

SERMONS AT TRINITY

Sunday January 4, 2009

“The Book of Consolation”

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Good morning.

The greenery and bows are gone,
the trees have dried out
and been replaced by trees of a different sort,
and the sparkly lights
have all been put away for another year.

I know we have not reached
the 12th day of Christmas yet,
or Epiphany for that matter,
but at Trinity we have carved out
two seasons of worship between now and Lent:
January is focused on Solidarity
while February is focused on Mystery.
Solidarity and Mystery
are the heads and tails of
of our spiritual tradition –
or the yin and yang of it.

Solidarity points to the love of God
moving like smoke through human history;
and Mystery
evokes that image
of a wispy thin veil
between God and creation.
And of course, it is not either/or –
as if we take our eye off of the one while
fumbling around in the dark trying to find the other.
But with the help of
Christian communities around the world,
we are going to give special
thought
and mediation
and prayer
to what connects us with those we do not know,
and what weaves us together
with those we may never meet.

The first and obvious answer is, God.

As I am fond of pointing out,
the universe –
the whole cosmos as far as we know –
has been constructed by someone or something
who seems to take special pleasure

in interdependence.

Whether it is the balancing act
of human biology,
or rainforests and clean air,
or the varicose matrix of
underground waterways and aquifers
and rushing mountain rivers
and great lakes...
interconnectedness
and *exquisite intricacy*
are the hallmarks of the Creator.

A humble species of frog goes extinct
and suddenly
a plague of insects
damages a certain water plant
that the local fish depend upon
and before you know it,
the ecosystem is failing.

Over and over and over again
we see the same inter-dependency
within individual organisms
as in huge inter-continental systems.
So solidarity is not just a sentimental word
for political or economic alliance,
it is a fact of life –
it is the fact of all life:
live in solidarity or die.

Now I want to shift
from this big global theme of ours
to one of its more narrow, concrete expressions.

Jeremiah ben-Hilkiah
was a priest who was born and raised in a little village
six miles outside the capital city of Jerusalem.
While a priest
he became a prophet,
and we know more about him
than any other prophet in Israel's long history
with the exception of Moses.
His prophetic poetry
spanned the years from 627 to 560 BCE,

and the scrolls that he wrote
were published in numerous evolving editions
across those seven decades.

The verses we heard this morning
were taken from a little two chapter set
that have been referred to
since Medieval times
as the “Book of Consolation”.
The speculation runs that these two chapters
were originally an independent scroll,
one written for himself and his closest friends.
Written sometime during the height
of Jerusalem’s darkest night,
the theory goes that Jeremiah,
responding to God’s whisper,
wrote down the core of hope
he had been given to hold
as if guarding the last
tiny candle’s wavering flame
against a bitter and brutal wind.

First King Nebuchadnezzar laid siege
to Jerusalem for two years,
until the defending inhabitants,
protected behind fortified walls,
ran out of food.
When Nebuchadnezzar marched into the city
he maimed and tortured and chained
10,000 of the city’s ruling class
and their households,
and sent them into slavery to Babylon.

Within a decade
those who had survived the first brutal invasion,
rebelled against their Babylonian occupiers.
Nebuchadnezzar’s army returned
and reduced the city to rubble, decimating the remaining population.
Somewhere between the first invasion
and the second destruction,
Jeremiah fled to Egypt
carrying with him his scrolls of prophecy.

Now remember that
when you hear Matthew’s
Gospel story about the Holy Family

escaping to Egypt's safety
to avoid a wicked king.
Who do you think Matthew is comparing Jesus
to with that part of the story?
It's not Luke Skywalker.
It's Jeremiah.

So huddled with his closest companions
somewhere in Egypt,
Jeremiah writes his Book of Consolation –
to remember the hope
he is keeping alive
until the time that God
makes it possible for his words
to become enfleshed in history.

I remember a night many years ago,
a Christmas Eve when I was home on break from seminary.
The preacher started his sermon
by telling us that there are some Christmas'
too painful to bring cheer.
Then he told us
our long time
and well-loved bishop was dead.

It was the first time I can remember
ever having a psychosomatic response
to an emotional pain.
A pain somewhere in my back
took me to my seat
and I have no memory
of anything else the preacher said that night.

I have been reminded of that Christmas this year
as we have been witness
to the passing of so many of our community,
and families with struggles,
and crisis' among friends,
and deep financial insecurity for so many
among us and around us.

It may not feel that way for you,
but frankly,
I cannot remember such an unrelentingly long
stretch of tragedies,
losses,

struggles
and grief so close at hand.
And so when I opened these verses from
Jeremiah's personal Book of Consolation,
I felt challenged to offer us
a verse or two of consolation from mine.

