

The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss: Horton Hatches the Egg

June 28, 2020

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

1 Peter 1:3-7

Brief recap of series:

- *Green Eggs and Ham*
God invites us to step out of our comfort zones and try something new
- *Mr. Brown Can Moo! Can You?*
God has created us all with amazing gifts! Gifts intended to bless not just the recipient, but the whole community. So use the gifts that we have been given!

Today we are reading our first *longer* story. Both *Green Eggs and Ham* and *Ham and Mr. Brown Can Moo* were written for the very youngest audiences. But Dr. Seuss also wrote books for a more mature crowd – books with creative and winding storylines – with plots and characters and conflict and surprises.

Horton Hatches the Egg is the first of three Horton books. The second book, and probably the most well-known one, is *Horton Hears a Who*, the story of an elephant named Horton who discovers a speck of dust with a whole city of tiny, invisible-to-the-naked-eye Whos living on it. Horton befriends the Whos and suffers horrible ridicule for his insistence on the existence of people that nobody else could see or hear.

The third book is titled *Horton and the Kwuggerbug*, and I have to be honest that I had never even heard of this book before I started working on this sermon. Evidently it was published posthumously, only about 6 years ago, and it's about a kwuggerbug who lands on Horton's trunk and asks him to take him to his beezlenut tree, which the kind-hearted and trusting-almost-to-a-fault elephant is only too eager to do, even in the face of all kinds of dangerous obstacles – including the biggest obstacle of all, the dishonesty of the very kwuggerbug he is trying to help. If any of you happen to have a copy of this book, I'd love to borrow it!

So, *Horton Hatches the Egg* was the first book in the Horton series, and this is the story where we really get to see the depth of our favorite elephant's principles. In this story, a bird named Miss Mayzie is sitting on her nest, and she gets bored. She is tired of always doing the right thing, the responsible thing, tired of being tied down to her egg, tired of not being able to fly around and play and travel. And so Mayzie sees Horton the Elephant strolling by, and she sees an opportunity. She sweet-talks Horton into coming and sitting on her egg for her, while she runs a quick errand.

Horton, as we know, is an elephant with a HUGE heart. He is kind, he is honest, he is sensitive, and he is maybe a little bit naïve. It never occurs to Horton that anybody else would have anything less than the absolute best of intentions. He never thinks that

others might try to take advantage of his kindness. And that gets him into trouble, from time to time.

So Horton readily agrees to help Mayzie out, and tend to her egg while she is gone.

The problem is, Lazy Mayzie never had any intention of coming back. At least, not any time soon. But that didn't dissuade Horton. Horton made a promise to Mayzie, that he would guard her egg with his life, and that is what he intended to do.

Even when all of his friends ridiculed him.

Even when Fall turned to Winter and "icicles hung from his trunk and his feet."

Even when the people discovered him and figured that they could make a pretty penny off of charging admission to see "the elephant who thinks he's a bird."

Nothing – and I mean NOTHING – was going to convince Horton to go back on the promise that he had made.

"I meant what I said and I said what I meant," Horton repeats over and over and over again throughout the book. "An elephant's faithful, one hundred per cent."

It's a fun story, partly because we readers, as much as we love Horton, probably most of us relate a lot better to Horton's friends, and the people who stand by and stare at him, and laugh at him, or even exploit him for their own gain. We value honesty, and integrity, and keeping our word, but I think probably for most of us, we have our limits. How far are we willing to be pushed, before we say "enough is enough?" When it becomes apparent to us that Mayzie isn't coming home again, that we were duped into helping somebody who did not have the best intentions and we find ourselves stuck, then what?

- Some of us might be tempted to walk back on the commitment that we made, knowing that the other person has failed to keep their end of the bargain. And we would be completely justified in doing so.
- Or we may keep to our commitment, but grow to resent the other person in the process.
- Or we may allow ourselves to become calloused, or jaded, and resolve not to be so trusting next time. Our hearts may harden a little bit as a result. "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me," the saying goes.

Our scripture reading today from 1 Peter is written to a whole group of Hortons. In the days of the early church, the Christian community was faced with a long series of very serious challenges. Just 20 years after Jesus was arrested and crucified, the emperor Nero ascended to the throne in Rome and for the next 14 years the church in Rome suffered intense persecution at the hands of this evil and corrupt ruler. Nero was so corrupt that he even had his own mother executed when he thought that she was meddling too much in his affairs. In the year 64, Nero set fire to Rome, in an attempt to clear the way for him to build an enormous palace complex, but rather than owning up

to his decision, he blamed the fire on the Christians living in Rome, and had them systematically rounded up and burned alive.

If ever there was a time for the church to go underground, or for early followers of Christ to go back on their commitments they had made to their faith, this was that time. But no. In the face of ridicule and persecution, in the face of “three rifles aiming right strait at [their hearts], when even their very lives were at stake, “We meant what we said and we said what we meant. A Christian is faithful, one hundred per cent.”

