

Sermon for Trinity Sunday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

On your way out of Harrison, Arkansas, heading north on Highway 65, you're gonna pass a road that esses off to the right. That's Journagan Lane. The Harness side of the family used to call those hills a few miles back from the main road "home." Mary died there, with Cynthia and Uncle Bill and the rest of us close by, but the rest of the dirt road is populated with homes that sprung up since Grandpa Bill died. I changed a neighbor's tire back there once. But you don't want to turn in there. There's nothing but dust and overly large servings of tomato aspic down that road. Keep on heading north, past the trout farm and Devito's Fine Italian. Go on past the creatively named The Rock Shop which sells, well, rocks. Minerals, if you're fancy. You can get tiger's eyes and hematite by the bag full and, if you're lucky, there'll be a quartz strung on a necklace you can bring back to Mom. And on those rarest of occasions, a geode the size of a ten-year old will be on display, safely tucked away in a corner from any ten-year old's excitement. Your eyes stray from the sparkling curves of its interior and land on its pricetag, an equally stunning sight, and you slowly back away, hoping the stare from your eyeballs doesn't knock the formation from its pedestal. You inevitably bump the table behind you and turn around in a fright, sure destruction has come at your clumsy hand, or rump as the case may be. But all is well; it's just another table full of rocks. But the tiger's eyes and magnetic hematites now have lost their luster; how could those silly little stones ever live up to the sparkling beauty in the corner?

As your jaded eye drifts over the piles of now common gemstones, you can't help but scoff at the ugliest pile of rocks in the whole dang store. There's a whole box full of 'em, tucked underneath the table so unsuspecting rock shoppers won't stub a toe on this pile of lackluster paperweights. They look like somebody took hailstones, covered 'em in fine gravel, and somehow kept 'em from melting. Scribbled on the inside flap of the cardboard box: "Geodes - 10 for \$10." Your eyes go wide. They shoot back to the beauty in the corner, to the box at your feet, and back again. How could these be the same thing? But then you begin to notice the pitted surface of the beauty in the corner, like a mud-covered rind on a freshly sliced watermelon, the drama of the interior eclipsing the protective shell around the outside. With a new appreciation for those dirty hailstones, you crouch down and reach a hand into the box, carefully selecting a golf ball sized geode with a particularly plain exterior. Just one will do. A few dollars for your haul at the register, and you're on your way, quartz necklace held lovingly in Mom's hand, unbroken geode tucked away in a pocket. Back on the road, keep going north. When you get to what used to be grandma's old antique shop, hang a quick left. You'll pass the old hillbilly woman's house where she made a living off of stained glass hummingbirds and frames built from the barn an ice storm caved in a few years back. A bit further down the road, you'll see the Baptist Church poking up from an otherwise empty field. This is the same church your Great Grandmother Pearl built with her gnarled hands and a hacksaw while the men were off fighting the Great War. This is also the first stop. Bill and Cynthia, Kathy, your sisters, a smattering of cousins and other kin you can't quite place, and Mary, the then limping matriarch, pile out. The kids run straight for the rusted swing set, Mom holds Grandma up by the elbow, and Bill takes on the solemn task of gathering a few black-eyed susans and some Queen Anne's lace. These are quietly placed on a few headstones in the quiet graveyard under the steeple's shadow. Mary sheds a few tears, tells the story of how Uncle Vernon took her and her cousin in after they flew halfway across the county in a cedarwood trunk during the monster of a tornado that ripped those hills to pieces back in '34. Tears water Vernon's grave for the first time since last year, Mary looks at Kathy and nods, and we all pile back in, the caravan headed to the next cemetery, the next graveyard, the next unmarked fieldstone at the base of the next shade oak. This process repeats all day, pile out. Listen to grandma's stories. Wonder how her eyes make so many tears while her skin is so taut, wonder how she makes it out of the pickup at each stop when she can barely make it to the breakfast table most days, wonder where she holds all those memories when she can't even

remember which grandkid you are. Lately, you've sort of time travelled in her memory; last year you were her son; this year, you've become a dear friend from elementary school; you pray the next time you see her, you'll just be someone she knows she loves.

Just when the stories end and the call of the cicadas take over, it's back to the caravan, the annual liturgy of the graves coming to a close with one last stop at the cemetery outside of Denver, Arkansas, where Aunt Cynthia warns you not to stand too close to that towering angel statue, in case it were to fall. From there, it's on to Bill's farm or Cynthia's sprawling deck where there's sure to be all sorts of critters to play with, bug bites to scratch, and a cake made up to look like an American flag with strawberries, blueberries, and Cool Whip. When you finally make it home, your arms sticky from dried sweat and your eyelids heavy from the first full day of adventure since school let out, your hand slips into your pocket, and there it is, a dirty stone, hidden away and already forgotten. Holding it up to the light, you hope to catch a glimpse of the sparkling wonders hidden inside. But it's dull, dull and kind of boring. Now, you don't have a hammer in your room, but your Sunday Best saddle shoes have pretty hard soles, so you think you just might be able to break the darn thing open with them and find the treasure inside. But you don't move, can't seem to pull your eyes away from that boring old rock. How many times have you walked right past a rock just like that? How many times have you kicked a rock like that halfway down the street? Wouldn't breaking the thing open kind of ruin it? You could put it on display and only you would know the wonder it hides. You could tuck it away and, if robbers ever broke in, they wouldn't know to take it. So you hide it at the bottom of a box full of prized Ninja Turtles because that's where treasures should go. Every so often, you'll come back to it, but most days, you forget it's there.

