

# Story and Meditation: Delivered

March 14, 2021

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

John 3:14-21

*by Eric Anderson*

The 'apapane had taken a couple of experimental flights – extended hops, really, with wings extended and flapping to carry her just a little further along the branch just below the nest where she and her sister and her brother had hatched and grown and eaten and squabbled and... well, the nest they called home.

The night came with a storm.

The fledglings had been through rain and wind before. You have to expect that sort of thing on the slopes of Mauna Loa. They would huddle down deeper into the nest and try to all fit underneath their mother – that was getting more difficult as they grew, of course. All in all, she rather liked a rainy night. There was great comfort in being close together like that.

This night the tree began to swing as the wind grew stronger. The rain began to fall, and the chicks squirmed to find space, fluffing their own feathers as they did. The nest was rocking like a canoe on the ocean – a comparison that would make no sense to those mountain birds, by the way – and between the howling in the branches and the increasing pounding of the rain our young one was getting pretty alarmed. She'd never been through anything like this.

Suddenly a great patch of light flashed across the sky, vanishing as soon as it appeared but leaving everybody blinking. It was followed by an enormous crashing noise that echoed from the trees and the cliffs. Without thinking, the young 'apapane jumped. She jumped out from the huddle of chicks and mother. She jumped up to the side of the nest. She jumped out of the nest itself to a nearby branch.

The branch wasn't there, or at least not where she reached for it in the dark. With everything twisting in the wind, and the wind itself pushing on her, nothing was where she thought it was, including her own feet. Wings fluttering desperately, she fell into the dark, brushing against whirling leaves and missing attempt after attempt to grasp a branch or a twig or anything in the howling wind.

The next thing she knew she was in open air, still descending. All her wings could do was slow her down. In that wind, she could neither steer herself nor make her way upward. Flashes of lightning continued to suddenly illuminate the forest and then leave it pitch dark again, while rolls of thunder confused her and frightened her.

It took forever to reach the ground – you know, not really that long, but it sure seemed like forever in memory. She found herself near a tree trunk and huddled up against it. There was nothing else to do but wait – wait for her parents to come find her.

She knew they would. One of them would be right there, she was sure. Any moment. Any minute. Any... hour?

The storm went on, and she stayed by her tree, and her parents did not come.

The storm blew itself away in the night, and she stared out into the dark for any sign of movement that would show that her parents were on the way. She didn't see anything at all until, finally, morning began to bring light to the forest. Then, at last, she saw a red and black form flitting low through the trees, alighting briefly to take a good look at something, then moving on.

It was her father. She let out a cautious cheep, and he wheeled about in the air to come straight to her. For a long time they just held an 'apapane embrace, with her fledgling head tucked into his feathers.

"Why didn't you come for me?" she asked.

"I did," he said. "I've been looking for you all night."

She took a good look at him, and sure enough, his feathers were soaked and some out of place from struggling to fly in the gale. "I thought you'd find me right away," she said.

"Your mother and I – we will always search for you if you are lost," said her father. "But we are ordinary 'apapane. We will find you, but we also have to look for you. Looking takes time. Just remember that all through that time, we are searching, and we will not stop until we have found you."

Psalm 107 is a celebration song, a celebration of God's deliverance. This morning's reading takes up the third of four sections, each one describing a crisis, people's cries for help, God's aid, and a summons: "Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind." In the first section the people are lost in the desert, in the second they are imprisoned, and in the fourth they are in a storm at sea. In this third section they are beset with illness – this is just one of those odd coincidences of the lectionary and our current reality in a global pandemic.

"Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured affliction." There's a translation issue here, as Rolf Jacobson points out at Working Preacher. It's better rendered as "Some were foolish through their sinful ways." Dr. Jacobson writes, "...sometimes our sin is that we are stubbornly foolish. And when we are, our foolishness can lead to our own suffering."

I am not interested in blaming the victims of COVID-19, because we have seen this sin of folly manifesting both as personal sins – with people neglecting to wear masks or to keep their distance – and as collective sins, with governments and elected officials disregarding, discounting, or actively counteracting the best guidance of public health experts. The history of this pandemic will, I regret, look a lot like the history of other pandemics: official denial and personal irresponsibility has cost far more lives than it should.

As Matt Skinner writes at Working Preacher, “Here in the U.S.A. we live in a world where people were given the opportunity to make sacrifices to protect vulnerable and exploited populations and they chose personal indulgence instead.

“Everyone believes that it’s good to love their neighbor. But we live as though only our closest circles of like-minded friends and ideological mirrors really qualify as neighbors. The rest are strangers who have to fend for themselves.

“It’s not as though the love of God was wasted on the world. But the evidence suggests that such love hasn’t really caught on here as something to imitate.”

At this time last year I was leading a Lenten study program on the theme of Wisdom in the Scriptures. The irony that we got a year demonstrating the costs of folly is... well, ironic.

In this moment, we are, I think, still huddled up to the trunk of a strange tree wondering if the storm is really past. We are still hoping that our parents will show up and replace the cold comfort of the tree’s bark with warm feathers. We are still wondering when that will happen. As day dawns, we are perhaps just a little disappointed that it hasn’t come yet.

Psalms 107 is written from what we earnestly pray is our future, the time that we can tell this story: Our world was sick because of a combination of the vagaries of life – you know, the fact that diseases happen – and repeated human folly that deepened the crisis. We cried out to the LORD in our trouble, and God saved us from our distress, guiding us in healing and recovering, saving us from destruction. So we gave thanks to the LORD for steadfast love, for wonderful works to humankind.

That is our future. It is not – yet – our present, though we can see it coming.

Cheryl Lindsay asks at ucc.org, “Why is it so hard to make it through the wilderness... even when our needs are met, our path secured (if uncertain), and our God abiding with us?” The answer is, because the wilderness is a hard place, and as the psalmist also observes, imprisonment is a hard place, and a storm at sea is a hard place, and widespread illness and distress is a hard place. Our path has been relatively clear before us, and God has been with us, but... none of that means that the place isn’t hard and the path isn’t long and that God’s presence before the arrival of God’s deliverance isn’t... hard.

This is not, however, a “hang on” sermon. You’ve heard that from me... um... nearly every week for almost a year, now? This is a “get ready” sermon. The celebration time is coming. The deliverance is coming. The thanksgiving is coming. It won’t be as soon as Easter, and I don’t think it will be as soon as May when all adults should be eligible to receive vaccination – because being eligible is not the same thing as having all the doses on hand. The point is not when it will be, but that it will be, and thanksgiving will be the order of the day.

So give thought: how shall we thank God for steadfast love, for never leaving us, for bringing us to deliverance? How shall we thank God for our ability to realize the shortcomings of our society that allowed some to benefit and some to suffer more greatly? How shall we thank God for bearing with our folly, and for offering us divine wisdom? How shall we thank God when COVID-19 is our story and not our reality?

We can be thinking about it as the time draws nearer.

Amen.