

**Ninth Sunday after Pentecost Proper 15**  
**August 14, 2011**  
**Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32**  
**Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28**

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatred cease; that our divisions being healed we may live in justice and peace. (Prayer for Social Justice; BCP p. 823)

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Have any of you ever had the unpleasant experience of being in a situation with someone you thought you knew well and then have seen them react in a way—say something or do something—that seems astonishingly out of character? It can be a little disconcerting. Where did this come from you wonder? What does it mean and how do I incorporate this into what I thought I know of this person? And sometimes it makes you maybe even wonder if you really know this person at all?

I have always found our Gospel reading today to seem to be a little like that. On first glance Jesus' conversation with the Canaanite woman seems to be seriously out of line. He seems to go way out of his way to insult this poor woman who comes to him for help, going so far as to call her a dog, an epithet which remains insulting even today. Is this the same Jesus I thought I knew who earlier in Matthew preached the Sermon on the Mount and told us "Blessed are the meek," and "Blessed are the merciful" and later reproved us to love our enemies? Where did this come from? What's going on?

We are told at the beginning of our reading today that Jesus left Gennesaret, that is the district on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon in what is modern day Lebanon. In the passage immediately preceding our reading Jesus has yet another tense and pointed exchange with representatives of the ruling religious establishment regarding the purity laws and the hypocrisy of the leaders who interpret those laws often to their advantage. It is the passage in which Jesus tells them it is not what goes into one's mouth that defiles a person but rather that which comes out of the mouth, for "what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart and this is what defiles." We already know the leaders are seeking a time when they might arrest Jesus and rid themselves of this meddlesome rabbi, so Jesus and his followers leave the area.

Now, in traveling from Gennesaret to Tyre and Sidon one moves from Jewish territory into Gentile territory. It seems that when they arrive in the area Jesus is quickly approached by a woman seeking help for her daughter. And this not just a random stranger but a Canaanite woman. The Canaanites were the people who populated the Promised Land when the Hebrews arrived after the Exodus and were defeated and driven out by Joshua. Since that time the Jews considered them pagan idol worshippers and the greatest, and most defiling, of their enemies. It is no wonder her daughter is possessed of a demon for they are a demon filled people.

And yet this Canaanite woman approaches Jesus using Jewish messianic language calling him Lord and Son of David. Jesus reputation has obviously preceded him. But Jesus simply ignores her—there is no indication he even acknowledges her presence. The disciples urge him to send this unclean woman away and he answers them, surely loudly enough for her to overhear, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." She is not put off and begs his help. And here is when we are startled by Jesus' response, steeped in Jewish prejudice and racism as he refers to the Jews as children and Gentiles, most pointedly her, as dogs—this response coming only eight verses after the Gospel account of Jesus' teaching that it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles. She remains undeterred, however. She persists in the strength and desperation of a mother's love for her suffering child as at first she agrees with him but then points out that "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Her faith has swayed the argument and her daughter is immediately healed.

Once again we are given the example of great faith and understanding in the words and actions of one from whom we would least expect it—an unclean outsider and foreigner who proves to have a more complete insight into what Jesus is teaching than those of his chosen inner circle. The Canaanite woman has shown a remarkable prophetic understanding of the radical and inclusive nature of the Kingdom of Heaven which Jesus teaches. While agreeing the Jewish messiah must first be known to his own people, she also insists his witness and ministry cannot end there. This underscores the important concept that while Israel may be the Chosen People of God, the coming of the Messiah is not solely for them but to be a "light to lighten the Gentiles," and a blessing to all nations which shall stream to its light. This exchange has put into

action the message of the preceding verses that present a more relaxed understanding of the purity laws so that people are not separated and driven apart but drawn together into the inclusive embrace of the Family of God.

This nameless woman of Canaan gives us another valuable insight as well. Through her persistence and determination we are shown that it is acceptable to be in worshipful struggle with our beliefs that we may more fully plumb their depths and comprehend their richness. Ours is not a faith of rote recitation and blind obedience but rather a continual progression of growth, patience and understanding as we come more fully into our knowledge of the Gospel message. And that message remains a radical message today.

