

Catching Waves and Holding Moonbeams
St. John's, Linden Hills, Advent II 2018
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The Sound of Music starts with four or five minutes of breathtaking scenery of the Austrian Alps from a helicopter. The valleys are intensely green, grazed on by sheep, goats, and cows. The mountaintops are bare and daunting, but then we meet Maria, the star of the movie, singing the title song, and we fall for her right away. She's a young goddess, dancing in the meadows at 8,000 feet, never out of breath. Julie Andrews, singing in that sweet and fierce soprano voice. Then the church bell rings, down in the valley, and the goddess turns into a frightened teenager: tardy again.

Because this outdoor girl is a nun. A novice nun, anyway, and she misses prayers, and the three leaders of the convent, who are all indoor girls, sing "How do you solve a problem like Maria." It's a fun song if you've seen the movie before, but if not, you have to wonder how this joyful young woman could possibly be a problem. Sing along if you want

She climbs a tree and scrapes her knee, her dress has got a tear
She waltzes on her way to Mass and whistles on the stair
And underneath her wimple she has curlers in her hair
I even heard her singing in the abbey
She's always late for chapel, but her penitence is real
She's always late for everything, except for every meal

I hate to have to say it, but I very firmly feel
Maria's not an asset to the abbey

I'd like to say a word in her behalf
Maria makes me laugh

Isn't religion weird? A bunch of people who aren't even related get themselves to church to sing songs about an invisible higher power? Or they shave their heads and become vegetarian and wear orange robes, and go chanting in the mall? Or they bow down to a desert city ten thousand miles away and tell the higher power he's greater than them?

They act like they've been reincarnated many times before. They wear funny hats and won't eat bacon. They sit cross-legged or worse for an hour, with their eyes almost closed and try not to think about anything but breathing.

Religion is really weird. They eat bread and say it is their God. They put a little water on the head of a crying baby dressed in a miniature wedding gown and then give the baby a candle. They kill an animal and put it on a pile of stones, then burn it and talk to someone in the sky hoping he likes the smell. They hike all the way across Spain to go to a church along with thousands of other people and get a certificate saying they did it, in a language that people don't speak any more.

Why is Maria a nun? We don't know, except that she wants to be. She loves God. She loves the singing and the other women in the community. But it doesn't work out like she planned. I don't want to spoil the ending of the movie for the six of you who haven't seen it, but: she stops being a nun. She's sort of kicked out. Like so much of religion, it doesn't work out the way she planned.

John the Baptist was a city boy, raised to be a priest like his father, and a holy man like the prophet Samuel. That didn't work out. He went to the desert and became a wild man. Not a priest like he was supposed to be, in nice robes like this, but a shouter, a warner, a scold. *Get ready for a change said John, a fire is coming! A bath in bleach or lye soap! Judgment!*

His cousin Jesus was a carpenter and a carpenter's son. He lived in town, in the green northern hills. Then he heard about John leaving his life of white robes and long prayers, and realized that his time had come. The angel had told his mother that Jesus was going to be the son of the most high, and John was announcing that *someone* was coming to bring salvation. Jesus decided to go see John.

We don't know if Jesus meant to leave carpentry forever, but he did. When he got to the Jordan River, John picked him right out of the crowd and offered to change places with him. Jesus said no, baptize me. But then a voice from heaven told him *You are my son. I love you.* Matthew says the voice told everybody, *This is my son with whom I am well-pleased.*

Religion is weird because God is so strange. The Holy Spirit is so unpredictable. John was brought up to be a priest, maybe a high priest, but the Holy Spirit showed him how clueless organized religion had become. When Jesus got to the Temple a few years later, he came to the same conclusion.

No matter how hard we try to contain God in religion, we fail. We make resolutions to pray or read the Bible. We make rules about fasting or meditation. We recite carefully-written sentences over and over so we don't forget who our ancestors said God was. We try to create a routine to hold on to those rare times when we really feel God; when the universe makes sense. It's totally worth a try,

But rituals can't usually capture such gigantic and subtle things. And so one day, we may find those rituals empty. That's what happened to John.

I assume it was news of John's quitting organized religion that made Jesus go see him, and that baptism convinced Jesus to go through with God's plan.

A lot of my fellow baby-boomers are sad that most of our kids don't go to church much, or synagogue. They're spiritual, maybe, but what we have to offer in organized religion is compelling to fewer of them than it was to us. Certainly the sins of our fellow clergy make the rest of us look like possible hypocrites or failures. Certainly the anti-science attitude of religious leaders makes us look stupid or cruel. The Patriarchy. The racism. The smugness. The over-reach by some religious people into politics. The failure by others to even notice public life.

Every generation, every individual maybe, remakes organized religion. Some walk away. Some double down. Some switch to another path. Many of us in this room are not practicing the faith as our parents did. All of our parents needed to let go of us, and most of them did! All of us will need to let the next generation figure out God for themselves. We can't control the decisions they will make. We can show them, rather than merely tell them, who we think God is. Why we love her. Why we try to follow Christ. God wants us all to keep trying.

Even John and Jesus were both wrong about the future. Judgment Day didn't come soon. But they weren't wrong about most things, and we gather here every Sunday to sort those things out. John, like so many of the prophets, expected God to be decisive, even violent. God, on the other hand, being strange, was trying a different strategy:

“God's Given Up On Us” just depressed people.

“God's Mad at Us?” was too childish.

“God's Gonna Crush Our Enemies?” No. Only worldwide carnage could defeat Rome, and that would be was too much even for the God who sank Pharaoh in the Red Sea.

So John didn't know it, and Jesus wasn't totally conscious of it, but here was God's new strategy: Come to earth as a helpless baby. Live a humble life. **Show** love and forgiveness rather than **tell** some prophet to recite poetry about it. **Be** the image of God in human form. Then, when the time is right, start telling people who you are. Start discerning what human limits to ignore (like ‘human beings can't turn water into wine’ and ‘human beings can't walk on water’). And embrace all the rest of the limits of being human (like crying because your friend has died).

Like letting the police arrest you and humiliate you and even kill you). The new strategy: Go through it all, be a human being, and after tasting mortality, come back. Let people see beyond the darkness of death and hate and fear.

Maybe then people will understand.

God's new plan was not going to remove Rome or rebuild the Temple. God wasn't going to scare people into following. God was simply going to show people. And in every generation to come, we would have to figure out what that means. Elders like me, we do what we *can*, in pulpits and classrooms and dinner tables, to *say* why we follow Jesus. But some things can't be taught, really. Spirituality, religion, faith, are all too important, and too impossible to pin down in mere words or rituals. The sisters in the movie sang it so well:

(G) Many a thing you know you'd like to tell her
Many a thing she ought to understand
But how do you make her stay and listen to all you say
How do you keep a wave upon the sand?

Oh, how do you solve a problem like Maria?
How do you hold a moonbeam in your hand?

There is nothing wrong with organized religion, as long as we remember this: we may want to "solve" the problems of life, like the sisters in Maria's convent. But religion is not God. God is like that wave. That moonbeam. So are we.

[clenching hands] Waves are not for keeping. Moonbeams are not for holding.

Perhaps you, like I, have some letting go to do. [open hands] Amen.