



Watch Hill Chapel

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The Reverend Canon George F. Woodward III July 12, 2020

Amos 7: 7 – 15; Psalm 65: (1-8), 9-14; Romans 8: 1-11; St. Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

I have not preached to an actual congregation since March 15th...four months ago...and here you all are, *captive*. So as I place my wrist-watch onto this pulpit, you know what it means, don't you? Absolutely nothing!

You all come from everywhere and I'm just in from Mexico. In a chapter from one of Daniel Boorstin's books called "The Lost Art of Travel" Boorstin reminds us that the Old English noun "travel" was originally the same word as "travail". My travel here was not onerous, but you have traveled here in troubled times from troubled places and we gather to pray and hear Scripture and wrap ourselves around some truth and consolation.

When we listen to the Gospel, we want to make sure we've heard clearly, and that can be a challenge when people gather from many perspectives and so many places.

Do you know the United States has the second-highest number of Spanish speakers in the world...53 million? There are only 46 million Spanish speakers in all of Spain! As I navigate Spanish, I say embarrassing things all the time, despite keeping my 501 Spanish verb book on my nightstand.

English isn't especially easy for Spanish speakers either. I checked in to a Buenos Aires hotel where a sign read: "**Leave your values at the front desk,**" of which the Argentine pope would surely not approve. In San Miguel de Allende there is a restaurant with a placard on the table announcing: "**The manager has personally passed all the water.**"

Oliver Radtke came back from China and published a book of photos documenting valiant efforts to render perfectly clear Mandarin into understandable English, including a menu item advertising "**Man and Wife Lung Slice,**" which kills any thoughts of brunch. A sign on a subway exit that said: "**Don't Forget To Carry Your Thing,**" and a handicapped restroom designated as a "**Deformed Man Toilet.**"

So much is lost in translation. If human beings have trouble with Spanish, Mandarin and English, it should come as no surprise when we miss a few beats trying to read the Divine Mind. Just what has God inscribed in the star-fields, in our DNA, on this earth, our island home, in Scripture, for goodness sake, and in our families and churches and nations? If I can't manage front-desk Spanish, how will I measure up to Angel-ese?

Our first lesson today is from the Book of Amos, as the prophet Amos challenges the priest of Bethel, Amaziah. I feel sympathy for Amaziah in our reading from the Book of Joel. When Amaziah is confronted with unruly Amos, Amaziah is put out-of-sorts. Amos is not a temperate fellow. Amos is Bernie Sanders in a bad mood. Amaziah is trying to run a proper holy site, like all of you, and Amos the interloper shows up and calls out the government: "**O seer, go away, flee to Judah, prophesy there!**" says Amaziah, and I don't blame him.

The useful thing that Amos does achieve is to point us each to a plumb line. He points to an objective reality against which everything else is measured. There is nothing that isn't out of whack when it is measured against true justice. *Fowler's Dictionary of the English language* and 501

Spanish Verbs and Holy Scripture all exist to bring us closer to those elusive plumb lines which take our measure.

I don't know about you, but I feel as though a plumb-line has been dropped into our midst this 2020. There is at least as much truth going on in your life as in mine, and those of us trying to be Church... ***"Many as the Waves, but One as the Sea, In Essentials Unity; in Non-Essentials, Liberty; in All Things, Charity,"*** are engaged in a common quest to take our own measure as best we can, and align so much as we may with the God of the right and the good and the true.

Jesus, after a bit of travail, has done some traveling of his own today in St. Matthew's Gospel. He has left dusty hill-town Nazareth behind and moved to pleasant sea-side Capernaum with its sweet breezes and excellent fish. This Galilean town, still lovely today, is where Jesus will base his life and ministry. Whenever we read of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem, we know it has come at the end of a long road trip. Jerusalem was dangerous territory for rabbi Jesus, and he always sought refuge back home in Capernaum.

Summertime Jesus sets out from Capernaum for a picnic, crowds gather, so he steps into a boat, and starts talking about seeds and gardens. He could be in Watch Hill, looking up at verdant grass and flowering perennial beds. My hosts Margah and Tom Lips have beautiful gardens in Connecticut and in San Miguel de Allende and here in Watch Hill, and they didn't just open the door and throw out a hand-full of seeds. Beautiful gardens are cultivated. In my former home town of San Marino the Huntington Library and Gardens had bevvies of gardeners, entire groups of migrant men devoted to the rose gardens, the Chinese gardens, the Japanese gardens, the cactus gardens.