The dialogue we have heard this morning calls into question our own prejudices and misconceptions. It demands we reconsider and redefine who is out and who is in. We must be careful to maintain the discerning focus that the radical message of Jesus is the incomprehensible and unconditional love of God that includes us all despite the many barriers we still erect to divide and separate us.

Shortly after Edmund Browning was elected Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in 1985 he proclaimed that “in this Church of ours there will be no outcasts.” His statement was met with remarkable resistance that persisted, and even increased, throughout his tenure. It still meets resistance. Yet it is the outcast, the rejected and the unclean that, like the Canaanite woman this morning, often provide the most piercing insight into those ethereal truths we claim to hold sacred.

For her persistence, insight and worshipful struggle, Jesus responded by telling her, “Woman, great is your faith.” She is the only person in Matthew’s account whose faith is called great. May we all grow into such a faith. Amen.

-The Rev. Dr. Richard Effinger

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### Sunday, July 17

Lord, teach me to be patient - with life, with people, and with myself. Teach me to trust Your sense of timing rather than my own and to surrender my will to Your greater and wiser plan.

Help me to wait for all to unfold in its own time—your time.

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Our Gospel reading today gives us a lesson in patience, forbearance and trust as beautifully reflected in this opening prayer. I, on the other hand, tend to be personally much more acquainted with the more familiar prayer that goes something like “Dear Lord, give me patience... and give it to me now!” It often seems to be a large part of our human nature to tend to see things more in the short term rather than the long term. Today Jesus gives us a lesson in viewing things from the perspective of the long term—the very long term.

Our reading opens with a familiar and often repeated line in Matthew: The kingdom of heaven may be compared to... Although this is the first time we hear this opening sentence, it will be repeated six more times in the unfolding chapters. All this serves to underscore the point that these parable lessons are about helping to define and explain what the coming kingdom of heaven will be like. And, in Jesus’ time as in our own, it is usually not what we might expect.

Last week we heard the parable of the Sower who generously, even extravagantly sowed good seed almost indiscriminately about the landscape. How the seed grew and whether or not it flourished depended on the condition of the receiving soil. Today we hear of two seeds—good and bad—and two sowings—intentional and clandestine. And when the seeds began to grow, for they were all apparently planted in good soil, it soon became evident that there was a problem. The slaves of the household perceived the problem and prepared to enact an immediate and short-term solution requesting permission to remove the weeds. But the master sees things differently and advises patience.

Now the term we have translated as “weeds,” in other versions of the Bible is translated as “tares,” a term used in biblical times as well. Tares are generally understood to have been a plant called bearded darnel, a rye grass that still grows prolifically in Syria and Palestine. Also called cheat weed or false wheat, darnel is nearly impossible to distinguish from wheat when it germinates. Once the ears of grain appear and harvest nears, however, it can be easily distinguished and removed. And that is a good thing as the seeds of darnel can cause intoxication, diarrhea, hallucinations and even death. There have been

documented reports throughout history of evicted tenants, disgruntled laborers and the like sneaking into the fields of the offending landowner at night and sowing cheat weed.

There is fairly evident in these writings of Matthew the dualistic and judgmental nature of his thought. Things are often portrayed in terms of good and evil, saved and damned with the prospect of final judgment always on the horizon. The world, and the church, has always been a mixed field of wheat and weeds. But such thinking is not limited to biblical times. Indeed we have seen it enacted throughout history and it has often appeared as if the weeds were truly winning. Think the Inquisition in the 16th century, slavery into the 19th century, the Red Scare in this country in the mid-20th century. But in time--in God's time--we come to see the evil fruit borne of such seed and have rooted it out from the good. We again find ourselves in a polarized and judgmental time when obstinance is often viewed as integrity, polemic as discourse and insult as dialogue both in the world and the church. Many are quick to judge, defining who agrees and who disagrees thereby defining who is good and who is evil, who is orthodox and who is apostate, who is saved and who is damned. But we are forewarned in today's lesson that judgment is reserved for God alone and in God's time. We are counseled to patience, forbearance and trust.

