

A short distance from the northeastern most point in the United States, Mount Desert Island is just a few latitudinal degrees south of Trondheim, Norway – the home of my paternal ancestors. Early in the morning of June 14th 2013, I walked into the Bar Harbor woods to take a farewell swim alone in this, my most favorite spot on earth. A day later I would be flying across the Atlantic to Frankfurt to begin a year's internship here in the Bergkirche.

There's no sign that points to Lake Wood Pond – you have to know it's there. It's an artifact of the Ice Age, and wild blueberry bushes nestle under the evergreens surrounding the crystal-clear lake. A rocky cliff – excellent for diving – breaks the ring of green on the eastern side of the shoreline. The season for swimming had not begun, and as I stood waist-deep in the icy water, a large tadpole swam up to me. As this baby bullfrog contemplated my navel, it occurred to me that he had never seen a human being before. He hadn't learned to be afraid, and so he just floated there, trying to figure out what kind of plant or animal I was. I had my swim and said farewell to the lake, the trees, the tadpoles, and promised to return the following summer – a promise I did not keep.

Last week I had a conversation with 5-year-old Jakob Peters in the Bergkirche courtyard, in which he told me about his Kindergarten trip to a pond with tadpoles and then taught me how to say tadpole in German: Kaulquappe. This conversation led me to think about the baby bullfrog that had never seen a human. The Gospel of John, including our sermon text, was written for people who had never seen Jesus. Here is the text:

"In a little while you won't see me anymore. But a little while after that, you will see me again."

Some of the disciples asked each other, "What does he mean when he says, 'In a little while you won't see me, but then you will see me,' and 'I am going to the Father'? And what does he mean by 'a little while'? We don't understand."

Jesus realized they wanted to ask him about it, so he said, "Are you asking yourselves what I meant? I said in a little while you won't see me, but a little while after that you will see me again."

I can't imagine that Jesus' reply would have done anything to clear up the disciples' confusion.

By the time those words were written, the tiny, continually persecuted group of Jesus followers had been on high alert for as many as a hundred years... a long time to wait for the return of someone you've never seen. Thirty or so years earlier, the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed for a second time. As years passed, and with the ascendance of the brutal ruler Nero, the hope of redemption from Rome seemed remote.

Was Jesus coming back or not? The message was not clear. The crucifixion story in Mark, the earliest of the Gospels, ends with an empty tomb and three women, who ran away in terror. Although in the Gospels, Jesus spoke often about the return of the Son of Man, he never once said that he was that Son of Man. Not only was this confusing for Jesus' followers: it remains a mystery for Bible scholars to this day.

Riding with my grandmother through the Florida woods as a child, I remember reading road signs like this: Jesus is coming: BE READY! they blared. OK, I would think; Jesus is coming. Should I

be scared? What do I need to be ready for? Those signs terrified me. The source of those signs was a passage in the Matthew gospel, a favorite within a certain brand of Christian piety that uses fear as a motivation for faith: *No one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son of man himself. Only the Father knows. And since you don't know when that time will come, be on guard! Stay alert!*

Staying alert is a tough assignment. It is exhausting. Hyper-vigilance, the psychological state of being chronically on alert, is a symptom of the mental injury known as Posttraumatic stress disorder. Traumatic stress had been a way of life in the Judeo-Christian world for a very long time. I think that, in this climate, the writer of John took on the task of making spiritual sense out of waiting, out of accepting what one has never seen before: *Blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed.*

Still, I'm unsatisfied with this text: *In a little while you won't see me, but a little while after that you will see me again.*" The question is cliché, but I can't help but ask it as I think of that chubby tadpole which had no clue, what I was: If we were to see Jesus today, would we recognize him? Would we like him? Would we have him arrested? Would we even care?

Living here in beautiful Wiesbaden, if not for the television and the internet, we could possibly forget that much of the world is engulfed in trauma - the trauma of war and all its attending violence and victims; the little ones who continue to be abused, ignored, bought and sold; the ravages of climate change and war that, in Somalia, Yemen, Nigeria and South Sudan, have produced famine; the 70 million people worldwide who are right now experiencing hunger. All the while, violence-prone leaders in various parts of the world foment fear and unrest. We continue to watch and wait. It is easy to become discouraged.

More than anything else, what encourages me in these times, are the random, and the intentional, acts of kindness and caring I am privileged to witness in my work here; you, who take on the responsibility of concern for each other, you, who – when praised – ask, "What did I do?" I love those sheep in the 25th chapter of Matthew. As the Son of Man welcomes them into the heavenly kingdom, they ask, "When did we feed you, or visit you or give you clothing?" When indeed.

We all know the answer to their questions: 'I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!'

I want to thank you, who are a source of comfort to others and a source of inspiration for me. I don't know how much time, if any, you spend watching and waiting for Jesus to return. Probably you are just too busy, as you see the face of God in the faces of the people you serve. And that's as it should be. Jesus told us not to worry so much about the future. The kingdom of heaven, when we open our eyes, is among us.

Amen