

“The Power in You”

(Ez 34; Eph 1: Mt 25)

11-26-23

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This is the last Sunday of the religious calendar year and next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a New Year. Over the past century or so, it has been called “Christ the King” Sunday, as a way of affirming that Christ has reigned in our lives throughout the past year.

This morning’s readings give us glimpses into the mind of the one we call our King. They point to God as a tireless shepherd, relentlessly caring for his sheep and working to make the vision of his Kingdom a reality. And in the New Testament, God is our Servant King, who bids us to join him in serving others; by sharing a “cup of cold water” with those who thirst.

Where can we see this God at work? There are the obvious Mother Teresa’s, Martin Luther King Jr’s whose lives we celebrate for doing God’s work. But sometimes it happens through the most unlikely people.

Nyad

The other night, I got to watch a movie that recently came out starring Ann Bancroft and Jodie Foster called Nyad. It is about Diana Nyad, who successfully swam from Cuba to Key West at the age of 64.

When we meet her at the beginning of the movie, she is a restless 60 year old, struggling with the idea that all she has to look forward to is life as a has been. She is a former long distance swimmer who is now, pardon the pun, “all washed up.” And the movie takes you through her whole journey, five attempts before she succeeded.

Apparently, Diana was sexually abused as a child, and the movie suggests that her determination to succeed was in part a struggle to free herself from the abuser’s hold on her mind, because during her dreams and as she swims she has episodes where she hallucinates about the abuse.

It’s a gruelling movie to watch, because of the way it immerses you in her struggle and several times I found it so disturbing that I had to take a break and listen from the other room. Her journey was in many ways a selfish journey. And the movie makes no attempt to hide the troubling aspects of her character. A lot of her suffering was self-inflicted, and there were times when she was pretty ungrateful toward the very people who sacrificed the most to help her.

And yet, her flaws don’t take away from the fact that she accomplished an astonishing feat that has to be admired. All of the people around her, including the experts, said that what she did was impossible. I think

of myself now exactly the same age of 64 and when I go hiking on these old legs, it seems laughable to imagine that by any force of will that I could make them carry me further or faster than they did when I was in my twenties, which is exactly what she did.

Someone brought up this same point in the movie and she pointed to her head and said something like, "I didn't have this, when I was 20." meaning that she now had the will and experience she didn't have then. Mind over matter. But isn't there just a point at which the body simply won't do what the mind commands? It seems obvious that there is.

And the amazing thing is that she did it. It took her five tries and finally a swim of sixty hours to cover the 110 mile distance. And when she came staggering out of the water at the end of her successful attempt, she said three things to the cheering crowd. One, Never give up! Two, You are never too old to chase your dreams. And three, it looks like a solitary sport, but it takes a team.

The Readings

So, you may wonder what it was in the readings that got me thinking about this movie. It is not a movie about shepherds caring for their sheep, which is the subject of our first reading. Diana Nyad's goals

seem far more selfish. And yet, even though God is never mentioned in the movie, her story does reveal the hidden power of God, present and at work in a unique way. God works in mysterious ways.

And I hope it is not to big a stretch to say that there must be many people for whom her achievement must have come like a “cold cup of refreshing water” to reinvigorate their own lives; that through her achievement, they were able to take a fresh look at their own lives and ask, “Am I really all washed up, or do I still have what it takes to bring a dream into reality? Her story is an astonishing true story about the power that is available to us, if we are determined.

“I Will...”

As I was looking for a sermon topic, the thing that reminded me of Diana Nyad’s story was the presence of the words “I will” in the Old Testament reading. Those words “I will” show up 19 times in the reading. For example, God says, “I will seek out my sheep and I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered.”

Throughout the reading God describes a vision for the future and the will to make it come to pass. God is describing an effort that, on the face of it might seem impossible. How can a scattered people be

brought back together in this crazy world. How can we ever live in a world where God's justice can triumph over our own attempts to distort that justice to our own advantage? How can there ever be a world in which all behave as true servants of the love of God, binding up each others wounds, and caring for each other's needs.

In this world of cleverly concealed self-interest, such a vision seems naïve and impossible. And yet, when we are touched by Jesus, we see glimpses of his vision. And two of the first words that come to our lips are "I will." I will struggle to make the impossible vision real? God's work and the strength of our will go hand in hand.

And I think the message of Diana Nyad's life is, if you want it badly enough and you are willing to struggle for it, you can make it happen. Never give up on your dream. "Push onwards through the waves that come against you, even if they are driving you backwards."

And for us as Christians this means, Be faithful to God's love no matter what. Continue gladly serving and giving of yourself, like the tireless shepherd himself. Even if other people around you are cheating and getting away with it. Even if they tell you, "Go on and cheat and lie a little. Manipulate the people around you. Everybody does it." Never give up on trying to be the better world you wish to see.

