

# UNEARTHLY VAMBRACES

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on Father's Day, Sunday, June 18, 2017

*Lectionary Reading: Proverbs 8:1-6.*

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

## **P**referred Treatment for a Younger Son, not for Older Girls

I'd like to begin on this Father's Day with a true confession, which is not unique to me. As a matter of fact, I would bet that many, most, or maybe all of you could make the same confession. That is that I was raised sexist, racist, and homophobic. Let me talk about the sexism part for starters.

I had two sisters, seven and ten years older than I. Surprisingly, I never had to make my own bed because I was a boy. My sisters made their own beds for themselves. Another plum was that I was allowed to have a car in high school, and my sisters were not allowed this privilege.

When my sisters complained to my dad about this, he informed them in perfect logic, in my hearing, that a guy needs a car in order to take a girl on a date. You get picked up for a date, he pointed out, speaking of my sisters. Therefore, you do not need a car. The shadow side of that was that the girls did not have to have jobs in high school. They could simply go to school, but I needed to have a job to support my car.

This difference in our treatment came to a head in my nuclear family one night after supper with an argument about the dishes. It was one of those moments in family life, and

it could have turned out very badly. It didn't, though, because my parents were pretty good at apologizing to one another. But my dad was in a time in his life when his career was not going well, and he was down in the dumps for a while, a couple years, actually.

## **S**exism in the Family of Origin

Mom had committed herself to do something special that evening — I don't remember what it was, but supper was over. All five of us were in the kitchen. Having other plans, mom made the mistake of asking dad if he would do the dishes. His response was remembered in the family lore for many years, to this day.

The story is that we had a built-in dishwasher under the kitchen sink. His reply was, and I quote, "I bought you a dishwasher. I married a dishwasher. We're raising two dishwashers. The answer is 'No!'" I found that I needed to go deal with my homework right away. Mom was on her way to the store to buy twin beds. It was a tense moment.

They made up, but we never forgot the brutal comment that he had made, and I had never heard sexism articulated so plainly in my life.

So off I go to seminary, finally, and this is in the early 1980's. The first generation or so of

feminists had been winding down at this point, and sexism among the men at seminary was obvious, everywhere to be found. One of their jokes had to do with women preachers, and the joke went like this: They were likened to dogs walking on their hind legs. The punch line was, “They don’t do it well, but we’re sort of amazed they can do it at all.”

I told you at the outset, it’s true confession time. So that was seminary for me.

### **A Turnaround: Attracted to Female Preachers; Schizophrenia**

It’s going to get better. I know all of you are thinking about leaving at this point. My impasse was, first of all, a woman by the name of Cynthia Jarvis. There’s a very prominent Presbyterian church right on the main drag on Nassau Street in Princeton, with a high and powerful senior pastor. Cynthia was the associate pastor, and she’s the one I wanted to hear. She’s the one who always had the message that somehow or other touched my heart.

At the same time, another woman preacher was in her ascendancy, Barbara Brown Taylor, now considered one of the finest preachers the world has ever seen. And so my impasse, which I tried to ignore, was that the preachers I wanted to hear were women, even though I would make jokes about them among the guys.

I entered the church, finally, but I wasn’t able to articulate this impasse at the time. Later I came to use a word for it. I was schizophrenic about women because I would take the notion of women and venerate them. So you have the Virgin Mary throughout virtually all of Christendom. You have the Lady Sophia that Judy spoke about from Proverbs 8 today. This feminine notion of the wisdom

of God, prominent in the church in which I was raised, is that you have the idea of God — male, masculine, white beard with the Lady Sophia working together for the Creation, to make the Creation.

### **Finding Mysticism in the Kabbala; Females of the Biggest Churches**

As I continued my theological studies, I came upon Jewish mysticism, the Kabbala, and it featured prominently and exalted in the feminine face of divinity, called Shekinah. I Didn’t learn it at all in seminary, but what a rich pool of theology is found there. The two most famous churches in all of Christendom: In Istanbul, the Hagia Sophia, Holy Wisdom, named after that feminine counterpart in Proverbs, and the other one in France, Notre Dame, Our Lady.

So this is the veneration of femininity, but then look at the way in which it treats real women, flesh and blood women. You have veneration and then denigration. Always second class. And so the argument was that you take the sexism found in First Century Palestine, and you make it into holy writ in the New Testament, and then, at that point, the argument is that it’s God’s will. It’s permanent. That’s the way it ought to be. You may not like it, but it’s the way God likes it. Deal with it.

