

Sunday Message: May 31, 2015
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Koinonia – Grand Junction CO

Throughout history, colorful, graceful, rhythmic, wonderfully winged flying creatures have been viewed as sentient beings with special meaning. One species of birds - the Crane – is considered among the oldest species of birds still calling earth its home.

Some fossils suggest that the crane existed over 60 million years ago. It's animated choreography led the ancient Greeks and Romans to construct myths about the Crane that suggest its mating rituals are a dance. Their rituals, like those we humans find meaningful, symbolize the love of joy and the joy of love which represent a rich visual celebration of life.

Throughout Asia, the crane over the centuries has been a symbol of happiness and eternal youth. In Japanese tradition cranes stand for good fortune and longevity because of its fabled life span – said to be one thousand years. Existing in fifteen species and inhabiting five continents, the most majestic bird is the Japanese, Red-Crowned Crane which stands almost five feet tall with a wing span of more than six feet. Its white body capped with its bright red crown.

Some legends maintain the powerful wings of the crane were able to convey souls up to paradise and to carry people to higher levels of spiritual enlightenment. The regal, upright carriage of these elegant birds reflects their dignified status as the noble winged creature most worthy of serving as messengers to the ancient immortals.

In the 1700s the crane evolved as a favorite subject of the ancient tradition of folding paper. According to Japanese tradition, anyone with the patience and commitment to fold 1,000 paper cranes will be granted their most desired wish, because they have exhibited the cranes' loyalty and recreated their beauty.

Working with a special paper called origami adds a particular charm, beauty, and elegance to these artistic creations.

The story of a young Japanese girl in 1943 is one that has added a level of realism and inspiration to these ancient myths of flight.

* * *

Here name is Sadako Sasaki. She was born in January of 1943 in the city of Hiroshima. When she was two, the first atomic bomb was dropped over her city in August of 1945. Recent estimates place the number of people killed by that

bomb at around 140,000. Those in the immediate blast area died instantly followed by those for whom radiation poisoning would slowly claim their lives.

Two year-old Sadako and her four year-old brother, Masahiro Sasaki, both survived that blast and ran to the nearby river to avoid the black rain falling all around them. Without knowing it, they were all exposed to this new radiation. When she was 11 years old she developed symptoms of radiation poisoning and was hospitalized. Throughout the months that followed, Sadako folded paper cranes in the hope of recovering from her illness we know as leukemia. Paper in those days was expensive and she made the paper cranes out of any scraps she could find, including wrapping paper from her medicines, cards from friends, and gifts she received at the hospital.

In October of 1955 at the age of 12, Sadako Sasaki died from her cancer, before she could finish the 1,000 cranes. She made 644. As a tribute to Sadako's life, her classmates folded the remaining 356 cranes, and Sadako Sasaki was buried with the full 1,000 at a funeral in Hiroshima.

Saddened by her death, her schoolmates started a movement to collect money to build a monument in the Hiroshima Peace Park. In 1958 a memorial was dedicated there at the Children's Peace Monument, featuring a little girl holding up a crane. On the monument are inscribed these words:

"This is our cry, this is our prayer. For building peace in the world".

The words of Jeremiah the Hebrew prophet come to mind. He reminds his fellow Hebrews how easy it is to confuse gestures of accommodation with real gestures of peace. He writes of those who not inclined to take peacemaking seriously:

*They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious.
"Peace, peace," they say. But there is no peace. (Jeremiah 8:11)*

Sadako's brother, Masahiro, who survived, began traveling around Japan telling her story. He gave speeches and lectures and created a nonprofit foundation known as the Sadako Legacy.

An American named Clifton Daniel heard this story and was touched by its truths. He contacted Masahiro Sasaki and together they began to forge a lasting friendship. Three years ago for Hiroshima Day, Clifton Daniel traveled to Japan for a peace ceremony honoring the memory of those who died.

The words from our reading today by Daniel DeGrazie ring true.

*"When we stop reading each other,
when we stop paying attention to each other's words and stories,*

we too easily oppose one another.”

One of the more meaningful parts of this story for me is the fact that Clifton Daniel, whose middle name is Truman, is the oldest grandson of Harry Truman the president who ordered the dropping of the bomb. Clifton has made a mission of understanding the repercussions of his grandfather’s decision to drop the two bombs on Japan. And he has become a spokesman for the elimination of all nuclear weapons and the establishment of peacemaking at its most basic level.

Two years ago he and Masahiro traveled to Pearl Harbor where they placed a paper crane in a memorial ceremony at the USS Arizona Memorial. That paper crane was one the handful of remaining cranes of the original 1,000 folded by Sadako and her classmates.

Her words became real:

“I will write peace on your wings and you will fly all over the world”

* * *

In this year of the 70th anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb, ceremonies this August and September will commemorate the Hiroshima and Nagasaki events of 1945. A Peace Vigil in Las Alamos will be held on those two dates of August 6th and 9th. Paper cranes will be delivered to that site. Those folded here in Grand Junction I will deliver as our way of supporting this work of international peacemaking. I invite you – your family, neighbors and friends - this summer to learn this ancient Japanese art form and help us fold paper cranes as our gesture of international support.

“The sadness that led to the establishment of these memorials is the same as Sadako’s” her brother said recently. “We are placing her cranes all around the world with the message that we hope such tragedies will never occur again.”

I’d like to share a poem written by a teacher named Lynne R. Dorfman. She is a third grade teacher and co-director of then Pennsylvania Writing Project. She worked with her young students a few years ago to learn and reflect on the story of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It’s entitled *Peace for the World*.

Blue ghosts linger above Hiroshima’s dome
 While deeply scarred faces wander below.
 White doves circle a lone statue—
 Sadako, stretching outward to release
 A crane that joins the flock of peace birds—
 Thousands of origami cranes litter the ground.

Silent onlookers remember loved ones lost
As lanterns, fragile warm-yellow swans,
Glide across the cold, black waters.
Families place rice cakes on altars for spirits . . .
For the blue ghosts, for Oba Chan,
And now, for Sadako, too.

Atom bomb brings a mushroom-shaped cloud,
Brings sickness and snatches children
Oh, so slowly . . . oh, so slowly.
Hoping the gods would grant her wish, she labors.
Thick, swollen fingers make fold after fold,
More paper cranes for the hospital ceiling.

Her family waiting, watching, wondering
Who will be the next to join Oba Chan.
It should not be the children . . .
It must not be the children . . .
It will not be the children . . .
Struggling with clumsy fingers,
She makes one last crane.

Remembering Sadako,
she lives.
All over the world
children
making paper cranes.
Blue ghosts
vanishing.

I invite you to join me in this work:

The folding of the origami paper,
The sharing of Sadako's story,
The international reconciliation efforts symbolized
by the grandson of Harry Truman,
The hard work of peacemaking and peacekeeping.
And the inspiration of one little girl's paper crane.

The compelling message of hope and love and honor and peace that each hand-folded
paper crane represents.