

# Story and Meditation: Did We Say That?

November 8, 2020

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

Matthew 25:1-13

by *Eric Anderson*

Have you ever set out to do something that you regretted later?

One honu did.

He liked to sun himself in Kiholo Bay, with all the blues of the ocean behind him, the black sand beneath him, and Mauna Kea rising up against the sky in front of him. It was a pleasant place to nap and be warm and dream about the next meal in the sea.

One day, this honu got... ambitious. As he swam toward the shore, the sun shone off the summit of Mauna Kea in a way that just captured his imagination. He pulled himself onto the sand, and then the rock, and said to another honu resting there, "I'm going to the top of that mountain."

The other honu looked at him. "You're kidding."

"No, I'm not." And off he went.

It didn't take too long – by the standards of a honu traveling on land, that is – before he had climbed the beach and the rocks and entered the grassy area behind. The ocean and the other watching honu – none of whom thought this was a good idea and none of whom had offered to join him – were out of sight. He pulled himself through the grasses and around the big humps of rock and paused from time to time to catch his breath. It was hot. It was dry. It was hot. And dry. And whatever you might say about flippers in the water, they weren't all that efficient at moving a big heavy shell around on land. Did I mention that he was hot and thirsty?

At this point a kolea appeared, looking for snails and insects in the grasses. "Oh, hello," said the kolea. "How are you today?"

"I'm just fine," said the honu, and then decided it might as well tell the truth. "Well, except for being really hot and thirsty."

The kolea took a short hop into the air and came back down again. "The ocean's right back there," she told the honu. "Just turn around. You can't miss it."

"Oh, I know that," said the honu. "I'm on my way to climb the mountain."

“The mountain?” said the kolea. She looked back over her shoulder. “You mean that mountain?”

“That’s the mountain.”

She looked very carefully at it, and then said to the honu, “That’s a long way. Do you really want to do that?”

“I told everybody I would,” said the honu, and sighed. “Did I really say that? I’m starting to think it was a bad idea.”

“What if,” said the kolea thoughtfully, “I flew up to the top of the mountain, came back down, and told you about it?”

“Oh, that wouldn’t be right,” said the honu. “I couldn’t lie to all my friends that I’d been there.”

“No, you shouldn’t,” she said, “but you could tell them that I told you. Wait here.”

Without another word she took to her wings and rapidly disappeared to the east. The honu waited for some time. Even with wings, he realized, the summit of Mauna Kea was a long way off and a long way up. She didn’t return, in fact, until around sunset.

“It’s really rocky and steep up there,” she told him, “with hardly anything growing.” And she told him about ridges and cinder cones and observatories, of course. As she talked, the honu started to push his way back to the beach, with the kolea walking alongside him.

“And the sunset,” she told him, “is absolutely beautiful.”

About that time the two of them emerged from the grasses and saw the sun setting beyond Kiholo Bay.

“Like that, you mean?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she said. “It’s a lot like that. Different, but a lot like that.”

“I may not be able to climb a mountain,” said the honu, “but you know what? Together, we can climb a mountain.”

“Together,” said the kolea, “we can enjoy a sunset.”

Joshua summoned the people of Israel together as they had begun to enjoy God’s promised gift of a home in the land of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were the descendants of people enslaved, and they were free. They were the descendants of wanderers in the

wilderness, and they had homes. They were the descendants of people waiting for promises, and they had experienced blessing.

So Joshua asked them what they would do now. You see, they had spiritual options. Their ancestors before Abraham had worshiped other deities; they could worship them. Their parents and grandparents had lived in Egypt and some, clearly, had worshiped those gods; they could worship them. The people among whom they now lived, the residents of Canaan, they had gods of their own; they could worship them. Let's face it, that last option made a lot of sense. How many people over the centuries have turned to the deities worshiped in the place to which they moved? That would include some of my forebears, and probably some of yours.

Sara Koenig writes at Working Preacher, "And Joshua presents this as a genuine choice, not something they are compelled to do. In fact, the Hebrew of Joshua 24:15 puts it starkly, 'it may be evil in your eyes' to serve God!"

The people's response sounded rather gratifying. "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods." God had, after all, come through. Freedom. Home. A future. What more could you ask? Joshua, who had really pushed for this answer in the section between verse 3 and verse 14, suddenly sounded coy. "You cannot serve the LORD," he told them, and they insisted, "No, we will serve the LORD!"

