

Chapel Talk
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A reading from Genesis and 1 Kings:

Genesis 11:1--9

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.

2 And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

3 And they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar.

4 Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.'

5 The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built.

6 And the LORD said, 'Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.

7 Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.'

8 So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

9 Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

1 Kings 19:9--13

9. ¶ And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there; and, behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said unto him, What doest thou here, Eli'jah?

10. And he said, I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts:

for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.

11. And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD.

And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake:

12. And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.

13. And it was so, when Eli'jah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave.

On Christmas Eve I became horribly ill. At the breakfast table Christmas Eve morning, I turned white as a sheet, almost fainted, and my mother rushed me to the doctor. The doctor prescribed antibiotics and very strict rest.

I was confined to the house with my family for over a week. It turns out that my younger sister, Hope, who is home on break from Columbia, is a bossy, threatening and sometimes violent nurse.

The farthest I could wander from my bed without harassment was the television in my parents' den. My routine for 10 days was totally limited to sleeping, eating and watching TV in a recliner—occasionally interrupted by my sister thrusting a thermometer in my mouth.

As many of you know, I have not had television since I lived at home with my parents, before I came to St. Andrew's, about 15 years ago. I now have a TV for watching movies, but it receives no cable or network stations.

So over winter break, while you were happily spending time with your families, visiting friends and reading exhibition books, I was getting a crash-course in pop culture.

I have traditionally thought of New Year's Day as a holiday of introspection—thinking about the year past and the year ahead, making resolutions, setting priorities.

But have you ever watched TV on New Year's Day? This is clearly not the media's idea of New Year's.

First thing in the morning, during breakfast, I was treated to the Mummer's Parade, brought to viewers everywhere straight from Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. For some reason this parade, where men dress up in costumes with hundreds of thousands of feathers, mirrors and sequins and play banjos, has become a New Year's tradition around the country.

Hundreds of men in groups with names like Trilby, Polish American, The Hog Island Fancy Brigade, and The Second Street Shooters compete for prizes and the distinction of being the Best Mummies in the United States, which really only makes them the best mummies in Philadelphia—though I'm not sure the participants are aware of that.

Thousands of fans line Broad Street and watch each group perform routines. This year my favorite was the “jungle” theme group—white, banjo-playing men from South Philly entirely covered in feathers and sequins, costumed as giraffes and elephants and, worst of all, African warriors.

Next up, on HGTV, was the saga of Bruce Whittier, not just another insane resident of New Hampshire, but a special breed. Bruce, I was informed by HGTV, is a “pumpkin prodigy,” who spends six months of the year growing giant pumpkins.

The show followed Bruce through the ritual of choosing one giant pumpkin to enter in New Hampshire's apparently legendary “Topsfield Fair Pumpkin Weigh-Off.” The Weigh-Off is sponsored by the NHGPGA, which, for those of you who are out of the New Hampshire giant pumpkin loop, is the New Hampshire Giant Pumpkin Growers Association.

To relieve your curiosity: Bruce's pumpkin won the competition, weighing in at over 1300 pounds.

Though very nearly exhausted from all of this nonsense, my morning was made complete by the Tournament of Roses Parade, which precedes the Rose Bowl football game in Pasadena, California.

Now, this century-plus-old New Year's tradition, viewed by millions of Americans across the country, is TRULY amazing. The parade consists of hundreds of bands and floats. The catch here—a clever play on the “Rose Bowl” idea—is that these floats can only be made out of flowers, plants and plant components. This year's theme was “Music, Music, Music.” All floats had to incorporate this theme in their design.

Thanks to these stringent rules and regulations, I was treated to a procession of the most absurd creations I have ever witnessed.

I will give you two examples.

One really unbelievable float was entitled “Troubled Waters” and was sponsored by Roto-Rooters Plumbers corporation. As you might imagine, the musical accompaniment to this float was Simon and Garfunkel's song, “Bridge Over Troubled Waters,” which is now, frankly, ruined for me forever.

The float—more than two stories tall--portrayed a home overcome by water, gushing, one can only assume, from a clogged toilet or some equally disgusting plumbing disaster worthy of the bathroom in Schmolze.

The scene included waves of water running through a home, carrying with them the home's residents, who were all perched on the furniture being washed from the house--an easy chair, a grand piano, a tub, and even, Lord help us, one of them was perched on a toilet washing out of the house's front door.

If this does not seem ridiculous enough, imagine all of this made out of flowers—iris, gypsophilia, roses and orchids, I was informed by the parade announcer, who also comforted viewers, saying

with a knowing chuckle, that “viewers can take heart, because Roto-Rooter is on the way--to ensure that "away go troubles, down the drain."

You can only imagine my relief.

But really the most tremendous float by far was the one sponsored by Subway, entitled “Thanks for the Memories.” In an outrageous decision by the parade judges, this float won the award for “Best Depiction of Life in the USA, Past, Present or Future” for its float featuring a 20-foot tall representation of the late comedian Bob Hope.

Rendered in white mums, sesame seeds, onion seed and yellow strawflower petals.

I feel that the absurdity of this float can only be captured by reading you the narration provided by the parade announcer:

“Hope's signature song, "Thanks for the Memories," which he sang in his first feature film, is the inspiration for the float, which captures his giant, daring personality and ski-sloped nose. The legendary entertainer of stage, screen, radio and TV is FLORALLY symbolized amid the tools of his trade. . . . The float also includes the most notable symbol of all--a golf club.”

