

Get a Grip, Jack! By Jonathan Chapman L3070311
Isaiah 55:1-9, Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ
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Good Morning. My name is Jon Chapman. For those of you whom I have not met, I am the pre-ministerial student intern at Elon Community Church.

I love Youth Sundays. I love seeing young people forming worship, owning it, and offering themselves. What an empowering responsibility and reward!

Earlier this week, I was trying to reach back to my childhood, and I kept remembering a song my mother used to sing to me. Some of my earliest memories are of songs she would sing. She had (and still does if you listen closely) a sweet quiver in her voice—one full of love. She sang a little of everything, from the Batman theme song to which I would enthusiastically respond “BATMAN” to lullabies she made up herself. One particular song sticks out to me.

On a recent visit to Elon, I asked her if she remembered a song that used the phrase “the apple of my eye.” Without missing a beat, she sang it:

There’s a tiny baby boy in my arms
And I’m so very taken by his charms
He’s a cutie, sweetie pie
He’s the apple of my eye
There’s a tiny baby boy in my arms

All of a sudden I was back in her arms, rocking to sleep. She sang words of comfort that urged me, in gentle ways to calm down and be loved.

I wonder if there are songs or moments like the one I just described to you that God uses to calm us down. That we indeed are loved. A God Lullaby of sorts. Words of comfort that urge us to “get a grip” as our therapist told Jack earlier.

In the reading from Isaiah that we heard earlier, the prophet issues a call—a call to abundant life. Repeatedly, he uses phrases like “Listen Carefully to me” or “incline your ear, and come to me” or “get a grip and listen up” I don’t think these are angry words, but authoritative ones. These are words that remind us that we are human, and that God is not. That we are hardly in control, and that God is.

The prophet continues to remind us of that. At the close of the scripture reading, Isaiah offers vast and embracing words, words that have the comfort of a lullaby and the authority of the Divine--For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

For some, this could be interpreted as a reprimand. “Don’t think you’re God, because you aren’t.” I, however, see it as a liberating statement. God tells us that we are human, and that we don’t have all the answers, but God does. In that, it is God’s perfection that matters, not our imperfections. Does this mean blind following? No. It means the opposite—It means following with our eyes wide open, our hearts aware, and our souls willing to receive the ways of God.

God comforts us, directs us, and embraces us all the time. Isaiah seems to have felt the same way, but clearly came across a perennial problem—God’s people simply weren’t listening. I think that we are trying hard to listen. I think this church has made direct attempts to hear God. I challenge us to keep doing that by keeping ourselves open to all the ways that God, in the words of the UCC, is still speaking. God speaks beyond sermons, and verses and song.

Many of you know that I spent five months abroad during the winter and spring of 2006. For the academic semester, I had moved to Copenhagen, Denmark. It was an adventure—one that took me by surprise more than I was prepared for. I moved in with a host family for the long haul. I lived with two men, Hans and Per Hugo, and their five cats. Yes, five. Four of them are Siamese (think

Disney's Lady and the Tramp---[sings] "we are Siamese, if you please..."). The other one is a Burmese named Knul. Actually, they are all named after former Kings of Denmark.

In any case, one of the first eye-opening experiences I had in Copenhagen was watching my home-stay dads praise, play with and scold the cats--all in Danish!

Well duh, Jon. Obviously they would speak in Danish to their cats. Yes, I know. But what struck me was how, the first time I heard it, I thought to myself "the cats can't understand Danish..." And then it dawned on me that my cats at home, understand my English just about as much as Hans and Per's cats understand their Danish. I felt so stupid. Of course they wouldn't understand English or Danish--they're cats! Clearly, it isn't the words that mean as much as the emotions behind them. Sometimes, it's not so much what we say as how we say it.

We approach our lives in the same way. We assume that all the messages we need to get will be in plain English (or your language of choice). Maybe, just maybe, we shouldn't be listening for the words, but for the emotion. Every day, we live our lives thinking we're right because no one has told us we're wrong. Perhaps something is telling us to change, or to get a grip; we just aren't listening because we don't know what to listen for. Or we just aren't willing to hear it.

So, what then should we listen for? Lullabies? Rants? Whispers? Screams? Neither. We listen for God. We listen for moments, for revelations, for peace, and for hope and for love. These are all avenues through which God speaks. We listen for God. It seems to me that the rest IS details.

Have you ever had one of those moments? The kind that hit you when you bite into a freshly baked strawberry croissant from the local bakery? Or the kind that overwhelm you when you are busy working and stop to look up just in time to hear the rain start to fall? Or the kind that swells over you when you hear a long lost hymn that used to be a favorite? Or the kinds that freezes you in time—like when the sun sends its most brilliant rays through your living room window just before it decides to call it a day. It's almost like you are reminded of something you once were. Not in any mournful sense, but rather as a quiet tap on the shoulder saying "hey, don't forget me...don't forget where you came from."

This past summer, we had an unusually harsh stint of storms. Not the afternoon thunderstorms that appear at the drop of a hat, and just as quickly vanish. No, these were violent storms with the electric capability to light up a small town. It was during one of those storms that I was at work in the Sidetrack Grill. I was cleaning a table, and happened to look out through one of our side windows just as a freight train blew by, piercing the storm as if it was a sucker-punch by humankind against nature.

And in that moment of timelessness, there was a feeling of necessity. A necessity to be there, to witness that, to feel triumphs and defeats and tears and joy all to their fullest extent. To not simply settle for some meager passing thrill as the ultimate answer that we are all searching for, but rather delve deep beyond such moments into places where we find the sacred and mortal mingling. These are places in our lives where the divine kisses us, and reminds us of deeper truths. These places are so often whispering to us saying "follow me," calling us into our being while we are screaming each other deaf. How can we expect to hear the message when we refuse to listen and only find ourselves yelling about the details?

Details are important. They are things make us individual and different, diverse and creative. Explore them, search them, crave them. But, at the end of the day, remember that they are details. Let God deal with the details. We have been invited to a table of abundant life. Hear the whispers, the shouts, the rants, and the lullabys. Witness the moments, the revelations, the peace, and the hope and the love. Hear the call. Amen.