Each of us also is a mixed field of wheat and weed. We all have done or thought things that have not yielded particularly good fruit. We have all been party to thoughts or actions that were begun with the best of intentions but have proved to be more like weeds than wheat. But it is not our place to quickly judge for we are all also continuing works in progress living in God's time and there is yet time to bear much good fruit.

There is a remarkable scriptural case to be made on this point. Were judgment to be made before God's time, even the disciples would have been hard pressed to qualify for even lenient treatment. Were we to judge after the events of Holy Week, all the disciples save one, would surely be bound and cast into the furnace with the weeds for they all deserted their master and ran off into the night in fear. And Peter, the leader and Rock of the early church, would surely be bound and burned twice for he not only deserted Jesus but denied even knowing him three times. It is our human nature to be both wheat and weeds.

But there is an interesting aspect that has been uncovered concerning wheat and weeds. Recent studies have shown that when separate and presumed uncontaminated samples of wheat seed and darnel seed are germinated, up to thirty percent of the wheat seed germinates darnel and a similar amount of darnel germinates wheat.

So it also can be with us. What we presume to be weeds may truly be, in God's time, the finest wheat. It is not our place to judge but rather to cultivate the field, to tend the crop, to work toward increasing the holy in ourselves and in others. The Gospel message is one of love—love that conquers the world, love that transforms souls, love that defeats evil and death, love that changes weeds into wheat. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Richard Effinger

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### Third Sunday after Pentecost

July 3, 2011

Gen 24:34-38,42-49,58-67; Ps 45:11-18; Romans 7:15-25a; Matt 11:16-19, 25-30

Give me your tired, your poor;  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free;  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shores.  
Send these, the homeless tempest-tossed to me.  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, Liberator. Amen.

Many of you are familiar with these well known words which are actually the concluding portion of a sonnet written by Emma Lazarus in 1863 for a competition to raise funds for the pedestal upon which stands the Statue of Liberty. It won the competition and was quickly forgotten. The Statue was dedicated in 1876 with no mention of this poem. This portion of the poem, however, was immortalized when, in 1903, sixteen years after Emma's death, it was inscribed on a bronze plaque

and installed inside the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. Paul Auster wrote that the “gigantic effigy was originally intended as a monument to the principles of international republicanism, but [this poem] reinvented the statue’s purpose, turning Liberty into a welcoming mother, a symbol of hope to the outcasts and downtrodden of the world.”

So, other than the fact that tomorrow is the Fourth of July, what does Emma Lazarus and the Statue of Liberty have to do with our Scripture readings this morning?

In a word... discernment.

Our friend Mr. Webster defines discernment among other things as “the ability to judge well” or “to grasp and comprehend that which is important.” Discernment is a word we hear often in church circles. All of us in ordained ministry were required to go through a discernment process in order to evaluate our respective callings. Such a process takes different lengths of time for different people. Mine took five years. Of course, I thought it should have been much shorter but then, in the strange workings of the Spirit in our lives, I eventually came to “grasp and comprehend” that me getting out of the way of my discernment was part of the process. Perhaps that is part of what Jesus is referring to in this morning’s Gospel when he thanks the Father for “hiding these things from the wise and the intelligent” and revealing them to “infants.” How many times do we find that what we know gets in the way of what we truly need to “grasp and comprehend”?

Our Gospel reading this morning opens with what on first pass seems to be a rather harsh and condemning statement from Jesus. In the passages immediately preceding this one, the identities of Jesus and John the Baptist are defined: John is the messenger sent ahead of the Expected One, Jesus. And yet there still seems to be confusion, denial and dissembling on the parts of those who hear the message. John came as the voice crying in the wilderness, the wild-eyed prophet dressed in coarse animal skins, eating coarse food, living a life of extreme deprivation and calling all to repent. “He has a demon,” said many of those who heard his message. “Obviously this guy is nuts,” they said. Then came the One of whom John was speaking. Jesus, the incarnate Word relishing the joy of all creation and sharing food, drink and company with one and all. “What a party pig,” they responded, “a glutton and a drunk.” You can almost hear the frustration in Jesus’ voice when he asks what to make of this generation who are unable to “grasp and comprehend” what is right in front of them. He is addressing the crowd in this scene and we must remember that, like Matthew’s community for whom it was written, we too are part of the crowd. Jesus is calling for discernment, not only in his generation but every generation to follow.