And then I entered into a denomination that says, “God is still speaking,” which is very problematic for those kinds of views.

All right. To use an old phrase, “We’ve come a long way, baby.” I’d like to offer you some signs of hope. I have five examples I would like to give you of the way in which this change has been and is happening, in a societal way.

## I. FIRST OF THE SIGNS OF HOPE

- **Women theologians.** Since the 1960's, we now have about 57 or so years — in other words, really two generations' worth of women theologians — and I'd like to name a few of them because they are the best in the world in many ways:
  - a. Sallie McFague.** Taking the notion of the body of God and ecological sensibility to theology.
  - b. Katherine Jefferts Schori.** One of the bishops for the Episcopal church.
  - c. Diana Eck.** Arguably number one in interfaith dialogue in the world, the best at it.
  - d. Sister Joan Chittister.** She has the most difficult job in the world. She is a nun, living in the shadow of the Golden Dome in South Bend, Indiana, taking on the Holy Roman Empire, the Roman church, all by herself. One theological article after another after another, never giving up. Brilliant work by her.
  - e. Karen Armstrong.** Simply one of the best theologians in the world at the time.
  - f. Peme Chödrön.** Doing the same thing from the point of Buddhism.
  - g. Elaine Pagels.** Elaine Pagels and her friend **Karen King**, Elaine at Princeton, Karen at Harvard, working together on the Gnostic Gospels and our understanding of Mary Magdalene.

**h. Antje Jackelen.** She is the Lutheran Archbishop of the church of Sweden and one of the leading theologians on the dialogue of science and religion.

**i. Barbara Brown Taylor.** She is now a professor of World Religions, in addition to preaching virtually everywhere that I've already mentioned.

**j. Amy Jill Levine.** Daughter of Abraham Heschel. She is a Jewish New Testament theologian, one of the best.

That's our two generations, just hitting some high points of women theologians.

## II. SECOND OF THE SIGNS OF HOPE

- We also have women preachers by the thousands. I'd like to mention four of them from our area. They are all fine ministers:
  - a. Janet Abel.** One of the reasons I wanted to bring her to this congregation was that, when I was at a previous church I had a fifteen-minute drive to church, and I would turn on the radio, and she would set me right for the day listening to her sermons on the radio. So I was always sort of after her ever since.
  - b. Sara Baron.** She's in Apalachin, a Methodist. Unfortunately, another church in Schenectady stole her away. But she is a brilliant mathematician minister.
  - c. Elizabeth Ewing.** Elizabeth is across the river, at Christ Church Episcopal.

**d. Pat Raube.** In Endicott, Pat is at Union Presbyterian Church.

### III. THIRD OF THE SIGNS OF HOPE

This is probably one that's most personal to me because I've had a chance to watch the upbringing of my daughter, and then also the upbringing of my nieces. We have a generation of girls, raised now with much less sexism in their experience of growing up. For my daughter, looking at her experience relative to the experiences of my sisters — always having to make their own beds and doing the dishes. You can see a huge change between the two generations and the way in which the 20- and the 30-year-olds, now women, are raising their little ones. A change by the generation.

It has the upside that those people of the subsequent generations have a heightened sensitivity when they experience being denigrated or put down or limited. It has the shadow side, though, a downside in that they have a little bit of naïveté, a bit of foolishness. Like, why do they need feminism? But that was then, right?

### IV. FOURTH OF THE SIGNS OF HOPE

- There are role models in virtually every field. Whatever a little girl wants to do with her career, with her life, with her adulthood, there are good role models out there for every one of them, including all the jobs dominated by men:

**a. Sally Ride.** An astronaut. (God rest her soul.)

**b. Lisa Randall.** A Harvard theoretical physicist. She has the ability to write in such a way that we can understand it. She's brilliant.

**c. Danica Patrick.** A race-car driver.

**d. Maryan Mirzakhani.** She is a Harvard mathematician, who, like Lisa, has the ability to communicate her ideas to ordinary people. She's at Stanford, one of the best mathematicians out there.

**e. Angela Merkle.** Politics. Let me at least raise up Angela. You have the hard right; you have the hard left. You can all argue, but here's one who has navigated the leadership of Germany in a sterling way as a politician.

So you've got theologians, preachers, a generation of girls being raised differently, role models, and now the one that's the most powerful of all.