The *hope* that I tend,
that I guard against the winter wind,
is nowhere better said
than Romero's Prayer
that we are about to use as an Affirmation.

*It helps, now and then,
to step back and take the long view, he says.
Nothing we do is complete...
no statement says all that could be said...
no prayer fully expresses our faith...
no program accomplishes the church's mission...
no set of goals and objective includes everything...
This is what we are about:
we plant seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted,
knowing that they hold future promise...*
I received an email
from a man who tracked me down online
just to say *thank you*.

I had helped him,
without ever knowing it,
almost three decades ago.
To be honest,
I don't even remember his face
and I struggled for awhile to recognize the name.
He came to see me
when we were both young men
and he was apparently struggling with his sexuality.
Whatever I said to him,
or *did not* say to him,
or the fact that I listened
and offered him some assistance,
set in motion decisions and actions on his part
that utterly changed the direction of his life.

He looked me up
and sent me word,

across a continent of miles
and decades of a life
to thank me.
I had no idea...none.
Now you know,
there are people out there living in gratitude for having been offered a momentary ride
in the wake of *your* life.
Dozens maybe...and you have no idea.

Don't deny it...
you have no idea the gifts you have given,
and the differences they have made.

For me,
it was one of those moments
when exactly the right words,
at exactly the right time,
delivered exactly the right encouragement.
His thoughtfulness
and tenacity with tracking me down,
made a huge difference to me at that moment.

I never knew.

Here is another example,
if you don't mind my using something else
close to home.

Since the late 1960's
The Episcopal Church has taken a nosedive
in membership.
In fact,
all of the Mainline Protestant churches have.
In fact,
as it turns out,
so has the Roman Catholic Church,
although the strong increase in emigration
from Latin America has hidden the decline.

The big, splashy media emphasis
on Evangelical and mega churches
gives the impression
that they have increased the ranks of the Christian religion in The United States,
when actually church-membership
as a percentage of the population

has seriously declined.

My generation of clergy
have done nothing to reverse the trend
and there are days when I read stories in the paper
or research online and in professional magazines
and I can get depressed and cynical.

But step back.
It turns out
that the two decades from 1945-1965
witnessed the largest growth in church membership
ever in The United States.
It was a 20-year blip on the demographic chart
that was never seen before
and may not be seen again for a long time if ever.

Step back even further.
From WWI
through the holocausts of
Europe, Hiroshima and Nagasaki
Western Civilization was blown open
and every long-standing assumption,
and every core value,
were taken out,
disassembled
and either thrown away,
broken
or returned with damage.
Christianity,
as a result and appropriately so,
is experiencing a massive Reformation.
What can seem like utter failure in the moment
may in fact be growth, ripening and transformation.
Who knows what impact Trinity Church,
and all the other
progressive congregations out there,
will have on the history of Christianity.

Who would have imagined,
back in the day,
that an obscure priest in a village outside Jerusalem,
would write poetry
that still has a heartbeat
2600 years later?
Who could have imagined

that a scrawny,
half-crazed indigent beggar
named Francis
would have left such a mark on Christianity?

Or that songs and poetry
written by the mystic
Hildegard five hundred years ago
would be discovered
and published
and popular in 2009?

Who would have predicted
that the brutal carnage of Nazi persecution
would cut open the very heart of Christianity
to reveal the long-standing cancer of anti-Semitism,
and that in the horror,
shock,
grief,
shame
and remorse,
a healing would begin
that actually has led us to totally revisit
what we teach
and say
and believe about Jesus?

*“This is what we are about:
We plant seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted,
knowing that they hold future promise.”*

So our consolation is that
we do not know our impact
but it is greater
and deeper
and broader
than we will ever imagined.
Our consolation is that
our grief and pain
need not be left to molder and fester
but can become the source of strength
that transforms and empowers us.
Our consolation is that

we do not have the last word;
we do not know the last word;
we only know that we are utterly interdependent
and that if we act like it;
and nurture one another
and challenge one another
and heal one another ,
then whether or not it is good for us personally,
all shall be well
and all manner of thing shall be well.

Grief, pain and sorrow
can remain disfiguring and stultifying, or they can, over time, become agents of
transformation.
That is our consolation.

What seems like failure in the moment
can make us cynical and resigned,
or we can offer up our efforts to the future
and know that neither the moment,
nor our limited perspective,
has the last word.
That is our consolation.

We can be defeated personally,
and exhausted by walking alone
into the headwind of culture and history,
or we can reach out and grasp the hands
of those who have been by our side the whole time.
That is our consolation.

And that is from the Book of Consolation
I know about
because of poets like Jeremiah;
and the Book of Consolation
I offer to you on this,
the first Sunday of the new year.

Amen.