God is throwing seeds all around, like parachuting dandelion seed. God is seeding your life for good yield. Some of these seeds will grow and some will not; but God is busy sowing. We're to break up hard ground, nurture good soil, take our own measure, sack the thorns, put down deep root, drink good water. ***"Listen!"*** Christ says. Listen to your own life. Tune your ears so as to hear resonant voices amidst our present cacophony. Be attentive. Bear fruit and good yield, a hundred-fold, sixty fold, thirty. ***"Let anyone with ears listen! Hear the parable!"***

St. Jerome, who translated the Bible from Greek to Latin in the fourth century, said those who yielded a hundred-fold were those sworn to the monastic life, those yielding sixty were the widowed, and those yielding thirty were the married. John Calvin said that was ridiculous. The sower's seed was the seed of right doctrine, Calvin said, and had everything to do with getting your theology straight.

I hope they're both wrong. I suppose I need to be diplomatic when contradicting two mighty churchmen like St. Jerome and John Calvin. ***"You need to learn to be more diplomatic,"*** a man told his young son. ***"What's that?"*** asked the boy. ***"Well, think of it like this son. If I said to your mother 'Wife, your face would stop a clock,' that would be stupidity. Bit if I were to say, 'Honey, when I look at your face, time stands still,' now that's diplomacy!"***

With all respect for St. Jerome and John Calvin, I suspect good yield has more to do with a life lived with regard for a plumb line dangled among us by God, in whom we live and move and have our being. Last week was the Fourth of July, and we remembered the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the Gettysburg address and Frederick Douglass' July 5th 1852 speech in Rochester, New York. These are plumb-lines to which we have yet to fully align. We have Holy Scripture, ever requiring immersion and interpretation, taking our measure, and all of our churches and spiritual institutions, when they are at their best, take our measure, and it is our job to strengthen our institutions so they may be at their best, and take our measure.

Good seed has been sown; plenty enough for us to cultivate, weed and water. It has been cast upon the waters of our hearts, and it is time for us to have ears, and to listen.

"Amos, what do you see?" God asks the prophet. ***"A plumb line,"*** said Amos. Then the Lord said, ***"See, I am setting a plumb line in the middle of the people."*** The plumb line is in our

midst. It is not your possession. It is certainly not mine. But there is a sense in which it belongs to all of us together.

There is a plumb line in our midst and it gives the lie to our best grammar and syntax. However burnished our English or our Spanish, our lives are askew, and we have yet to master 'Angel-ese.' When Christ the plumb line stands among us, the room seems all off-kilter, because we are each one of us out of alignment. Each of us are capable of partisanship and expediency and self-focus; and Christ takes our measure.

'Salvation' is a strange word, isn't it? It doesn't play very well in the 21st Century. It is as strange as the indigenous Mexican language of Nahuatl. Yet, we are in need of just that...of *salvation*. And so Matthew preaches *evangelion* to us today, "good tidings". '*Evangelion*' was the word used for First Century imperial announcements, but Matthew's *evangelion* undermined the political and military elite of the Roman Empire and it comes to us with subversive force. The reign of God was a dangerous thing then and it is a dangerous thing now.

We need to let the seed of God's salvation take deep root in us, or we'll be warped by expediency and partisanship and the preservation of our personal fiefdoms; all of us mis-pronouncing the language God is trying to teach us, mangling syntax and murdering grammar. That's why we come to Watch Hill Chapel, this Sunday Berlitz, our spiritual immersion course.

The Scriptures are a dense read. We thumb them as gray as my 501 Spanish Verb book, learning how to treat others decently and how to say '*Hola,*' and how to order something better than "*Wife Lung*" for brunch. With a bit of luck and hard work, our moral verbs shall increasingly agree in tense and gender, and we will begin to enjoy genuine conversation. The *evangelion*, the Good News sown among us, is that God is with us and has set Christ the plumb-line in our midst by whom we discover, as though in a foreign land, that we are out of kilter, and have much to do as we strive for fluency. We water and cultivate the smallest of mustard seeds, and marvel at the yield:

Watch your thoughts; they become your words.
Watch your words; they become your actions.
Watch your actions; they become your habits.
Watch your habits; they become your character.
Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.

Amen. **GFW+**