywood and Broadway and Fairfield into the Shubert Theater on 44th street for an evening of story-telling and thanks-giving for Hume's marvelous life.

And Sigourney Weaver got up and told a story that I've never forgotten, a story that made us laugh through our tears.

The barracuda story.

The fish story I promised you.

Growing up, her parents had been close friends of the Cronyns, and Hume had been for her, she said, that most treasured gift:

a friend in her parents' generation who wasn't her parents.

And she told us the story of an adventure one summer in the Bahamas when they were vacationing together at Hume's home there.

Hume had announced that they would all be going snorkeling that afternoon, out to a particular coral reef he wanted to show them.

Sigourney had never snorkeled before, and she was somewhat petrified. Well, actually, quite petrified.

Out they all went in a boat,

and over the side went everyone else while she, Sigourney,

was still struggling to put on the equipment,

trying to remember what Hume had told her about spitting into the mask and then rubbing.

Finally, masked and finned and snorkeled,

she climbed over the side of the boat and began paddling alone toward the reef which was their destination.

And then she saw the barracuda.

"Actually," she told us, "all I saw was teeth.

Lots of teeth. Guarding, as it were, the entrance to the reef."

She began frantically paddling backward,
which is a bad idea with a snorkel on.
Gasping, and choking and flailing around in panic,
she felt a hand take her hand,
and she looked to see Hume,
"with his white hair and beard floating all around him like King Neptune himself,"
she said.
And he smiled, and tugged on her hand ...
and began to lead her back toward the barracuda.
She thought he was insane; she struggled backward,
but he insistently pulled her forward,
pulling her straight toward the barracuda.

"And so we swam right up to him," she said,
"And Hume grinned, and the barracuda grinned ... and then he swam away."
"I have always felt," said Sigourney Weaver,
"that that's what Hume was for me:
he was the one who, always, held my hand
and helped me to face the barracuda.
He taught me to face the barracudas ... and to trust that it would be okay."

I love that story. Not just 'cause it's a Hume Cronyn story and I loved Hume,
but because the truth is that it's a *God* story.
He was the one who always held my hand, said Sigourney Weaver,
and help me face the barracudas.
That's a God story.

There's a passage in the Book of Isaiah,
which says this, it says:
"Do not fear. You are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you:
when you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned ...

For I am the Lord your God... and I love you."

He was the one who *always* held my hand, she said.
I am the one who will always be with you, says God;
when you pass through the rivers, they shall not overcome you,
when you walk through the fires, you shall not be burned.

This past Thursday night,
after youth group and Bible Study were done for the evening,
David and I sat and watched the news from San Bernardino,
as we all did.

And then, we sent out a letter to all of you.
The letter said "Do not fear. Be not afraid."
And it said: "Don't let the evil we have witnessed consume you,
rule you, change you, discourage you. Be strong."

Or, I thought to myself as we sent it,
put another way:
face the barracuda.
Hand in hand with the one who loves you beyond all loves,
don't surrender to fear; face the barracuda.

Which means what?
It means don't get out of the water:
keep going *forward*.
continue to love one another -- but love even more.
Continue to be compassionate -- but even more compassionate.
Continue to work for peace -- work even harder.
Continue to do what you're doing –
and I *know* what you're doing because I see it:
caring deeply for others,
offering your time in service,
praying for those who are hurting,

teaching our children about kindness,
serving meals and tutoring refugee women
and getting gifts for kids who need us...
I see you listening to one another,
and opening your hearts to others,
and showing the world what it means to be people of Love.
What it means -- truly means -- to be friends of Christ.

To be friends of Christ.
'Cause *that*, of course, is who's holding your hand.
Holding your hand so tightly in the waves,
walking through the fire.
Holding your hand, all our hands,
to guide us the right way ...

The Prince of Peace, Isaiah calls us that friend of ours.
The Prince of Peace, for whom we lit the second candle on the wreath today
as we prayed for peace.
The Prince of Peace, who came to strengthen us against all evils,
to walk with us through everything, everything,
and to show us the only road to his Kingdom of Peace,
the only way to get there.
And that is the way of Love.

I started this little sermon with a fish story,
about facing the barracuda.
I've talked about waves and fires and roads to be followed.
But really, all you need to remember is this:
Fear not. Be not afraid. You are *never* alone.
We are never alone.

And our witness in this Advent season is this:
to *live* fearlessly,

to *love* abundantly,
to serve compassionately,
to laugh joyfully,
to believe, to believe, to believe --
in the One who holds our hand in the waters
and never ever lets go. Amen.