These stories from scripture remind me of those kind of days. Days full of spectacle, of practiced liturgy, of building on the stones of the past. Whole days of calling on the glory of that past, hoping it'll have something to say to us today. Whole days of wonder and worry, of startling moments and loving silences. Isaiah tells the story of how he came to be a prophet, remembers the sparking wonder and the completely reasonable respect for the bizarre and sacred before him, before God and, ultimately, before God's people. He stakes his claim to a place and a people with something as common as a coal and as glorious as mystery. And his mind swirls as flames dance from God to his lips to the people he loves. There's nothing boring about Isaiah's vision. Isaiah's vision is that sparkling geode in the corner.

In fact, many of the stories in the Bible are sparkling geodes, impressive structures, story arcs covering pages of tiny print or shorter stories that stun you with their brilliance. But some are bland fistfuls of gravel: an old woman finds a nickel between the couch cushions, a kid took a nap and woke up, sheep and goats got put in different pens. At least, they're bland on the surface. And that's an important reminder. Sometimes our lives do have sparkle and pizzazz. But most of the time, we're pretty boring on the surface. Rough and scarred, glad just to be pulled out of a box and stuffed in a pocket. Relieved, even, when we don't have to be on display anymore. Those moments of shining brilliance are like Isaiah's otherworldly vision. But the rough, scarred, boring on the surface stuff, the mundane, y'all there's so much sacred held within. In that psalm that begins with God's glory and beauty, we go to some of the most everyday stuff. Water and rain and forests and newborn calves. Fire and oak trees and wildlife chittering around. That's the stuff of God's glory! Paul talks about flesh and blood and parents and death, important things, sure, but things that everyone has or has had or one day will have. Even good, ol' Nicodemus comes to Jesus for the simple purpose of asking some questions, and they end up having an earth-shattering conversation about birth. Now, don't get me wrong, birth is kind of a big deal, but is it unusual? Not really. It's kind of a prerequisite for the rest of what we do. But in all that, there's the reminder from Jesus himself who says that talking about all these earthly things helps us get to something sacred. And that maybe, just maybe those earthly things are sacred in and of themselves. They bring glory to God, even if

they don't sparkle, even if they aren't perfect, even if they're a little boring or pitted on the surface, they're still sacred, and they bring all of us closer to God.

After almost 450 days, we're finally back at this altar. At the same moment, a sturdy but mundane table and the epicenter of our faith. It's in this place, this old, familiar, and loving home where St. Thomas' has come together for nearly two centuries to sit in these plain wooden pews and recognize the sacred even in the mischievous carvings of a century-gone teenager. Or to stare at the beauty of a hidden turtle in stained glass. Or to watch the sunrise filtered through green leaves and colored panes. Or to hear a reminder of hope. We come together now in that long tradition of totally normal people to do a really normal thing: go to church on a Sunday. Remember when this was normal? We come together to present our own selves, glittering and impressive or sort of forgotten under a dusty table. We come together, and today, y'all, today we get to have communion. And I don't know about y'all, but before all this Covid stuff, I'd gotten so into the habit of having communion any time I went to church, that even communion had become a little mundane. And in some ways, it kinda is. It's bread, one of the most basic things we eat. And it's wine, which can be celebratory, but also isn't unusual to find in your own cabinets at home. What we say, what we do with our bodies, how we see the people around us when we do this, I mean, it was a predictable and normal dance. We all had the steps we were supposed to do, and then poof, Jesus right there on the altar. But this absence, I've felt it. I know y'all have. Some of you have sent an email or two about how much you've missed it. All of a sudden, we lost our ability to gather here to do that normal, every-week thing. And if we didn't know it before, we sure know it now: that what we do here at this place is more than just boring old bread -- or stale cardboard wafers -- it's more than just bread and it's more than just wine.

Those words we'll say carry a power with them too. The Episcopal Church doesn't say exactly what it is that happens in Eucharist, so much as that something does happen. We say Christ is really present, and we leave it at that. The most mundane, everyday things are somehow changed, we know not how, into something deeply, deeply sacred. Or we're able to see their sacredness a little more clearly. And in that, we're also changed. We're also made holy, bearers in our own bodies of that really-present Christ, we carry that sacredness in our own everyday selves. Hidden within us, the beauty of the glory of God. I don't think we live for the big days, the flashy stuff, the complicated liturgies or the emotional highs. We enjoy them, maybe we remember them a little more. But I don't think we live for those days. I think we live for all the days between, all the slowness, the normal, the boring or easy or simple. All the days we return to a place and water the ground with our tears, all the days we grip a stone and remember the beauty in the corner, all the days we gaze at a simple slab of wood or charcoal or a newborn calf and recall the unexpected victory of a discarded God.

You know, I've still got that geode. It still lives in my closet, forgotten more often than not. But when I do see it or on the rare occasion my mind wanders back to it's understated box, I'm transported to the forested hills of Arkansas. And I might as well be there for real, memories dancing like light on a crystal. Holding Mary up by the elbow, gathering wildflowers with Bill, looking into Kathy's damp eyes. That's where my people are, that's where I first heard about flaming lips, about the sick being cured, about the dead rising with new life to spare. That's when I first saw someone fall to their knees and pray. And that's when I first learned that God was here, flashy and easy to overlook and waiting to be found.