



**April 2, 2006**

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

John 12: 20-33

## “Only Thunder”

Once there was a small boy who lived in a medium-sized town. He lived next door to a vacant lot, and there was another vacant lot behind his house. He could play outside and imagine he was WAY out in the country. It was wonderful. He liked to pretend he was a pioneer, walking sturdy and stalwart beside his family’s covered wagon; seeking a good shaded site near water where the family could build their new home.

He also liked to pretend he was an Indian brave, dark and strong and swarthy—who could track any animal, live in the wild, mimic the call of birds and walk soundlessly in deerskin moccasins. His name would be “Soaring Eagle”, and he would marry an Indian princess with eyes dark as a summer night, and an inner strength and bravery to match his own.

In the vacant lot behind his house was a beautiful, lush, giant oak tree. His pioneer family chose to build right by the tree. “Soaring Eagle” always rested under the tree after many weeks of tracking animals. Actually, it was under that tree that “Soaring Eagle” first spoke alone to the Indian princess.

The tree was a wonderful place for hanging a swinging rope—then he could be Tarzan. The boy’s dad nailed slats on the trunk so he could climb right up into the branches.

Oh, that tree! It smelled so clean and fresh. The rough bark felt good against a tear-stained cheek after a scolding from parents. The sighing of the wind in its branches could soothe the tired soul.

Once the boy even sneaked out of his house after bedtime, to climb up into the tree and gaze at the stars. It seemed he could almost reach out and touch them, they were so bright and clear and close.

The boy grew older and began attending school, but he still found time nearly every day to go out to the tree and play, imagine and dream. One day when he came home from school, he heard his older sister talking excitedly with her friends about the lot behind the house having been sold. A new home was going to be built by a family who had purchased the property. The boy quietly went out to the tree, climbed into the branches and sat feeling empty. The day, a few weeks later, he came home to find bulldozers clearing the lot, and the tree cut down, he went into his room and locked the door. The tears just wouldn't stop coming. They streamed down his cheeks and soaked the bedclothes as he lay sprawled across his bed.

The boy's family tried to coax him out for dinner, to no avail. Finally his parents became angry and pounded on his door.

“Open up this minute!”

“For heaven's sake, child! It was ONLY a tree!”

Once there was a young girl who had just passed her thirteenth birthday. She was finding that moving from childhood into her teens was not turning out to be a very pleasant experience. None of her clothes seemed to fit right. Her arms and legs were long, and yet if she bought clothes for her height, they didn't seem to fit anyplace else; they sagged and drooped in awkward places. Her hair always fell into her eyes and was limp and uncooperative. She just KNEW the kids at school thought she was a freak. When she walked through the halls, she looked straight ahead, trying not to notice the other kids laughing and chatting together. She was just SURE they were laughing at HER; talking about HER.

There was a boy in her homeroom class who sat next to her. He had dark curly hair and dark eyes that always seemed to sparkle with an impish delight. He would come into school on cold winter days with hands red from the cold—he never wore gloves. She'd laugh when he'd sometimes grip the back of her neck with a hand like an ice cube. She really liked this boy. But he certainly would never take her seriously.

One day the homeroom class was preparing to leave on a field trip. The teacher had instructed them to each choose a partner to sit with on the bus and keep track of during the time away from school. There was a buzzing in the room as the students consulted their friends. The girl sat with her eyes down, waiting to see who would be left over to be her partner. Suddenly she felt a playful squeeze on her neck. Raising her eyes, she saw the dark sparkle in the eyes of the boy seated next to her.

“Hey, wake up!” he said, laughing. “I've been doing everything I can to get your attention. You stay up all night, or something?” She shook her head. “No,” she said, smiling. “Wanna be partners?” he asked. “Sure, ok.”

What a day that was. She sailed into her house after school like the Queen Mary. The next days and weeks she talked constantly about her new friendship.

“For heaven’s sake,” her parents cautioned her, “you don’t need to get so worked up over this. It’s ONLY puppy love.”

Once there was a man whose wife died suddenly three days after their 50th wedding anniversary. The shock and pain of loss was sharp and piercing. As the weeks went by, and then months, he found more and more comfort in his faithful dog. The dog, a long-eared mutt, had been left as a puppy out in the country, dumped off by some city folks who’d gotten tired of him quickly, or didn’t know what to do with the last of an unwanted litter. The pup had straggled to their farmhouse, half-starved, wet, bedraggled. The man’s wife had brought him inside and nursed him back to life and health. The man wasn’t one to hold with house pets—animals belong OUTSIDE, he’d always said. But this little mutt had a funny way about him that really grew on you. Soon he was solidly established as a member of the household. The man’s adult son stopped by often after the death of his mother, to check on his father and provide support. He was struck by the way his dad spoke to the dog and just generally doted on the pet. “For heaven’s sake, Dad,” his son teased, “the way you talk to him, you’d think he could understand you and answer back! Remember, it’s ONLY a dog!”

Once, long ago, there was a traveling preacher. He preached and taught in an occupied country. People were really impressed with him. They were excited about possibilities that he might lead them in overthrowing the country that ruled their land. Several of his closest followers were suspected of being involved in a resistance movement. The teacher talked a lot about a new kingdom, a different kind of government, and he seemed to have incredible leadership potential.

But something seemed to go sour near the end of his career. He started saying a lot of defeatist kinds of things: like, he was going to have to die- be killed by government forces. He said crazy and confusing things that were impossible to understand- things about seeds needing to die so plants could grow and bear fruit. He said that if you cling to your life as if it’s the most important thing in the universe, you’ll lose your life. But if you don’t, you’ll have a better kind of life. Nobody was too sure what this was all about, but they DID notice a really loud noise when the preacher finished speaking. People asked each other, “what was that?” And the reply came from others in the crowd: “It’s only thunder.” Somebody else thought maybe it was an angel trying to tell the preacher something—but most everyone agreed it was only thunder.

Angels don’t really talk to people, do they? At least not right out loud. Well, maybe to unusual people- saints, maybe—or poets. We know what’s what - we know what we hear in the real world, in regular ordinary days of our lives. God did and said things long ago, maybe, in direct ways, back in the time of the Bible stories. Today, things are different. We know what’s important and how life works- God’s not so DIRECT in his communications any more. We know what we hear, don’t we?

Angel voices telling us of God's love for us? Telling us what's important and what matters in day-to-day life? Voices telling us God is glorified through things the world sees as unimportant? God is glorified even through tragic events, like a man's execution on a cross?

NO, it's ONLY thunder.

It's ONLY a pet dog.

It's ONLY puppy love.

It's ONLY a tree.

Angel voices? Speaking to us?

NO. It's only thunder.