

# A GLOWERING SKY

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on Sunday, October 18, 2015

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## **PART I: “I Met You in the Rain”**

*This is a short story, about a year old, and it comes from Craigslist. Craigslist has a subsection called “Personals,” and “Personals” in turn has a subsection called “Missed Connections.” Herewith the story:*

I met you in the rain on the last day of 1972, the same day I resolved to kill myself.

One week prior, at the behest of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, I’d flown four B-52 sorties over Hanoi. I dropped forty-eight bombs. How many homes I destroyed, how many lives I ended, I’ll never know. But in the eyes of my superiors, I had served my country honorably, and I was thusly discharged with distinction.

And so on the morning of that New Year’s Eve, I found myself in a barren studio apartment on Beacon and Hereford with a fifth of Tennessee rye and the pang of shame permeating the recesses of my soul. When the bottle was empty, I made for the door and vowed, upon returning, that I would retrieve the Smith & Wesson Model 15 from the closet and give myself the discharge I really deserved.

I walked for hours.

I looped around the Fenway before snaking back past Symphony Hall and up to Trinity Church. Then I roamed through the Common, scaled the hill with its golden dome, and meandered into that charming labyrinth divided by Hanover Street. By the time I reached the waterfront, a charcoal sky had

opened, and a drizzle became a shower. That shower soon gave way to a deluge. While the other pedestrians darted for awnings and lobbies, I trudged into the rain. I suppose I thought, or rather hoped, that it might wash away the patina of guilt that had coagulated around my heart. It didn’t, of course, so I started back to the apartment.

And then I saw you.

You’d taken shelter under the balcony of the Old State House. You were wearing a teal ball gown, which appeared to me both regal and ridiculous. Your brown hair was matted to the right side of your face, and a galaxy of freckles dusted your shoulders. I’d never seen anything so beautiful.

When I joined you under the balcony, you looked at me with your big green eyes, and I could tell that you’d been crying. I asked if you were okay. You said you’d been better. I asked if you’d like to have a cup of coffee. You said only if I would join you. Before I could smile, you snatched my hand and led me on a dash through Downtown Crossing and into Neisner’s.

We sat at the counter of that five-and-dime and talked like old friends. We laughed as easily as we lamented, and you confessed

over pecan pie that you were engaged to a man you didn't love, a banker from some line of Boston nobility. A Cabot or maybe a Chaffee. Either way, his parents were hosting a soirée to ring in the New Year. Hence, the dress.

For my part, I shared more of myself than I could have imagined possible at that time. I didn't mention Vietnam, but I got a sense that you could see there was a war raging inside me. Still, your eyes offered no pity, and I loved you for it.

After an hour or so, I excused myself to use the restroom. I remember consulting my reflection in the mirror. Wondering if I should kiss you, if I should tell you what I'd done from the cockpit of that bomber a week before, if I should return to the Smith & Wesson that waited for me. I decided, ultimately, that I was unworthy of the resuscitation this stranger in the teal ball gown had given me, and that to turn my back on such sweet serendipity would be the real disgrace.

On the way back to the counter, my heart thumped in my chest like an angry judge's gavel, and a future — our future — flickered in my mind. But when I reached the stools, you were gone. No phone number. No note. Nothing.

As strangely as our union had begun, so too had it ended. I was devastated. I went back to Neisner's every day for a year, but I never saw you again. Ironically, the torture of your abandonment seemed to swallow my self-loathing, and the prospect of suicide was suddenly less appealing than the prospect of discovering what had happened in that restaurant. The truth is, I never really stopped wondering.

I'm an old man now, and only recently did I recount this story to someone for the first time, a friend from the VFW. He suggested I look for you on Facebook. I told him I didn't know anything about Facebook, and all I knew about you was your first name and that you once lived in Boston. And even if by some miracle I happened upon your profile, I'm not sure I would recognize you. Time is cruel that way.

This same friend has a particularly sentimental daughter. She's the one who led me here to Craigslist and these Missed Connections. But as I cast this virtual coin into the wishing well of the cosmos, it occurs to me, after a million what-ifs and a lifetime of lost sleep, that our connection wasn't missed at all.

You see, in these intervening forty-two years, I've lived a good life. I've loved a good woman. I've raised a good man. I've seen the world. And I've forgiven myself. And you were the source of it all. You breathed your spirit into my lungs one rainy afternoon at Neisner's, and you can't possibly imagine my gratitude.

I have hard days, too. My wife passed four years ago. My son, the year after. I cry a lot. Sometimes from the loneliness; sometimes I don't know why. Sometimes I can still smell the smoke over Hanoi. And then, a few dozen times a year, I'll receive a gift. The sky will glower, and the clouds will hide the sun, and the rain will begin to fall. And I'll remember.