And we have seen the response to such a call to discernment. In our recent past we have seen the response of those come to be called “the Greatest Generation,” several of whom are members of this and many congregations although their numbers are rapidly diminishing.

On this Fourth of July weekend we look also to the founding generation of this country. In a time when the western world was governed by crowned heads and ruled by royal and imperial decree they embodied the truly revolutionary principles they espoused into a new form of government—a government run by the governed. Part of the revolutionary nature of our form of government is the fact that our system is an ever changing and adaptable system. We do not shy away from asking tough questions rather we require it. We may ignore them for a while but ultimately they are addressed. As our society and culture continually discern a greater understanding of what it is and who it encompasses we live into our expanded understandings. This weekend we celebrate the ratification of the Declaration of Independence wherein we resolutely proclaimed that “we hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal.” Of course, that really meant men at that time, not women. And it really meant only white men. And only white men who owned property. It was only later we came to truly understand and embrace the much wider scope and universal application of that statement. And it came in fits and starts. But that is how we grow as a nation and live into our discernment.

The Preamble to the Constitution states it most succinctly. “We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union...” I see in that statement a declaration that we continue to be a dynamic, ongoing work in progress, always striving to be a more perfect union. This is where the Statue of Liberty makes a return appearance. She welcomed newly arrived immigrants from all over the world for decades. For many it was the first thing they saw in their new country. The desire to be a part of creating this ever-evolving “more perfect union” remains strong even today. The United States admits more legal immigrants into its borders every year than every other nation on the planet combined.

It is the same with the church. We too are called to live into our discernment, to continually explore in our hearts and our minds what it is to live into the Gospel message we proclaim. We do not shy away from asking the tough questions even when doing so generates friction with some of our sisters and brothers in other parts of the world. Our quest is not one of provoking confrontation but rather discerning the truly radical Gospel message of inclusion and love. And yes, it too

comes in fits and starts. It is sometimes uncomfortable. It sometimes requires us to examine, in both ourselves and others beliefs, prejudices and behaviors we would prefer to leave untouched. But our community of faith is a dynamic, evolving and ever-changing commonwealth through which we continually are invited to strive toward the perfection that was once modeled for us by the Word made flesh. It is how we live into the discernment to which we are all called. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Richard Effinger

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## The Great Feast of Pentecost

June 12, 2011

Veni, Sancte Spiritus.

Come, Holy Spirit bright, come with thy celestial light;  
pour on us thy love divine; come within our hearts to shine.

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Wasn't that a marvelous, crazy and chaotic cacophony of Gospels? I like to think that captures a little of the sense of what that first Pentecost experience was really like. You heard the Gospel read in eight languages this morning other than English, including Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Spanish and Swedish.

Thank you readers for sharing your skills with us this morning.

Today is the Great Feast of Pentecost—as the name implies coming fifty days after Easter. It derived from the Jewish Festival of Pentecost which comes, interestingly enough, fifty days after Passover. Although it began as a first spring harvest festival nearly three thousand years ago, today it is associated with Shavuot, the receiving of the Law by Moses on Mount Sinai. In the Christian tradition it is associated with the receiving of the Holy Spirit by the apostles as promised by Jesus both before his Passion and before his Ascension.

The account we hear from the Acts of the Apostles this morning is filled with great special effects—the rushing of wind which filled the house and divided tongues of fire resting on each of them. I can only imagine what George Lucas or Steven Spielberg would do with such a script. But the really important part is what comes next—they were all filled with the Holy Spirit! And they all spoke as the Spirit gave them ability. Now, finally, after all this time of not getting it, the disciples—with a little help from the Holy Spirit—do get it and are able to begin to spread the message in a truly meaningful way.