All of this persecution only happened in the city of Rome. But about 30-50 years later, when Domitian and later Trajan were emperors, the persecution of Christians spread outward from Rome and into the smaller communities in the area. We have some reports of Christians being banished from the Roman empire – deported, based solely on their Christian faith, and other reports of Christians being executed. Many were brought up on charges of “obstinacy” when they would refuse to recant their religious views, and then get shipped off to Rome for trial and execution. We think that it was probably during this season that the book of Revelation was written, and that’s also why Revelation is so hard for us today to read and understand – much of it is written in a kind-of “code” language that the oppressed Christians of the day would understand, but that outsiders would not get.

That was also the season when we have the emergence of certain Christian symbols that we use even to this day – the most common one being the fish symbol, or the *ichthus*. When two people would be talking one of them would use their staff to draw a rainbow on the ground. If the other person was also a Christian they would draw a rainbow in the opposite direction, completing the picture of a fish. In Greek, the word for “fish” was “ichthus,” which was also an acronym for the Greek phrase Ἰησοῦς Χριστός Θεοῦ Υἱός Σωτήρ, translated “Jesus Christ, son of God, savior.” So in working together to draw this fish on the ground they were establishing with each other their common faith. And then they would know that it was safe to talk openly with each other.

So, 1 Peter was probably written sometime in this 80-year span of time, either during the reign of Nero, or Domitian, or Trajan, when the church was basically forced to hide underground, and when people would convert to Christianity, knowing full well that that could mean the end of their life. And people had to consider: If it ever comes down to it, will I stand up for my faith knowing that I could die a painful death if I do, or will I recant to save my life?

So, let’s read our scripture lesson this morning again, with that context in mind:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that

the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Basically, “To all of you Hortons out there – all of you living saints who keep following in Christ’s footsteps even through the dangers that are facing you; to all of you who keep finding new ways to proclaim the death and resurrection of Christ; to all of you who made this huge, life-changing, life-altering commitment to Christ and are now finding yourself persecuted as a result, know these things:

- When it seems like there is no hope left to be had here on this earth, take heart in knowing that our hope lies in a God who exists beyond this world. While the rulers and the riches of this world are corrupt and defiled, the inheritance that we have as children of God will last forever.
- We live under the protection of God. That doesn’t mean that we can go out and do stupid things and think that nothing bad will happen to us. That doesn’t mean that we won’t get rounded up and executed if we’re not careful. But it does mean that our eternal lives – our souls – are protected by God and God alone. And so no matter what happens to us in this life, we can look forward to an eternity with God where no earthly king or emperor or ruler can touch us.
- And therefore, rejoice. Rejoice that God is bigger than the corrupt rulers of this world. Rejoice that our faith is stronger than even death itself. Rejoice that the God who created us and the God who calls us and the God who claims us as his own will, in the end, get the last word.

Friends, thank God that we are not living in first-century Rome. That we don’t have to wake up each and every day faced with the very real decision: my faith or my life? What’s it going to be?

However, we *do* all face struggles in this life. We *all* come up against circumstances that challenge our faith, and that challenge our faithfulness. Do we go along with the status quo, if the status quo runs contrary to what we say we believe? Do we speak up, or do we speak out, voicing our convictions, especially when we know that our perspective might not be popular or well-received? Are we willing to take the risk and love, and serve the “Mayzies” in our life – even when doing so causes hardship to us and we run the risk of getting taken advantage of?

I encountered this *all the time* back in Albuquerque where there were panhandlers on just about every corner in the city. And the constant string of thoughts that ran through my head when I would sit at each traffic light: “Don’t make eye contact with them, because if you make eye contact you will feel more guilty about not helping them. Do they really need the help, anyway, or is this just a scam? What are they going to do with the money? How do I know that this \$5 is going to go to buy them food and not drugs or booze? There are places that they can go to get help if they really need it. It’s not up to me to fix homelessness in the city. I couldn’t afford to help them all if I tried. This would be like putting a band aid on a gaping wound.” and on and on the questions and the

assumptions and the excuses went. And then the light would turn green and I'd drive through the intersection and go on with my day.

But then, do you know who I really respected? The pastors in town who might have also driven through the same intersection and seen the very same people and maybe also didn't hand out cash willy-nilly, but who took the time to start an outdoor worship service and meal for people experiencing homelessness. Those who learned the names and the stories of some of these people, who took the time to see them as people, or even friends, and not just as a problem to be solved. These were the real Hortons. The people who would take it upon themselves to hear the call of the Mayzie bird and ask "how can I help?" rather than – like me – hiding behind a pile of excuses. The people who would take the risk and love when the rest of us would turn a blind eye, and then stick to the commitments that they made.

In the end of the story, after 51 long weeks the lazy bird comes back to re-claim the egg that Horton has kept warm this whole time. But when the egg hatches, out pops a baby elephant with wings – a sort-of "mini Horton." Reminding us of the same promise that the writer of 1 Peter reminds the persecuted Christians: This life that we are called to live is sometimes really hard. Choosing to do the right thing isn't always rewarded in this life. In fact, sometimes it even leads to *more* pain and suffering and ridicule and isolation. But if we step forward in faithfulness, and make that conscious choice to love even when it doesn't make sense; to stay faithful to God even when it's not the popular choice; to do the honest and honorable and grace-filled thing even when it is a horrible inconvenience to do so, then, in the words of the Beatitudes, "great is your reward in heaven."