

Lent 4B, March 22, 2009

Lections: Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22; Eph. 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

In the Ottawa Citizen this past week a government official responsible for science grants said something curious. "I am a Christian. You can't ask me about my faith." He had been labeled a creationist which might mean that some feel that his faith beliefs could determine how science grants might be restricted under his leadership. What intrigued me was the refusal to give witness to the faith that is in him. Perhaps, for him, it was not the right forum

On Ash Wednesday in our prayers we lamented our failure to commend the faith that is in us. And I wondered if, in light of practices in worship here and around the diocese to offer witness talks, that is precisely what we **are** interested in, the faith journeys of those who sit among us every week. We want to know what faith is in each other. I bet you didn't know that my undergraduate work was in science. It is where I learned to be curious about the nature of things – animal, plant, mineral, and human.

We have some pretty strong faith witnesses in our lessons today. Theologians often draw conclusions from core statements. If "a" is true for you, then "b", "c" and "d" are the logical next steps. The implications are the telos, the direction and ultimate conclusion from such foundations. Yesterday I received a phone call from a friend who is a member of the Unitarian Church; her faith practices are Buddhist. She assumed that, because I had intentionally asked for her witness at an Integrity liturgy in December, I cared about human rights for all sorts of folks, all sorts of faith practices. She asked for my support in a faith witness in light of a two day "arms bazaar" to be held at Lansdowne Park at the end of May. How do I feel about the sale of armaments in light of following the Prince of Peace whose death was through a torture perfected by the Romans? What does my faith articulate about the desire to enhance life? Do I view an arms sale as a form of hate speech – here, kill those who are 'other'? In light of the deaths of four more Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan this week what is the place of war in the 21st century?

I am struck also by the confluence of three meetings on Tuesday night at which I am to be present:

- A meeting at Southminster United to plan a candlelight vigil as a witness during the arms sale dates
- A meeting of the community planning the U2charist to benefit persons living with AIDS and malaria
- A meeting where I am to represent the parish as a site for the community in case of natural or other disasters.

All of these are important places of brokenness where the power of a faith witness might make a difference.

The psalmist speaks of healing as does the text from Numbers. Paul's witness to the church in Ephesus calls us away from death and destruction toward God's desire to work

good in us. The Johannine community is based on God's love. God's judgment of the world is mercy, sending and showing that perfect love in Jesus.

The cross has been in the midst of us for four weeks, the text of the gospel in dialogue with it. For many of you, it is impossible to pass the peace or approach and return from the altar without having to deal with its presence. In my life the cross represents transformation, from what was to what is intended by God for our lives and for the world. If the power of the cross were not present, I would not have become a priest. I would not have come to be your rector. The points of pain have become points of life. John's gospel would call it moving from darkness into light. The painful parts have been internal and external, things done and not done. All have been met for me in God's merciful compassion. All of the suffering has been transformed and redeemed so that it might be of some good purpose. As a free human being I choose to respond to God's initiative to transform all things.

Before we read the portion of John's gospel appointed for today, Nicodemus has come to Jesus asking questions quietly, in the dark. Jesus tells him he must be born again, a preposterous notion for this man of inquiry. It must happen all the time, in all sorts of circumstances Jesus seems to be saying. Choose the transformation; allow God to create a new life for you. Where is your foundation? What kind of a God holds your belief? As a child on a swing beneath a canopy of trees, the light shining on me was an awareness and deep sense of God's love for me. This is my earliest memory as a child. Did that foundational moment carry me through the rest of my life? I believe it has.

"Long before there were preachers, churches, or even organized religions, there were essential human experiences of community and alienation, of connection and disconnection to the divine," says Barbara Brown Taylor in her book on sin. Bonds of community and connection are broken all the time. It is God's saving help that mends them, giving us the openings we don't deserve, so that reconciliation and transformation might be our legacy. Surely it is God that saves us....

We cannot be transformed and saved unless we look at ourselves and the world. The Numbers text insists that we look at our sin, our missing the mark, our falling short of what is intended and allow it to be changed. God so loved the world is less a statement of the fact than it is of **how** God loves the world, so that all may be changed, moving us from condemnation to transformation. There are few places in the world where it is okay to face the truths about ourselves and where those truths work a miracle of change. The power of this cross for me is in its power to restore us all to full life in God who loves us.

The fourth Sunday of Lent is called Laetare Sunday; it has traditionally meant "lighten up," we are almost at Easter. Sundays are always days of claiming the resurrection feast, moving into resurrection faith. With all the woes of the world, with all of our financial, vocational, personal woes, our perpetual anxieties, we can lighten the load by sharing the burden and leaving as much as we can at the foot of the cross for transformation. We can look at what drives hope away and what will renew it.

After the ten o'clock liturgy we will work with Kathie on Easter eggs. It is a symbol for all of us who wish to hatch the gift of new life. And it is hard to cradle an egg if we won't let go of something.

Amen+ The Rev. Dr. Linda Privitera