We continue to invoke the Holy Spirit in many of our activities. The hymn verse with which I opened, the “Veni, Sancti Spiritus” or “Come, Holy Spirit”, is a 13th century work attributed to either Pope Innocent III or Archbishop of Canterbury Stephen Langston and considered to be one of the finest examples of medieval Latin poetry. It is recited at the ordination of deacons and priests and at the consecration of new bishops immediately prior to the laying on of hands and is one of the most powerful and moving parts of the service. We call on the Holy Spirit at every Eucharist to bless and consecrate the elements—a portion of the canon called the Epiclesis. We will soon anoint the newly baptized and proclaim them “sealed by the Holy Spirit ... and marked as Christ's own forever” as we welcome them into the community of faith and the household of God.

We hear a different account of the gift of the Holy Spirit in our Gospel reading, however. In John it is “evening on that day.” That day is not fifty days after the Easter event, but rather that very same evening of the Day of Resurrection. Jesus himself appears to them and offers his peace. He then commissions them saying, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” They, and we are sent into the world to continue the ministry, the witness and the work that Jesus began. The gift of the Holy Spirit is then imparted to them by Jesus breathing on them. This is imagery rich with meaning and symbolism. Consider the breath of God moving across the waters at the very beginning of creation—even before there was light! Consider the breath of God infusing life itself into the new human being fashioned of clay. Consider the breath of God parting the Red Sea at the time of deliverance and liberation. And now the very breath of God envelops them with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Although this seems like the climax of the story and all we have left is the final resolution and conclusion, the reality is that for the disciples and apostles, the real work is about to begin. This is not the time to sit back and enjoy the end of the story.

They are now to be sent into the world, most of them facing difficult times, persecution and martyrdom for their efforts. The Holy Spirit has great plans for them. It is not an ending, but a magnificent new beginning.

The parents and godparents of our newly baptized must also realize the work for them has also just begun. It does not simply end with a few words spoken in church. The promises made this morning will continue to be upheld and fulfilled through the years to come. The Holy Spirit has great plans for them.

And like the Apostles, our work here at Bethesda is also about to begin. We have worked hard over the last almost two years of the interim period. The search process has been long and careful. It is with great excitement that we anticipate next week as Fr. James assumes his duties as our new rector. But, despite all the hard work of the last few years, the real work is about to begin. Now is not the time to sit back and relax and enjoy the end of the story, for the next chapter of the story is just starting.

I am reminded of one of the Gospel readings we hear during Advent. At the advent of the newest phase of our life together at Bethesda I think it is important to recall its message. It occurs when the Pharisees send representative to John the Baptist inquiring as to who he may be. And his response is, "I am not the Messiah." It is crucial for us to remember that that job is taken. I am certainly not the Messiah. And neither is our new rector. He is here to lead, to guide and to pray with us. But he is not here to be all things to all people, make everything new and fix everything that is wrong. And to do it all in three weeks. While he may shape the vision of our future together, it is up to all of us to join in the work necessary to bring that vision to fruition. No one person can do it all. We are, after all, a community of faith, the household of God. As with any family, to make it work we all must work together.

So, roll up your sleeves for the work is about to begin.

After all, the Holy Spirit has great plans for us.

And the best is yet to come.

Amen.

– The Rev. Dr. Richard Effinger

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### **The Fifth Sunday of Easter** **May 22, 2011**

Come my Way, my Truth, my Life; Such a Way as gives us breath; Such a Truth as ends all strife; Such a Life as killeth death. In the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The opening words are from a poem by George Herbert, the great early 17th century mystical English poet, who in only a few words, begins to convey the core of the message we hear from Jesus in our Gospel reading today.