I am still at a loss to discover what this has to do with life in the United States—past, present or future. I continue even now to cherish my belief that it has, in fact, NOTHING to do with it.

Furthermore, I wondered, who would spend their time working on these floats? These floats must have taken weeks of work by dozens of people. Did they not at some point pause and consider the fact that they were expending their energies on possibly the most useless project ever?

If these entertainments had not been enough, in flipping channels I discovered that I could also watch a 24-hour New Year's marathon of NYPD Blue on USA, or a 24-hour marathon of Law & Order on TNT, or a 24-hour marathon of Queer Eye for the Straight Guy on BRAVO.

At this point, I retired to my bedroom to nap, exhausted and confused. At this moment of weakness, my prison guard—I mean, my sister—felt that it was her turn to entertain me, by reading posts from a Web site called “Craig’s List.”

My sister has a sick obsession with this Web site. I believe she studies it as an anthropologist of New York City life, but she has become obsessed with it like a mad scientist.

If you have not heard of Craig’s List, it was started by a computer programmer, Craig Newmarket, in San Francisco, and has spread to dozens of cities around the country. At first, it was an outlet for bartering, which seems like a great use of the World Wide Web.

Posts in this section, though a bit weird, seem strictly utilitarian, like, ”need Web designer to create Web site for florist in Chelsea—will pay in bouquets,” or “free refrigerator available if you can represent me in my case against the Bloomberg administration, who are trying to use my body for medical research.”

Since the bartering function of Craig’s List took off, he added personal ads, which also seems like a rational use of the World Wide Web.

But then something strange began happening. Craig, in media interviews, began to claim that his site is an “online community,” and that its real success is in helping people meet “friends” whose relationship consists almost entirely in IMing and e-mailing, and starting list servs solely for the purpose to discuss Craig’s List. There are thousands of Craig’s Listers for whom the List appears to be their primary social circle.

Let me give you a glimpse into the world of Craig's List. Posts like this one from last week are commonplace:

“Hey peeps, if you want to kill some time this Friday then drop me a line. Hope to hear from you.”

Or this one:

“19 year old female, from the NYC GWB ‘burbs, looking for someone to hang out with... People I could eat dinner with, see movies, go shopping....all the good stuff friends do. I am looking for friends between the ages of 20-25.”

As Hope read these posts, which appear not in the personals, but in the section of Craig's List entitled “Strictly Platonic,” I found them hilarious—but also disturbing.

After monitoring Craig's List at various times during the ensuing days, I struggled to put my finger on my discomfort.

This notion of an “online community” seemed artificial, an imposition. The site, a gigantic digital repository of desperation and alienation, seemed like an inadequate response to a central problem of the human condition—that it is difficult to find a community, a home. The postings were too loud, too raw—they weren't trustworthy. There were way too many of them. They communicated nothing. The more you read them, the more absurd they seem.

Eventually I began to connect the problem of Craig's List to the absurdity I had witnessed on TV on New Year's Day.

As human beings, we have an essential tendency to embrace what we call progress, to create enormous, towering monuments to our acumen as creatures with a gift for engineering. We often

prefer to celebrate false histories—Bob Hope made out of flowers equals American history—and false accomplishments—“I am a handsome and funny and athletic 24-year-old ivy-league banker looking for successful friends”—rather than confront the real issues of how we treat each other and our complicated and painful histories.

Instead of accepting the risk and sacrifice involved with creating real places, real homes, real friends and real communities, we prefer to hide online, in a net of blurbs, text messages, and postings.

Eventually I was reminded of the vanity of the people who built the Tower of Babel, the tale from Genesis read by Hugo earlier tonight.

These people built this tower, we are taught in Sunday School, attempting to reach the sky, as high as God, to prove their greatness. Upset, God created discord by making it impossible for the people to speak to each other. Why was God upset?

God was upset because there is something within humans—our best selves, our greatest capacity—which is actually greater than this. Our worst tendency is to build things bigger and to lose sight of each other. In doing so, we neglect our REAL need—to understand each other and create something worthwhile and human—like a friendship, or a community.

Craig’s List, and these ridiculous floats, which are quite possibly among the LEAST transcendent expressions of human capability, conjure a new Tower of Babel—a construction which only leads us to a superficial unity and away from our real potential as people.

These thoughts led me deeper into the Old Testament, to Elijah, perhaps the fiercest of the prophets, in his moment of ultimate desperation in Horeb. He is deprived of all the trappings of civilization and reduced to a prehistoric state of existence. He has slaughtered all the pagan priests of the imperious Queen Jezebel, and she seeks her revenge, swearing to have Elijah killed. He hides in a cave—alone--and prays for death.

When Elijah prays, God sends a series of natural phenomena to get Elijah's attention:

“And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.”

Elijah comes to the mouth of the cave, and is told by that still small voice that he is not meant for death. While he has lost everything, his life still has meaning and purpose. He is sent down from the cave to a new community, to crown a new king and mentor a new prophet, Elisha. There are connections yet to be made—and sacrifices to be sure—but this is not the end of the road for Elijah.

Elijah is a metaphor for our real work as human beings. Rather than seeking a spectacular external validation of our powers and risk a false expression that we call a community--it is instead our calling to hear the still, small voice from within that leads us to a home, a community, and to each other.

So the question for us becomes this: when we encounter the quandaries of our human nature—loneliness, failure, disconnection—will we opt for the glib and absurd rituals of human society, the noisy parades and meaningless monuments that protect us from the disappointments of human connection as well as the rewards—or will we take the path down the hill to the cave—and wait there—and listen?