

Overlooking the Obvious  
Benjamin Maynard  
Written for 8/15/2010

I've been listening to sermons at Meadowbrook now for several years, and I've picked up on something. They always start with a joke. So here it goes: A Rabbi, a Priest and a monkey walk into this bar. Now, before... Oh. Okay. Never mind.

Let's start instead with an image. Smokey the Bear, big, brown and on his hind legs, with a park ranger's hat and speaking in a low grumble. Here's another one, the Kirtland's Warbler, a small grey backed bird with bright yellow feathers, a little smaller than a robin. Alright, where are we? The answer, Northern Michigan in the 1970's.

The Kirtland's Warbler is one of the rarest birds in North America. Birders come from all over the country simply to try and spot this bird. When they see it, sometimes they applaud. Often they cover their mouths, or just stand silently in awe of this elusive creature. You can imagine the incredible value that Nature lovers, Birders, and of course the Forest Service place on this bird. As the population in Northern Michigan expanded and towns spread deeper into the woods, the Forest service had noticed that the Warbler population was declining, year by year. At this rate, the birds would become extinct. So how did they solve this problem? I'll come back to this.

First I'd like to make sure I didn't scare you too much with today's reading. I was given the choice of picking my own or going off some suggestions by Rev. Ritter, and after investigating, this one got me quite curious.

Jesus is the speaker of the passage, and he is first talking to his disciples. He tells them "Sorry guys, I bet you thought I was here to bring peace." The disciples are probably confused; peace is the reason they follow him. "Well, I'm here to bring division. I wanna light this world on fire, and I wish it was started already!"

Um, wait a minute, is this the same Jesus we call The Prince of Peace? Bringer of Goodwill, We sing about: Let There Be Peace on Earth, Away in a Manger?

At this point I'm going to turn to the source of the answers to many of my problems in life, YouTube. A British TV commercial went viral on the site a few years ago. I'll play it for you now. It shows two teams of basketball players, one wearing white and one wearing black. It asks you "how many passes the team in white makes". It shows you the video, and most people can get it right, the answer is 13. But, the video is only half over. It then asks if you managed to catch the moonwalking bear in the background of the video. The basketball sequence plays again and a bear, sure enough, can be seen dancing by in the background. The key phrase of the commercial plays at the end: It's easy to miss something you're not looking for. Watch out for cyclists.

When God sent down our savior from Heaven, he sent a human being. Jesus had emotions and was in every way human. So it's understandable that Jesus got a little frustrated. Jesus' emotions are kind of like the moonwalking bear: no one expects them to be there, so we overlook it and at first don't that Jesus wasn't actually perfectly emotionless. He knew that some amount of destruction and disagreement was necessary in order for the Kingdom of God to be achieved on Earth. Every day there are theological arguments, debate, and destruction over religion. Jesus just wants us to realize this side of the issue.

Besides, we come to church for unity and peace, not to be told that we're going to be lit on fire. It's easy enough to overlook the downside of a solution. When two people fight, there is a winner. When someone is right, someone else is wrong. When things change, the old way is kicked out. But change has to happen. Something has to be lit on fire to start something new. And this brings us back to the Warbler.

Biologists started looking into the issue. What they found at first was the Kirtland's mortal enemy, a big ugly bird called the Cowbird. These birds were picking off Warblers one by one by invading their nests, laying their eggs and kicking out those of the Warblers. The birds were simple enough to take care of. They were trapped in cages, and either relocated or removed. Their species was not in danger. Problem solved? Almost. The population of Warblers stopped decreasing, but it didn't start to increase. The issue, the scientists soon figured out, was that the Warblers nested only in the younger patches of Jack Pine trees. And this is where our friend Smokey the Bear comes in. The Forest Service had been doing such a good job preventing forest fires that the jack pines were not burning down. These trees had nowhere to grow because the forest wasn't being cleared. Fires were natural in the area before it was populated and were essential to the growth of new trees. So what do you do?

Start lighting fires. The Forest Service began controlled burns. First, a certain area was analyzed and selected for the process. The area was isolated by trenches dug by the workers, and then lit on fire. The great irony was that the people who worked so hard to fight fires were now starting them! Who would think that using the destruction of fire is actually the solution to preserving a species of bird?

Back when I was searching for background on the Bible passage, I found a translation from “The Message”, a paraphrase of The Bible in modern terms. It quotes Jesus saying this:

"I've come to start a fire on this earth—how I wish it were blazing right now! I've come to change everything, turn everything rightside up—how I long for it to be finished! Do you think I came to smooth things over and make everything nice? Not so. I've come to disrupt and confront!