We have spent a great deal of time with the Fourth Gospel so far this year—most of Lent and most of Eastertide. If you recall, during Lent we heard much of John's use of the metaphors of light and dark, sight and blindness as part of his way of making us understand that Jesus was indeed the true "light of the world." In Eastertide, after the resurrection, our readings come from later in the Fourth Gospel and bring us to a much deeper and more complex explication of who Jesus was and is. In these later passages we are presented with images that take Jesus beyond rabbi and divinely inspired master and intimately and inextricably identify him with the very being and substance of God. He refers to God as "Father" and assures us we come to actually see and know the Father through the Son, to actually experience the very presence of God in Jesus himself. This was understandably a difficult message for the disciples to grasp. It is understandably often a difficult message for us to grasp as well.

Our reading this morning forms the beginning of what is called the "Farewell Discourse" in John, a discourse by Jesus that is three chapters long. We need to put this reading into its proper context. It occurs during the Last Supper, Jesus' final time together with his closest friends before his arrest, trial and execution. In the chapter immediately preceding this one, Jesus has washed the feet of his disciples in an act of remarkable humility, revealed that one of this inner circle would betray him and, when Peter protested his loyalty even to the death informed him that he, Peter, would deny Jesus three times before the sun rose. Is it any wonder then that in this chapter we are told Jesus is "troubled in spirit?"

The reading today begins the longest discourse of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel in which he essentially bids farewell to his followers while also trying to explain the completion of his earthly mission, his returning to his heavenly Father and reassuring them of his continued presence in their lives. Certainly the disciples were troubled and confused by all this as well. But Jesus begins our present chapter with the admonition to “let not your hearts be troubled” but to “believe in God” and to “believe also in me.” The verb translated as troubled in this passage appears three times earlier in John, including the previous chapter, and each time refers to Jesus’ state of mind when confronted with the power of evil and death, the very forces of this world. It therefore implies much stronger emotion than mere sadness or discomfort. Jesus then tells us to believe...to believe in God and to believe in him. This forms one of the central tenets of John’s Gospel—the unity of God and Jesus and the certainty that the faith that understanding nourishes will empower the believers to recognize the great work accomplished in Jesus ministry, life, death and resurrection.

But of course, all of this discussion coming before the events of the Passion and Resurrection only confuse and unsettle the disciples. They hear Jesus say he is going where they cannot follow at present and they sense only change, loss and uncertainty. Jesus continues to reassure them that although he may be leaving for now he will return to take them to the place he has prepared for them where they will remain with him. Even in the face of death he comforts them with the assertion that he is indeed the “way, the truth and the life.” All the forces of evil and hate and death cannot overcome the love that is God or separate that love from among us.

These words continue to provide comfort to many in times of loss. This Gospel reading is one of the options for the funeral liturgy which is usually a time of personal loss and often a time of uncertainty and even despair. It is comforting to hear that even though we are confronted with separation and change and an uncertain future that through our belief our troubled hearts will be comforted, that there ultimately is a place for us all in the love that is God.

While most, if not all of us have experienced the personal loss of a loved one, we can easily overlook the fact that social groups and institutions can also experience loss, grief and uncertainty over the way forward. This congregation, as the family it certainly is, has experienced considerable loss, change and uncertainty over the last few years. It is always difficult to bring to an end a long and dynamic ministry such as was with Fr. Warren. After 27 years of continuity the prospect of change and loss and uncertainty can truly be daunting. Part of the genius of the interim system in the Episcopal Church is that it allows a congregation to grieve that loss, adjust to the separation and to move forward in productive and healthy ways. We were blessed during the interim period with the ministry of Fr. Fuller who was able to gently and skillfully shepherd us through that time of great change as we made the transition from the very comfortable ways that were toward the often uncertain ways that must now be. His unexpected illness only added more difficult and complex layers to our sense of uncertainty and even loss. But through this sometimes difficult time we have also seen the revitalization of parish participation and lay leadership. We have been well served by the thoughtful, prayerful and determined focus of our Rector Search Committee. And now as we stand poised at the beginning of the newest, and yes uncertain chapter of this wonderful place called Bethesda, we can still take comfort in the words of our Gospel lesson this morning.

Do not let your hearts be troubled, but believe.

Amen.