So wherever you've been, wherever you are, and wherever you're going, know this: You're with me still.

## ENTR'ACTE: "Let It Be"

*A performance of the song by Debra Miller, alto, and Rob Hollander, guitar.*

When I find myself in times of trouble,  
Mother Mary comes to me  
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.

And in my hour of darkness,  
She is standing right in front of me  
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.

*Refrain:* Let it be, let it be,  
Let it be, let it be.  
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be.

And when the broken-hearted people  
Living in the world agree  
There will be an answer, let it be.

For though they may be parted,  
There is still a chance that they will see  
There will be an answer, let it be.

*Ref.*  
Yeah, there will be an answer, let it be.

*Ref.*  
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be.

And when the night is cloudy,  
There is still a light that shines on me,  
Shine on until tomorrow, let it be.

I wake up to the sound of music.  
Mother Mary comes to me,  
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.

Yeah, let it be, let it be.  
Let it be, yeah, let it be.  
There will be an answer, let it be.

*Repeat stanza 3.*

---

## PART II: This Sermon Is Dedicated to Janet Abel

*Coming after the heart-breaking story, as it did, the song was a soothing transition to Part II.*

This is a great week for Janet Abel, to be highlighted by her installation service at 3 o'clock this afternoon. She's been Associate Pastor here for four some years, and finally we're making it permanent. I'm very happy about that and happy for her as well. In addition, she celebrated the twentieth anniversary of her ordination on Thursday.

And so I dedicate this sermon to Janet. She holds a generalist position here as Associate Pastor, with some preaching and leadership of the Spiritual Book Group plus many other responsibilities.

The core thing of all clergy these days is to attend meetings, and so she attends a lot of meetings and does some weddings and funerals. However, she is singularly gifted at pastoral care, as are a number of you.

### **Pastoral Care the Responsibility of All**

Pastoral care is one of those things that is seen to be the responsibility of the pastor. Hence, it's called pastoral care. That's just plain wrong. It's simply untrue. It is the responsibility of all members of the church. If you look on the back of the Bulletin, you'll see the list of staffing, and the very first entry

is “Ministers — the entire congregation.” That’s because it falls under the category of “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

All of us should be involved in pastoral care, all of us. The clergy? Yes. The crusty old men? You know who you are. Despite the crust, it’s for them also. The overly busy mom? You too. Teenagers? Male and female. Yes, you also. Older women seem to be unusually skilled at pastoral care. Younger men often have the most work to do on it.

Pastoral care is not as hard as it seems because the inner essence of it, the deep core of it, is the gift of presence, which is something all of us have and can contribute.

In many cases, if there is a tragedy, if something has happened to the members of a family that causes them to drop to their knees or that brings tears to their eyes, we often don’t know what to say.

Sometimes we mumble platitudes that usually don’t help, like “Oh, it’ll be okay” to the person who just lost a spouse, and no, it won’t be okay. Other times your tendency might be to say “Bummer. Tough luck.” Don’t say that either.

But all of us can give the gift of presence. All of us can be there. Sometimes the most important thing to do is simply to keep quiet and just be there to express unspoken sympathy for somebody who is suffering.

### **Care Is Drawn Out from the Soul**

What I’m going to say next might seem like bragging, but if you knew the full truth, you would realize that this is emphatically not the case. Within the last month, three therapists in town came to me for pastoral help. These are people who are in the helping profession,

and they came to me! It’s like whoa, he must be elite! Well, I’m here to report to you that I was no help whatsoever to all three.

Part of the reason for this is that, in a very deep sense, it’s not my place. The answers are in their souls. And so I was able to be with them in the same way that you can be with anybody else who is in need of pastoral care.

But the answer, the guidance, the comfort, whatever it is in your soul that can be drawn out to aid the sufferer is all to the good. This often is available simply by your being there for someone who needs you to listen and listen intently to the point that you get it. You understand where he or she is coming from, and that engenders empathy, which can be felt on the soul level.

This is what Janet does, par excellence. And that is why we are fortunate to have her in our midst.

### **Any Time, Any Place Can Be Holy**

Let’s go back to the story for just a moment. The man from Boston. He never got an answer to his “Personals” ad. So perhaps the woman doesn’t want to answer or perhaps she’s gone. We don’t know.

But I’d like to offer one question and one observation based on that story. They are very simple. The question is: “What did the woman do to save the guy’s life?”

And the observation is: Any time and any place can be holy. By implication, all times, all places can be holy.

Therefore, our meeting together, one to another, regardless of where and regardless of when, can be our sacrament.

*Amen.*