This translation interprets Jesus' words as less about fire and more about the change that results from it—as a creative fire. Instead of seeing fire as change for the worse, this translation gives fire the ability to turn things “rightsided up”. And of course Jesus longs for it to be finished! Patience is good, but only to a certain length; when things aren't going according to plan, impatience can be the right answer. It is interesting to see what we'd consider “upside down” as turning things back “rightsided up”. It makes sense when you think about it.

I love the things people say about the weather in Michigan. “If you don't like it, wait a few minutes.” The weather in Michigan can be crazier than my Aunt driving a Jet Ski, and seriously, if you've never ridden with her, you're missing out on something. But despite the seeming randomness of the weather, meteorologists have been able to predict coming weather pretty well, and with little information. They get the current and historical temperature, and a big weather map, and from that have to use computers and even intuition to give a prediction of what's going to happen. And even with all that technology and practice they can't get it right.

These days, a lot of professions use similar skills that look at life under a microscope. Economists watch the stock market and predict where to invest and what will happen. Chemists study reactions for minute changes in temperature, charge or appearance. Even teachers have to adapt to small changes in the classroom environment and students.

In the second part of the scripture reason, Jesus turns to some farmers. “Hypocrites!”, he calls them. All day long, when they're not watching over their fields, they watch the sky to predict the weather. Some farmers were so good at watching the skies that they could give you a forecast for practically the whole farming season. But, as Jesus reminds them, they spend so much time watching the skies, that they lose track of how they act. Jesus asks us to turn inward and use our analytical skills on ourselves.

What are we missing in our lives? What actions do we do unconsciously that we would only notice if we

watched ourselves like the farmers watched the weather?

Have you ever watched a video recording of yourself? I don't know why, but watching myself always seems weird. I think most people feel a sort of anxiety seeing or hearing themselves from an outside perspective. I think this anxiety is what keeps us from looking. But looking is what Jesus asks us to do, not necessarily by taping ourselves, but by examining our actions as closely as we watch our work.

If Jesus were giving that speech today, he'd probably give props to a guy named Neo. Neo is a character in the movie *The Matrix*. You may not be familiar with the plot, so I'll give you some background without spoiling the movie for those who haven't seen it. Basically, a group of people discovered that life as we know it is just a program, a simulation of how life might actually be. But, select people can escape this program. The program in the movie is referred to as *The Matrix*.

The hero of the story, Neo, eventually learns to read the code in the world around him. He does through by concentrating and observing, and figuring out the rules of the world. For example, what we experience as *deja vu* is actually a glitch in the matrix; when the programming goes wrong and repeats itself. Eventually, he becomes such a good interpreter of what is going on around him that he can... okay my spoiler alarm is going off. But basically, he learns to control himself with the same knowledge that he uses about the world around him.

The two lessons presented in the scripture revolve around a central point, observing. Things in life, especially in life these days are so complex and so deeply rooted that it is often hard to see a main purpose. Luckily we have the ability to look at what is around us and what is inside us to see what is not obvious at first glance. It takes a little effort to see what looks like a misfortune as something that brings change for the better.

The film "*Up In The Air*" is about a group of people whose job it is to lay other people off. They travel around the world spreading the bad news in a way that makes it "softer". They would bend the truth into some horribly optimistic statements: this is a new journey, a turning point in your life, you are now free to pursue your dreams. Just, not your dreams with this company. I think the writer of the novel and of the screenplay exaggerated the optimism on purpose. *Up In The Air* is an interesting counterpoint to looking for the bright side. If Jesus had instead said "I bring not peace, but division. But who wants to be peaceful anyway?", this reading would not have made much sense. There are limits to what we can write off as positive change and it is important to be at least a little weary of them.

One day, back when the forests of Northern Michigan were getting their makeover for the Warblers, a forest started the Fire service blew across the road, into a group of dry bushes. Immediately, the fire got out of control. It was a massive fire that damaged property and even ended up killing one of the Forest Service workers. Some see his death as a tragedy and detest the work of the Service. Others though, see even his death as a sacrifice for the animal kingdom, the survival of nature, and of mankind.

Turning 19 yesterday was a big step for me. The reality of going back to school hit me. I have to leave my family and friends and house and church AGAIN. It seems like this transition could be... painful. But when I stop and look at the reality, when I look at how great the transition last year went, I can't help but feel positive.

Maybe we should play with fire, maybe we should start over, burn some relationships and predisposed notions down to the ground and peacefully start over, regrow, and look again at what really is obvious. Amen.