### V. FIFTH OF THE SIGNS OF HOPE

There are cultural symbols that work in an archetypal way for men and for women, and I'd like to give you two examples. One of them is hands down my favorite. This one speaks to me at a primal level. It is, in my opinion, one of the best messianic scenes in a movie that I have ever seen. It's also in a musical play; it's also in a book. But it's here in the movie:

- *Phantom of the Opera.* So you have the climactic scene. I will describe it briefly for you. You have Christine and Raoul, two of the three lead characters. They have made their way down into the bottom layer of the opera house, and so the Phantom has captured Raoul, has him lashed to a gate. He's waist deep in water, and the Phantom is threatening to drown this guy if Christine, who is engaged to Raoul, doesn't forsake Raoul to go with the Phantom instead.

So it's one of these impasses, an impossible situation. There's no way out. The Phantom has all the power. And so she can go with him, and save Raoul's life, or she can refuse and Raoul will be killed. Those are her only two options.

And it's one of these things where all three of them are singing at the same time, so what I had to do was to take the DVD and listen to one, rewind it and listen to the other, rewind it and listen to the third until I got what each of the three was singing in this climactic scene.

And so it concludes this way, with Christine singing, "Pitiful creature of darkness, what kind of life have you known? God give me the courage to show you, you are not alone." And then she kisses him passionately. This is not a peck on the cheek, and you can see the hatred and the anger and the violence dissolve in the Phantom. You see him slouch down with just simply one act of love expressed to him, this pitiful creature of darkness.

It's very similar to the woman caught in adultery, and the Jews trying to trap Jesus on it because there's no way out of that, except that there was, and Jesus found it. And Christine found it. And this is a messianic scene, which operates at an archetypal subterranean level in our souls. It's not a coincidence that her name is Christine, which is feminine for Christ. And then to buttress that, of all things, the role was played by Emmy Rossum, Emmy being short for Emmanuel.

The other cultural symbol that I have to mention at this point is:

- ***Wonder Woman***. Sweeping the country right now, setting all kinds of records, I will do no spoilers. A vambrace, for those wondering what the deal is with the sermon title is Medieval armor. It's the thing that's on her forearm that does the power for Wonder Woman. So that's what a vambrace is here.

There are multiple materials for sermons in this movie. It is packed with Jungian archetypes. But I do want to share just a couple of thoughts about it with you.

If you get a chance, read Jill Lepore. She's a Harvard history professor writing editorials for *The New Yorker* and the *New York* magazine, right now in *The New York Times*. She's the one who a number of years ago wrote a book called *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*. And I'd like to quote from one of her interviews. She's been very busy since the movie came out:

"Superman appeared in 1938, Batman in 1939, Wonder Woman in 1941." As an aside, the reason Wonder Woman came out was because Batman and Superman were too violent. They needed a kinder, gentler superhero so they created Wonder Woman in 1941. "Of the hundreds of comic-book superheroes created in the 1930's and 1940's, only these three have lasted, uninterrupted, since they began. Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman have all been battling evil together since 1942."

Then later in the 1940's, after the war, they asked a question because all these superheros that had been created had a "Justice Society," which in our time morphed into the Justice League. But then it was called the Justice Society. They put out a poll, "Should Wonder Woman be allowed, even though a woman, should she be allowed to join the Justice Society?" 1,597 kids said yes and 203 said no. 197 of the 203 were boys, so there were still six girls who said no.

"But in a foreshadowing of what was to come, Wonder Woman was allowed to join the Justice Society as their — take a guess, shout it out — as their secretary. 'Good luck, boys,' she would call out after the men, while she stayed behind at headquarters answering mail. Ever since, she's been the Cinderella of the family — overlooked and neglected, and yet plainly the best of them."

Quoting Tyler Huckabee, who writes on the theology of movies: "What Diana [Wonder Woman] does is soldier through to redemption — through a refining process that leaves her principles intact, her innocence secure,

and her redemption in motion. You're out of Eden and on your way to Heaven. You know you can't save everyone along the way. But that's what you're going to do" anyway.

And then quoting Richard Brody, a *New Yorker* film critic, "Diana isn't a warrior to end all wars; she's a warrior to warn against wars — and against the parochial, self-enclosed island doctrines which are employed to justify them."

Operating at an archetypal level in the souls of us all.

To conclude, you might be asking, "What is the deal with all of this feminist stuff on Father's Day?" Seriously! Why would anybody be stupid enough to do that? To borrow a phrase from another movie, you and I, we have all "sensed a disturbance in the force." Patriarchy is that disturbance. It has created for generations unreasonable expectations for little boys, and it has stunted the expectations for little girls.

Do you want to give a gift for your guy for Father's Day? Do your part to restore balance.

*Amen.*