—The Rev. Dr. Richard Effinger

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**SERMON**  
**Easter IV –John10:1-10 - 04/13/08**  
**Good Shepherd Sunday**  
**“Shepherd No. 1”**

I think some time in the past year or so, we pretty much established that no matter how we might sentimentalize them, in fact, sheep are helpless, stupid, and they smell bad. The reason they get so much play is that the children of God in the Bible are often identified with sheep, and the big thing is that they are the objects of love by the Great Shepherd of the Sheep, which of course raises the status of us sheep greatly.

The owner of the sheep was often the shepherd. Sometimes the owner would enlist his children to be shepherds because

they would, like their parent, have a stake in the safety and care of the flock. Israel's King David is a good example of that. As the youngest son, he stayed behind and cared for the flock.

If you notice, we are, however getting something of a collection of shepherds. How many, four? There is your new shepherd, Fr. James on the way, No. 4. There is Bishop Frade, shepherd No. 3. Then there is Jesus, who says, one verse after today's Gospel lesson ends, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." But I want you to remember that Jesus is also the Lamb of God – this becomes very important later. Jesus is shepherd No. 2.

In Psalm 23, we meet Shepherd No. 1: "The Lord is my shepherd." The Psalmist says that the Lord God whose name may not even be spoken is "my shepherd, I shall lack nothing." Shepherd No. 1 is God. The Prophet Ezekiel (Chapter 34) has a wonderful extended section on God as the Shepherd. Listen to some of it: "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak... you are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God, says the Lord GOD." All of the other shepherds take their cue from Shepherd No. 1, including Shepherd No. 2, Jesus.

There is a practice in tending sheep, which reaches back into time immemorial, but is seldom spoken of. An English friend, familiar with sheep, pointed it out to me after a sermon I preached in Miami on the Good Shepherd. Every year during lambing season, some of the lambs do not survive, nor do all of the female sheep, survive birthing. This leaves some ewes without lambs, and some lambs without mothers. However, the ewes that have lost lambs will not accept the orphaned lambs into their care. So what shepherds have done for ages, and still do, is this. They remove the coat from a dead lamb and place it on top of an orphaned lamb and then present it to the lamb-less mother. She recognizes it as her own and welcomes it into her care.

Isn't this somehow a summary of the whole gospel? Shepherd No. 1, through his son, Shepherd No. 2, who is both the Good Shepherd and the Lamb of God given for us, have assured that all the flock are safe, included, and cared for. There isn't much more to say.

–The Rev. Dr. Perry T. Fuller

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**SERMON**  
**The Great Vigil of Easter**  
**Saturday, April 23, 2011**

Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us, therefore let us keep the feast. Not with the old leaven of malice and wickedness but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. Alleluia. Amen.

This is the night! The night that changes everything.

This is the night! The night that turns all human history upside down and inside out.

This is the night! The night when all of Creation is again reconciled with it's Creator.

This grand celebration of the Great Vigil of Easter is among the oldest celebrations of all the Church. And one of the most powerful. In it we celebrate our ancient covenant with God and the mighty acts of God's saving and redeeming grace given to us the Children of God. We also celebrate the rite of baptism by which we are all initiated into our covenantal relationship with God and receive the tremendous gifts of the Spirit. Tonight we welcome Skye, Christian and Richard as the newest members of our family of faith. And all of this is given freely from the great source of unconditional love that is God.

This is the night in which we celebrate the liberation given us through God and the intervention of the Divine Will in the course of human events. We celebrate the deliverance from the physical bondage of slavery in Egypt endured by the ancient Hebrews, the Chosen People of God. We celebrate the deliverance from the spiritual bondage of death endured by us all, the reborn Children of God. We celebrate the restoration of grace and holiness to all of Creation.

