

The Fifth Sunday in Lent-Passiontide Heb. 9:11ff.

John 8:46ff

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

Today we enter what is traditionally known as ‘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. We will now be focused like a laser beam. A laser (light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation) is where electrons are excited, energized and phase out energy in such a crisp way that it is possible to pinpoint an area less than a mile across on the moon from here on earth. The Tradition we read and experience 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—perhaps when we are at our lowest points. This story is our story, and like all stories must be told and understood with words and images that invoke our participation.

On some occasions mere words seem to be not quite enough. Consider the 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 and power. 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 is not quite adequate, but at other times it shocks us with simple revelation.

In our time hyperbole has come to be the expression du jour, often with disastrous results. We have become accustomed to overstatement, expanded facts, and outright dishonesty in public discourse as a means to make a point or to create an illusion. It might be about the largest crowd in history for an event, or like N. Korea’s Kim Jong-un whose news agency reported the great leader had played a game of golf, and miracle of miracles he had 18—count them—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 include 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 is this: **Do not be deceived by casual appearance, common expectations, or routine musings about the ways of God in this world!** God’s most meaningful and decisive moments in life may show up in ways and through people few of us would recognize as Divine activity. As Samuel Terrein, the great O.T. scholar once pointed out, just when we think we know the ways of the Lord, He turns out to be a very illusive presence! It is not that God is

deceptive, but rather our vision and openness are just not large enough. What if that annoying neighbor is really an opportunity for us to learn to listen behind the behavior with new patience to a hurt that we have the capacity to touch? Where is God in that?

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 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 their faith is so rigid and boxed-in they cannot see the greater gifts from God. The result is they are bound/enslaved. The real question here is: **Can we?** Can we find in this man who swims against the tides the real presence of God? For John's community Jesus is the Sacrament of God's presence and activity. In Him is unearned Grace and Compassion wrapped up in a very earthly element. It is just I 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 be among us in love is what real power looks like. If that is not counter-intuitive, I don't know what is. Are not these places, events, quagmires our journey as well? Yet it is in these very situations that grace is present and acting. Might it be that a major setback or unanticipated illness becomes the very place we are encountered by Jesus and link our vulnerability to him? Jesus' opponent could only accept God in terms of their definitions of absolute power, and that mistake disallows God to operate according to his own freedom.

So, where do we go from here? According to the writer of Hebrews, (which by the way is a long homily or expounding of Psalm 110—called a Midrash.) we move from setting the parameters of God's action to receiving unmerited hope. There are 2 main verbs in this passage (please go back and read the first verses to get the context) *entered* and *cleansed*. **Their mood sets God as the one acting.**

All of this is Temple imagery...In the lesson the author re-works the most crucial event in Israel's worship—Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement—At-One-Ment, where the High Priest passes through the veil and enters the inner Holy of Holies and offers the blood sacrifice. (Modern folk tend to 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, or teacher for a beleaguered student participates in sacrifice and covenant keeping. This is covenant, not contract! (He is the mediator of a new covenant.). Two things occurred on this day. One is that a goat—the scapegoat—is released into the wilderness to carry off sin that weighed people down. Then the High Priest sacrifices a lamb and sprinkles the altar with blood and in turn on the people; this is God giving God's own life to them—it re-enacts the Covenant and every good Israelite knows that blood is the source of life!! (By the way—the same liturgical action happens when a priest turns from this altar and offers you the Body and Blood of Christ—the New Covenant.)

Now, this story takes an unexpected turn; Jesus, says Hebrews, is both the High Priest and the Sacrifice. Good Friday becomes our Yom Kippur. The images in Hebrews may seem distant and foreign, but they are not. The liturgical actions which took place in the Temple are transformed and lived out every time we gather. And in personal way we may enact them in life. I once had

a parishioner who perished much too early in life. The details we will not recount here, but in a time of great crisis and risk to others this person removed their own safety in order to see that the well-being and lives of others could be preserved. In giving up all sense of personal safety others were secured. God is so irrevocably FOR US; so deeply and passionately (there's that word-Passion) in love with His creatures that He is willing to the most outlandish and unexpected behaviors to tell us and to give us hope. It is called the Cross, and God's way of speaking to us is cruciform, not neat and tidy and clean, but full of the power of Divine Love. Try throwing your guilt, sin, anguish, disappointments, anger, and need up onto THAT altar! It would be OK, because all of that has already been there in Jesus. We need, from time to time, to stop trying to control and simply stand in the presence that is passion and love for all of us.

I suspect that in my own life journey I have too often sought to tell God how He will deal with me because I am afraid that if I am not in control, God will not find me 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 out 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 wither doesn't exist, notice, or cannot get past our broken state. 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, "Mr. Shaw, what do you do about the debts no one CAN repay?"

According to the Scripture for this day the answer is the bill has already come due and taken care of—paid. In a place, by a manner, from a man no one would have predicted, but in whose wake the world finds and gains its hope and future. Amen+