I think that when God looks upon us and loves us, it must be a lot like the way a Master looks on his or her dog and loves it for its indomitable spirit. When we human beings try our best to be what God needs us to be, I imagine that it is as though God were like a sledder during the iditerod race, admiring his dogs as they run in their harnesses; creatures that give every ounce of energy and then give more to pull him towards the goal.

Us

I think that the movie speaks directly to us as a congregation and in a very immediate way. Like many other congregations, we look at the world around us and at the future of the church and our dream of bringing God's Kingdom into being looks as daunting and undoable as the swim from Cuba to Florida looked to everyone but Diana Nyad.

And each of us faces a choice like hers. Are we going to buy the story society is telling us, that we are a relic of the past and that our only task is to go quietly into the night, or are we going to will our vision of God's love as a community of Christ into a reality that persists into the future?

I can't know what exactly what the challenge presented by Diana Nyad would mean for each of you individually. When you accept the

challenge to make the “swim” your life is challenging you to make, it is likely that there will be many waves and cross currents that will push you forward or threaten to swallow you up. It is all foretold in the ritual of our baptisms. Will we go quietly into the night or will we dive back into life and accept the challenge to struggle to make God’s love real in the world with all that is left in our 60, 70 or 80 year old bodies?

The ocean between Cuba and the Florida Keys became Diana Nyad’s baptismal pool, late in her life. And she did not drown in it, but emerged on the other side, having lived, as she put it, to the fullest. “Never give up and never imagine that you are too old” she said.

Us

But the third thing she said is, I think, Diana Nyad said when she came out of the water is, I think, the best. And so I’m glad she saved it for last. She said that what she did is not a solitary sport and that it “takes a team”.

And it is true that she never would have accomplished her goal without her dedicated coach yelling information to her from the boat, without her navigator plotting the course of the various currents, her financial backers, and all of them sticking with her in spite of her shocking

displays of self-centeredness. They all stayed with her and the achievement was theirs as well.

So, if “I will” is our answer to whether God is calling us to something unachievable, remember that we too are not alone. None of us is swimming alone through the frightening deep in this world. We are the Montague Congregational Church team; the “Body of Christ” and we are here to help each other; to chart a way through the all the currents of life until you and I can finally stagger up onto the beach grateful for a life fully lived.

I know I am starting to sound very flowery, but let me now be straightforward and set a challenge before you. We have open positions in the leadership of this church and between now and our Annual Meeting in February the Nominations Committee, which this year is Janet Andrews, Judy Putnam and Julia MacMunn will be looking for volunteers to fill those positions.

And, although this challenge is far less dramatic than the one that confronted Diana Nyad, it has many of the same ingredients. We are very fortunate in that we have a lot of great people in leadership positions already and we have enough to be able to do some reshuffling, which is always healthy. But just barely. And if we are able

to add even one or two people to mix each year it makes a big difference.

I think I should emphasize that your attendance and financial contributions alone are a huge source of strength and encouragement and that no-one should feel pressured or guilty about declining. It is God and not the church, who tells each of us when and where we are to serve. But If you are sitting on the fence or uncertain of your own abilities, I'd like to share with you my own recent experience.

A couple of years ago, I was asked whether I would be willing to become the next Moderator for the Franklin Association. I knew that, being relatively new to the Association and not the sharpest pencil in the box, that I was a poor choice for the position. But they needed someone, and for me it was like jumping into a pool that I wasn't sure I'd be able to swim across.

I have to say that at times it has been a struggle. But I also have to say that it has been good for me, because I needed to be stretched, even though there was a part of me that didn't really want the extra responsibility. And this seems to correspond with studies that suggest that people who some kind of job responsibilities, whether they enjoy them or not, live longer and report being happier overall than people

who don't. As odd as it seems, a certain amount of struggle leads to greater happiness.

But the most interesting thing about being the Moderator is something I sort of already knew as a Minister, i.e. that this is not a solitary sport. It's a team sport. Good team members have a way of rooting for each other and coming up with creative ways to make up for each other's shortcomings. So that church leadership is just another way of discovering that the victory for any of us is never the achievement of a single will, it is always the triumph of a community that dares to love. And how that happens makes for a fascinating story or movie; a movie in which we are playing one of the parts.

Before closing, I'd like to mention that one of the things we are going to do this year is repopulate our Education Ministry. If we are able to do that, then it means we will have formal body that can oversee and advocate for Sunday School, which is still in an uncertain place. That Ministry will also have as its mission, helping us to educate ourselves and expand our horizons in other ways; given that education is a very important way in which a "cup of water" can be shared with those who thirst. I think this is a very exciting thing to watch for in 2024.

And so, I guess what I am saying is that, if you feel an inner tug to dive in and join or rejoin one of the committees, remember that you are never too old, and to never give up and most importantly that we are a team. Diana Nyad dove into the ocean of her fears and came out the other side, and we too have the challenge of our own baptisms; to dive into whatever challenge God holds out to us and swim for our lives.