"Then Joshua said to the people, 'You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.' And they said, 'We are witnesses.'"

Joshua realized that faithfulness is a big mountain, and most people climb it on a honu's flippers, not on a kolea's wings.

It has to be said that the central theme of Judges, First Samuel, Second Samuel, First Kings, and Second Kings – the sequels, if you will, to the book of Joshua – is the people of Israel saying, "Did we say that?" about their covenant with God. Put a little differently, the authors of this long theological history repeatedly observed that during this period, that monarch's reign, or in the midst of some crisis, the people of Israel had either lived faithfully or had betrayed God's trust. Usually you get an assessment like this: "He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD," a phrase used to describe two different kings just nine verses apart in the eighth chapter of Second Kings.

In the opinion of those historians, there was a lot of "Did we say that?" going on.

Ralph W. Klein writes at Working Preacher, "Few of us are tempted by any gods of other nations or any gods with other names, but as Luther made clear in his explanation of the First Commandment, anything one fears, loves, and trusts above everything else--whether that is riches, self, prestige, or whatever--is one's God. We all serve many gods."

We, too, find ourselves in the position of asking, “Did we say that?” about our covenant with God.

The election has given us all an opportunity – the election has invited us – to idolize the candidates we support and to demonize the candidates we oppose. There is some justification for some of that – some of the decisions and policies espoused by American political candidates fall into the realm of evil, in my opinion. Further, though, we have been invited to idolize or demonize those candidates’ supporters. There’s reason for that, too. Policies enacted by governments have real impact on real people. The overrepresentation of people of color in America’s prisons, which includes Hawai’i, is the result of legislation, of prosecutorial policy, of race-based grasp on power and wealth, of the ways Americans teach about race and culture, as well as of the individual decisions of juries and judges.

That’s one example. I’m sure you can think of plenty of examples of laws and policies and practices that have brought suffering to people. Those things lead lots of people – or should lead lots of people – to wonder, “Did we say that?” about their chosen candidate.

In this moment, we see the possibility of a shift in policies, practices, and laws to undo injustices we saw in the last administration and to make progress toward broader access to opportunity in our society. New leadership is no small thing. There is more work to be done than we imagine, however, and even as we move toward the society we dream of we will say, I know and you know, “Did we say that?”

If it only ended with politics: Americans have many gods. We worship wealth, we worship security, we worship order, we worship America (the notion that America is somehow a special nation immune from the sins and failings of other nations is, to my mind, not only delusional but heretical). We worship our past, we worship our race (ouch), we worship masculinity in a way that all too often becomes demonic, we worship...

Well. I have a lot of sympathy for Joshua’s sad statement, “But you cannot serve the LORD.”

But I also remember the kolea and the honu. The honu could not ascend to the mountaintop – nor could the kolea fly beneath the waves. Together, though, the honu could share a vision from the summit. Together, the kolea could speak of the wonders of the deep.

Kathryn Matthews writes at [ucc.org](http://ucc.org), “Loving God will inevitably lead us to worship God rather than idolize the false gods of modern culture (like materialism and nationalism and militarism, to name only two). Loving our neighbor will lead us to greater compassion and a firm commitment to justice, to making this a different and better world for all of God's children.

“However, this kind of living isn't sitting around and waiting; it's active and fully engaged in the present moment, as we trust in a future that is in God's hands, even if the timing of that future is unknown to us.”

As suspicious as I am of the word, “inevitably,” I think that loving our neighbor helps us be faithful to God. I think loving God helps us be faithful to our neighbor. I think attention to how we love one another and God helps us avoid worship of wealth and power and race and gender and safety.

I think that with a kolea’s help, a honu can survey the heavens from the summit of the mountain.

I think that with a honu’s help, a kolea can rejoice in the mysteries of the ocean.

I think that my metaphor isn’t enough, because while a kolea cannot bring a honu physically to the mountain nor a honu bring a kolea physically into the sea, human justice and human resources can accomplish both, and that kind of love should be our goal.

I think that with one another’s help, we just might be able to worship God.

Did I just say that?

Yes, I did – and you are witnesses.

Amen.