

## Lent 5 Year B 2009

**This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. *AMEN.***

“Jesus said the hour has now come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” This is the setting in motion of the texts for his death. At the end of today’s Gospel, a previous covenant of Moses and the snake is repeated, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” That image is like the one of Moses and the golden snake he raised up. Looking on the up-lifted snake would cure anyone who’d gotten sick, who’d sinned. That covenant was confirmed in Genesis by the snake, and it is renewed in Jeremiah, in today’s reading.

The people apparently had kept on sinning, but were still God’s chosen. God needed to strengthen the covenant, so instead of just writing it on stone tablets, God wrote the new covenant on the people’s hearts. God was not rejecting those to whom the 10 Commandments had been given by the new covenant, but was reasserting that God would be faithful to people, that God loved the people no matter what. That’s the promise of God’s covenants: that God understands people’s limitations, sins, ungod-like behavior, and realities, but God keeps loving people and showing it. “‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” says the Lord; “for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

People, however, are conscious that we keep on sinning. At this point in Lent, if we’ve made some promises about what we were going to do or not do, even for this short a time, to redress some of our self-recognized flaws or hoped for disciplines, we’ve blown it. The no alcohol for Lent promise

to ourselves may have slipped for one reason or another, or the promise of more nightly sleep, or more times at the gym, or more daily time for prayer, or whatever we aimed for during Lent, we've missed the mark. We haven't done that many times, but if we examine ourselves carefully, we can easily recognize the psalmist's plea that God blot out all our offenses, that God wash us through and through from our wickedness, or at least from our lapses and missing the mark, and that God cleanse us from our sins. We want to hear of joy and gladness, to have a new heart and God's saving help again. That was true for the psalmist's people, for the people of Moses, of Jeremiah, and the people of the time of Jesus; we are so there too.

God sent Jesus, God's personal living word, to renew God's assertion that God will stand by us now and always. In some way God understood that God needed to participate in human life, that in some way even God didn't get it. God recognized that people kept sinning in small ways as well as great ones, and that then people got discouraged and then from guilt, or habit, or whatever turned away, forgot God. If we say you really can't know someone until you walk in their shoes, God could figure that out too. God living as Jesus wore our shoes, but even for God, the question was how far would God go for us? How could anyone who was truly human not miss the mark some, not fall short, as is said, of the glory of God? Jesus was a real person, a human like us. He worked to demonstrate how to be fully human, but not sin. (Remember that this morning's Gospel is from John and so written in about 100 AD, that John didn't know Jesus, and was writing theology, not narrative history.) Jesus is heard to say in this morning's Gospel, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw people to myself." He said this to

indicate the kind of death he was to die.” Since we’ve been paying attention, we hear in this, a restatement of the promise God gave to Moses both in the 10 Commandments and with the golden snake; we hear the reformulation of the covenant in Jeremiah’s writing the covenant on the hearts of people, and we recognize that the way John has Jesus describe his coming death is to link Jesus to God’s pattern of renewing—not replacing—God’s covenant with people. God doesn’t break from one group and move on to the next group with each new covenant, but continues to be faithful to people and tries to reiterate that promise to love people in new and increasingly vivid ways. John expressed this version of God’s new covenant as “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that all should be saved.”

(Pause from this traditional lay-out-the lessons- homilette.)

This week at an event planned both by the Cathedral’s Crossing group and MECA, Massachusetts Episcopal Clergy Association, Phyllis Tickle came and presented some of her work. She’s an historian and lay Episcopalian. Google her. She has a fine website, an interesting biography, and a list of highly desirable and interesting books. The one she came to present material from, is *The Great Emergence*. Her thesis is that about every 500 years there is a paradigm shift, in social, cultural and other areas of life, which profoundly affects religion. Tickle says “Every 500 years the church cleans out its attic and has a giant rummage sale.” She says that this as a kind of summary of the church’s massive transitions over time, and that we are living in such a time of change now, a time of dizzying upheaval and hopeful promise which various sectors of the church swirl into a great confluence at the center. The emergence, which comes, comes from the previous understanding, but does so without breaking from

