

“Seeking a falconer”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
November 20, 2016

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

It is Christmas Eve 1995. Nine French monks living in a Cistercian monastery in Algeria sit around a table, voting on whether to stay or leave a country that has been consumed by a violent civil war between an illegal government and Islamic rebel groups. Rebels have brutally murdered a group of Croatian highway workers as part of a campaign to rid the country of all foreigners. The monks could be next.

Several want to leave. They didn't come here to become martyrs. Yet the village of Tibhirine relies on the monastery's medical clinic. And the monks are not eager to abandon their post in the face of violence. They know all too well that while they, as French citizens, can flee, there are others who do not have that privilege. Should they simply abandon their neighbors to the coming storm?

In 2010, a film called *Of Gods and Men* sought to tell the story of these wavering monks. It shows each monk, privately and together, struggling to know what to do, wrestling in the dark with a God they sometimes cannot hear.

The Irish poet W.B. Yeats wrote a poem for such a time as this. It was the end of World War I, and Europe was in ruins. The Irish War of Independence was just beginning, and almost 500 people had just been killed in the Easter Rising, more than half of them civilians killed by British artillery and heavy machine guns. In his poem “The Second Coming,” Yeats paints a haunting portrait of a lone falcon, circling ever higher, turning in a widening gyre, lost and unable to hear its falconer, unable to find its way home again to the arm from which it flew.

If we are the falcon—with rough winds having carried us too far afield—then Christ is the falconer.

Yeats writes, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned; the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

Lines from this poem have been quoted more often in 2016 than in any of the preceding 30 years. We are unable to make sense of the world around us. We see the church slipping away. Mainline churches struggle to stay alive and prove their relevance, their socially progressive agenda undercut by the fact that they are often just as segregated, just as inward-focused, as they were 50 years ago. In the meantime, some evangelical portions of the church are further discredited for bedding down with white supremacy, militarism, and xenophobia, happy to set aside their moral code for the sake of power.

Things, as Yeats wrote, are falling apart. Liberals and conservatives refuse to listen to each other, to honor and discover the shared stories of pain that underlie the rhetoric. And in a rising

tide of hate crimes and policies promising to target vulnerable populations, our neighbors—perhaps some of us right here, immigrants, Muslims, people of color, women, people who are LGBTQ—are afraid.

For two weeks now, we have talked about the calling to be the church God intended—not only a building, but a people whose discipleship carries them into the wounded places of the world.

But where are we—especially those of us who could just walk away—going to find the strength to remain planted in this church and its ministry? It can get to where we feel like we're carrying an awful burden, teetering and stumbling beneath the great weight of trying to save the church and the world with it.

The Colossians, addressed in our letter today, stand at a similar fork in the road. They are suffering. They too are looking for strength, and in their search, they have turned to leaders who are encouraging a strict code of regulations—a kind of new law—that, if followed, will achieve a mystical union with God.

In other words, if they work hard enough, they'll find salvation.

Paul doesn't want them to carry this burden, because he knows that there is only one capable of such a weight—Jesus Christ, the same one who said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

And so, Paul reassures the suffering church, telling them that they don't need to fight their way into God's heart; they're already there. God, Paul says, has *already* rescued them from the power of darkness, already transferred them into Christ's kingdom, already made them inheritors of the saints of light.

God is with you, even in this dark hour, not because you have withdrawn to safety, but because you have gone out into the world, as Christ did. For our inheritance isn't just in heaven; it's in the here and now. Our inheritance is love, now. Peace, now. Justice, now. Freedom, now.

Christ is with you, now, as the head of this body and this church. The strength of Christ runs through you—you who were buried with Christ in baptism and raised with him through faith in the power of God. The center *will* hold, because the falconer has grown wings and sought *you* out; he's found you. And with him, you are capable of mighty acts.

Mighty like those nine Cistercian monks. Though frail and aged, though men of quiet prayer and song, they find the strength to remain at the side of their neighbors. These men who tend bees and grow gentle things in the earth do not hide behind the walls of their sanctuary. They tend the sick in their clinic. They sell their honey in the local market. They join in celebrations with their Muslim neighbors and read the Qur'an as well as the Bible. They refuse the protection of the government's army. They will not claim protection not offered to others. And they will not perpetuate the legacy of violent French colonialism. They decide to witness to the gospel, not by

sheltering behind arms, but by going about their daily lives, in peaceful and loving relationship with their Muslim neighbors.

When the rebels at last arrive to take them, the film shows the monks sitting at table, as if at the Last Supper, sharing red wine as Tchaikovsky's Grand Theme from Swan Lake plays on an old record player in the corner.

Seven of the nine monks will be killed.

A letter was later found sitting on the desk of the monastery's prior, Father Christian de Chergé. It in part reads, "I would like my community, my church, my family, to remember that my life was given to God and to this country. I ask them to accept that the One Master of all life was not a stranger to this brutal departure... I ask them to be able to associate such a death with the many other deaths that were just as violent, but forgotten through indifference and anonymity... I have lived long enough to know that I share in the evil which seems, alas, to prevail in the world... I should like when the time comes, to have a clear space which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of all my fellow human beings, and at the same time to forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down."

He ended his letter with a note to the person who would kill him: "And to you, too, my friend of the last moment, who will not know what you are doing. Yes, for you too I wish this thank-you, this Adieu, whose image is in you also, that we may meet in heaven, like happy thieves, if it pleases God, our common Father. Amen!"

That is the not strength of a man speaking; that is the strength of Christ in him.

Our work is not to create the kingdom of God; it is to clear away the eyes to a reality already afoot. It is to embody in our daily lives the person of Jesus Christ and the work he has already done. We are not saviors. We bear neither the glory nor the burden of saving anyone. We are signposts. We point the way to the falconer.

All that we have, and all that we are, and all that we will be, belongs to God. Christ is the Lord of our lives yesterday, today, and tomorrow. And so while there may be great work to do, we need not worry for its outcome. Our lives are in loving hands. And should the world come for us with crosses, should it come for our neighbors with violence and hate, we will meet the world with faith and love, with the strength of God, because, in the end, not even we are the church. Christ is the church. And that church is risen. **Amen.**