

Heb. 9:11ff. John 8:46ff

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Today we enter what is traditionally called ‘Passiontide’. From here until the great Feast of the Resurrection all the worship of God’s people will be drawn toward the activity of Jesus’ final days; days filled with confrontation, healing, confused followers, political intrigue, suffering and death. This laser focus uses story and image, silence and language, music and sound, word and sacrament, to retell; that is, to re-present, to make present again the living reality of God’s deep and abiding love for creation. This story is our story, and like all stories must be told and understood with language and images that evoke our participation. On some occasions mere words seem to be not quite enough. Think of those times in your own life when in a moment of pain only an utterance conveyed the intensity, or an attempt to express love so deep that verbal articulation seemed to rob the moment of its true nature. As T.S Eliot wrote,

“Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.”

In short, sometimes everyday language does not quite seem adequate, but at other times it shocks us with simplicity.

In our time hyperbole has come to be the expression du jour! We have become accustomed to overstatement, expanded facts, and outright dishonesty in public discourse as means to make a point or to create illusion. It might be about the largest crowd in history for an event, or like N. Korea’s Kim Jong-il whose news agency reported the great leader had played a game of golf; and miracle of miracles he had 18 holes-in-one!! Outlandish Claims!!!!

We have for our hearing today 2 lessons that upon first blush are a challenge to hear and decipher. Both have storylines that speak outlandish things, and re-present Jesus beyond what anyone could have imagined. Each refers back to events long out of our memory and the writers now have to interpret their meaning in light of this little country rabbi, Jesus, who seems to be the crux (pun intended) of what God is doing.

In these stories the message being offered is this: **Do not be deceived by casual appearances, common expectations, or routine musings about the ways of God.** God’s most meaningful and decisive movements in life may show up in ways and through means few of us would immediately recognize as Divine activity. As Samuel Terrien, the great O.T. scholar once pointed out, just when we think we know the ways of the Lord, He turns out to be an elusive presence!! This is not in order to practice a sly and sneaky manner, but because we tend to label, pigeon hole, and pre-determine how God will act, and our vision is just not large enough.

The Gospel from John is a story of stress and conflict so extreme that Jesus gets up and leaves, but not before bringing 2 world views crashing into one another. A man not yet old enough to retire (age 50 for Levites) after claiming in essence to be the conqueror of death, says, “Before Abraham was, I am”. Of course, this is a play on the Name of God—the Great I Am, but it is heard as blasphemy. We have 20 centuries telling us who this man is, but imagine what the first hearers of this experienced. They think they know what God looks like, metaphorically speaking,

and this isn't it. Jesus' chiding is not that they have no faith, but that their faith is so rigid and boxed-in, they cannot see the greater gifts from God, and so they remain bound/enslaved. **But the real question is: "Can we?"** For John's community Jesus is the Sacrament of God's presence and activity. That is, in Him is unearned Grace and Compassion wrapped up in an all too earthly element. It is just in the scandal of his humanity, his care of the poor and desolate, His struggle with fear and doubt, His desire to avoid suffering, and His apparent helplessness in the face of persecution that we come to see the heart of God. God's willingness to empty Himself of power and glory in order to know our condition and to be among us in love is real power. If that is not counter-intuitive I do not know what is! Are not these places, events, struggles that are our journey as well? Yet it is in these very situations that grace is present and acting. Too often our world and we as well wish God to function in full power and perfection. It was only in the absolute that Jesus' opponents could accept God's actions. And that in itself is a mistake for it disallows God to operate according to His own freedom; even in the hidden and unanticipated.

So, where do we go from here? According to the writer of Hebrews we move from setting the parameters of God's action to receiving unmerited hope. (There are 2 main verbs in this section—entered and cleanse—setting God as the one acting).

All of this is Temple imagery...In this lesson the author re-works the most crucial event in Israel's worship—Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement, where the High Priest passes through the veil and enters the Holy of Holies and offers the blood sacrifice. (We modern folks think of this as archaic and primitive, but sacrifice is essential to life. Every parent that reaches beyond their own need to care for a child, or a child for an aging mother participates in sacrifice and covenant keeping. In its original meaning it refers to bringing back together two entities who have become estranged, and to offer thanks for the life this provides. It is to repair and continue a covenant.) Actually two things occur. A goat—the scapegoat—is released into the wilderness to carry off sin that weighs down people. Then the High Priest sacrifices a lamb and sprinkles the altar with blood and in turn the people; this is God giving God's life on them—it re-enacts the Covenant and every good Israelite knows that blood is the source of life!! (By the way—the same thing happens when a priest turns from this altar and offers you the Blood of Christ—the New Covenant.) Now the story takes an unexpected turn; Jesus, says Hebrews, is both the High Priest and the Sacrifice, and that **Good Friday is our Yom Kippur**. We are not people familiar with such liturgical actions, so they seem foreign or distant. Let me try a different field of view. I have a friend who years ago was caught in a rip tide on the North Carolina coast. Recollection suggests that he was a young adolescent; nevertheless, he was unable to escape the force. His father, seeing the event made his way to his son, and was able to get him out of the tidal pull. Tragically, the father was unable to do so for himself. What can only thinly be spoken in comparison to the reality is that the father loved the son so much he gave up all sense of his own safety to secure that of his own. What Hebrews is telling us in unique images is this: God is so irrevocably for us; so deeply and passionately in love with His creatures that He is willing to go to the most outlandish and unexpected behaviors to tell us, and to give us secure hope. It is called the cross and God's way of speaking to us is cruciform, not neat and clean, but full of the power of Divine love. Try throwing your guilt, anguish, sin, disappointment, anger, and need up onto **that** altar. It would be OK, because it has already been felt there. We need, from time to time, to stop controlling and simply stand in the presence that is passion and love for all of us.

I suspect that in my own life journey I seek to tell God how He will deal with me because I am afraid that if I am not in control God will find me not worth the time. That is the plague of sin. Sin is not nearly so much doing half a dozen bad things before breakfast as it is allowing guilt to cloud the vision and image God has placed on us. So we go about putting ourselves at the core of life and acting as if God either doesn't exist or can't get past our sin. Too often we are like the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw who once commented, "Forgiveness is a beggar's refuge; a real man has to pay his own debts." I have always wanted to ask him. "Mr. Shaw, what do you do about the debts no one can repay?"

The answer is the bill has already come due and been taken care of. In a place, by a manner, from a man no one would have predicted, but in whose wake the world gains its hope and future. Amen+