

## Past Sermons

The Fourth Sunday in Lent  
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St. Paul's Episcopal Church  
Salt Lake City  
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For about 1,000 years this Sunday in the middle of Lent, has been a bit different than the rest of the Lenten Sundays. As well as being known as Mothering Sunday, today has also been known as Refreshment (or, in Latin, Laetare = rejoice) Sunday. In the Middle Ages, the strict penitential disciplines of Lent were relaxed somewhat, there were some provisions for feasting and celebrations (and the Pope distributed bread to the poor). Even the vestments lightened up - so this day they are pink instead of purple! Thanks to Cindy Grua and Sheila Whitney and their gift of needlework we have some lovely pink ones. (Maybe Pete will stop calling it lingerie Sunday now.) This particular Sunday is an opportunity to lighten up, to pause in the middle of Lent, relax, and to get some perspective on what it means to be God's people.

Let's begin by reflecting on the first lesson, the one from Joshua. The passage is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham? It tells us of God's loving and forgiving act of reconciliation with his people. The Israelites have reached the Promised Land, they have reached the end of the rainbow that God put as a sign in the sky. The God who had created the nation, delivered the people from slavery, and gave them their land, had a special covenant with them. He told Moses "I will be your God and you will be my people." All that God asked in return was loving obedience and a faithful witness.

But, what happened along the way? They blew it. It was too difficult. They wanted to be like everybody else. They didn't want to be different. They preferred the flesh pots of Egypt, even though it meant captivity rather than freedom. It was so much easier to be like everybody else than it was to trust in the protection and care of God. Israel's failure was not a failure to keep the law, it was a failure of the heart. Sin is not transgressing particular codes of morality or ethical principles, sin is a proclivity towards behaving a way that destroys relationships including separation from God.

The Hebrew Scriptures are the story of how God reached out to the people again and again. Over and over God had renewed the covenant with the people and called them back into relationship. Despite prophet after prophet being sent the people chose to go their own way.

The result was that the land was conquered, Jerusalem became a ruin, and the people were taken into exile in Babylon. However, the story doesn't end there. Old Testament lesson goes on to tell how, in spite of everything, Israel's story did not end in exile in Babylon. The prophecies of Isaiah sing of hope in an alien land. The writings of Ezra and Nehemiah tell of the restoration of the Temple and the nation. The people return from exile, Jerusalem is restored, and the covenant is renewed. There is no way that the people

deserved it. It has nothing to do with justice; Israel does nothing smart or heroic. God simply refuses to give up on his people.

Let us now turn to the Gospel reading for today. It is a familiar one - the story of the Prodigal Son - or a better title, the story of the loving Father. Jesus was a storyteller *par excellence*. He along with those who wrote the books of the New Testament, were the inheritors of a long tradition which passed on from generation to generation stories of encounters with God. In the telling of these stories people were drawn into the action and given direction for their own lives.

We find identity and a sense of relationship when we share stories that we have in common. We know this from our own experience. The times when we have gathered with friends and swapped stories of old professor so-and-so, or what we did during the Olympics. Over a cup of coffee we tell of what happened to us yesterday, or last week, or a year ago. We remember within our ritual loved ones who have died. In the telling the event or the person comes alive again and we experience once again something of that moment.

The Bible - the Old and New Testaments - is our story of faith, and it invites us to participate - to experience exile and restoration, to be the unhappy prodigal son, or the angry, jealous elder brother, whose sense of worth and place is threatened by the forgiving love shown to the young. We become aware that we are there in that story. We are amazed at the reaction of the Father, when he shows no thought for what his son has done and its consequences. Who would have thought it? What is the end of the story? Does the elder brother go in and share in the feast? Or does he continue to be resentful? How would we respond? Haven't there been times when we've been resentful when someone got something that we deserved more than they did? Deep down don't we think we have to earn what we get? How often when something nasty has happened to someone we don't think much off, haven't we thought, "Well, he deserves all he gets," even if we haven't put it into words. Once again it has nothing to do with being fair, or deserving, or even putting forth a best effort. God welcomes the wayward son with open arms. No ifs, ands or buts.

This is what Paul means when he says "...we regard no one from a human point of view... if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new... [and we have been given] the ministry of reconciliation" It does not matter what has happened. It does not matter if we have been as disobedient as Israel, as profligate as the son, or as clueless as the disciples often are. It doesn't matter much how good we have been, either. God's love is simply more than we can either ask or imagine.

The sacramental life is the art of "seeing God's hand in the world about us." In this way as we live our daily lives we begin to see each moment as a potential revelation of God's purpose, whether boiling rice, relaxing on a mountainside or in a traffic jam on I-15! Any act of generosity or caring may be called sacramental. Any act in which a relationship is strengthened or healed may be called sacramental.

The parable of the Loving Father it is a sacramental story - a story in which the presence of God in our lives is made known. Once more God holds out his arms to receive us. No ifs, ands or buts.

Lent is about deepening our relationship with God. It is about metanoia - turning around; coming to our senses, acknowledging those pieces in our lives that are damaged or broken and asking God to make us whole again. The sacramental life is about recognizing an experience of God in our ordinary, everyday activities. It is that sense that no matter how often we fall, God is there to pick us up and help us begin again. These pink vestments remind us that we live out a little taste of that today, just like we do every Sunday. Because every Sunday we have the opportunity to return home, to be welcomed with open arms, and to be invited in to the feast. Every Sunday, actually every day of the week, what happened then happens now.

God welcomes us with open arms, not counting our trespasses against us, and entrusts the message of reconciliation to us. Can we do less for others?

Amen.

*Note: I forgot to cite my sources for this sermon, so I apologize if I have quoted without ascription.*