the earlier. Christianity emerged from Judaism, but Judaism remains intact. Western Christianity emerged from the all Christianity, but Orthodoxy—Russian, Greek, Coptic—Orthodox Christianity remains intact; Protestantism emerged from Roman Catholic Christianity, but Roman Catholicism remains intact, and now something is emerging from current Christianity. She is excited and hopeful about the form, the content, and the meanings to come. She observes that there are social, historical, cultural, scientific occurrences, which push the emergence. (Pause.)

Have you seen, or will you go see this week Richard Goodwin's play at the Huntington, "Two Men of Florence?" Get tickets and go. It's about the long debate between Galileo and his friend Urban VIII. Galileo, you remember, interpreted, translated, made the work of Copernicus understood, available, and stunning to all. The world had been understood as a flat one, with the earth as the center of the universe, and Heaven and God above, and Hell below. Copernicus demonstrated that the earth was a sphere, and moved, and that shattered Western Christianity's world view. If the earth was moving, then how could the earth be the center of the universe, where was God? was the earth "just another planet?" how could God be focused on us alone? where was God? what was God's relationship to God's people, to the world, universe, and to what else, what others? Although the Pope understood the science and was a friend of Galileo's, he believed his job was to uphold the doctrine of faith that the earth was flat. That's the topic the play turns on, literally in circles, and the staging is imaginative and makes the play.

Seeing the play on Friday, after hearing Tickle on Thursday made it easier to understand what kind of things move the

basic understanding of one world and drive it along to somewhere new. It's easy for us to "get" why people thought the world was flat and that scientific discovery crashed against that understanding.

For us, there have been a series of such basic understandings which are changing us, our understanding of church, religion, Catholicism, Protestantism, faith, God, and so on. We experience those issues and realities all the time and have for years. Tickle says it takes about a hundred years to set off one of these emergences and then about a hundred and fifty years to sort through the concepts and then about two hundred and fifty years of living into the new emergence. There we are. She says for us issues around justice—the equality of people of various races, of women, of homosexuals, or all people has churned the religious waters. Freud, Darwin, and others have driven us away from previous models of understanding humans, but she says there is one particular religious understanding—and have faith I'm getting to the point—that particularly sets un-churched, anti-churched, and others into emergence, and that is the atonement. People simply don't buy that if God is good and loving, all powerful or even pretty powerful, that God's way to reiterate God's love for people was to have the beloved Son die a hideous death. What kind of God is that? What kind of God would ask his chosen servant Abraham to kill his beloved Son Isaac? Right. We are apt to reframe this traditional language of sacrifice this way. How far was Jesus willing to go for us, how far to say and show that God would do anything and everything to show God loves people always, in all circumstances? That's certainly how I understand the work of Jesus on the cross, but it is not the way John describes that work and those events.

The church that grew up around a variety of hideous sacrifices, doesn't show us God's love, so we've retranslated, rephrased, but, really, have now come to different understandings. There is a clear level on which we understand the Abraham and Isaac narrative to show bullying brutality, torture for Sarah, and terror for Isaac. Somehow the moral of God's wonderful love and care is lost in the nightmares the story leads us to. The understandings around the atonement have led to similar rejections of the story, and so of churches that defend that understanding with the appalling consequences in our mindsets for us of that male bullying and male dying in an awful, hideous, titillatingly brutal way. What kind of God asks that? What kind of God or human does that? How far would you go for your child, your loved one? How far? As far as it takes to keep the beloved safe as the apple of God's eye. That's a different, but as biblical, an understanding of the events we're about to reenact. That's a new way to help us emerge into trusting the soundness of God's love and actions. God will go as far as it takes to bring us to God in paradise forever. That's Good News.

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