This is the night that gives victorious answer to the apparently ultimate defeat of Good Friday. To all the world on that

darkest of days it appeared as though the forces of this world had indeed overcome this self-proclaimed Messiah; for death has always been the final arbiter of victory, the irrefutable status of the totally vanquished. For them, when Jesus gasped “It is finished” and died, it was finished. Even his followers and those closest to him thought it was finished and hid in fear and despair. Little could they imagine that when Jesus had finished his earthly mission, accepted the agony of the cross and commended his spirit back into the hands of his Father, it was not an ending but a radical new beginning; a radical new beginning in the history of our relationship with God and of God’s relationship with us. In the abundance that is the Paschal Mystery we celebrate this night, reconciliation has been accomplished between Creator and Created. The means of salvation are now available to us all. The loving and forgiving arms of God are open to every one of us.

The Light of the World has indeed come into the world, and try as it might the darkness has not been able to overcome it. And now we live in the radiance of the inextinguishable Light of Christ, the true light of the world, now and forever.

This is the night!

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Amen.

– The Rev. Dr. Richard Effinger

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## SERMON

Lent IV – John 9:1-41 04/03/11

“Right in Front of our Eyes”

I apologize for the slight aura of melodrama by my showing up today. However, my planning horizon has some limitations; it often amounts to seeing how things go. I’m grateful to the clergy, particularly preacher, Fr. Rick, who were willing to indulge me. For our friends who worship at 9:00 AM, I will plan something there as well, although also unannounced. The 8:00 AM congregation may have to be satisfied with my love and blessing, of which they are assured already.

We are concluding the interim period, and I want to maintain whatever role I can to continue to facilitate the process you have so wonderfully advanced. It was disconcerting to disappear six weeks ago. I wanted to be here in these key days of the interim.

As much as I would like to it is probably prudent that I don’t meet and greet following the service today. Emotion comes too easily to the surface for the time being. So, let me just say this, the importance of your love and support for us has far exceeded my ability to articulate our thanks. But I hope you have some idea of the vast difference it makes in our lives and in my future health.

Today’s Gospel reading is interminable. It is an entire chapter long. There is a huge amount of material in it. However, we will look at it in the simplest possible way. Jesus healed the man blind from birth. Jesus leaves and does not return for 28 verses, while various factions debate the meaning of it all. None of them, by the way, rejoice over the man’s newly gained sight. They were sighted, but couldn’t see what was in front of their eyes. Obviously John has something more in mind than just recording a healing event. The message is this: the truth about life can be right in front of our eyes, and we don’t see it.

Many things blind us – you know the tiresome list of things that create unhappiness and dominate our lives. Also, we can be blinded by that endlessly vexing problem of why bad things happen in the world. The world is a beautiful, wonderful, and also fearsome place. It is still part of an ever-evolving 14 billion year creative cosmic process. The earth, making its appearance only about 4.5 billion years ago, is far from a bowling ball, solid to the core. While it is not alive in the biological sense, it is a dynamic, evolving entity in constant flux. It can be the paradise envisioned in the Garden of Eden, and life can be wonderful. Yet it can also be a difficult, dangerous and unpredictable place. Hurricanes arise. Tectonic plates shift and an earthquake devastates the area around it. If it is near the sea, the ocean will come crashing into the land, taking with it all in its path.

The writer of Psalm 46, imagining the world as a flat disc supported on great pillars, knew nothing of the tectonic plates moving and shifting under the surface of the earth, but listen: “... though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the

swelling thereof. (Psalm 46) That sounds like the northern coast of Japan to me. Yet, listen to how the psalmist concludes his poem: “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.”

There can be earthquakes in our personal lives as well. Jesus never promised that there would not trouble and difficulty in the world. What he did say is do not allow things to blind us to the truth that no matter what is happening, God is with us. It is the overarching message of our observed life together – Christmas, birth, to Good Friday, death. Easter bursts onto the scene with the ultimate, glorious affirmation. The energetic creative force of the universe we call God - is love – the love that is revealed in Jesus. Let me tell you, knowing we are loved in the midst of a disaster, is a huge piece of knowledge. “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world,” Jesus said. He is how we see God in the darkness.

I am an avid reader of the daily comics. Although dead 11 years, Charles Schulz’s comic strip “Peanuts” continues in reruns as popular as ever. Schulz knew apparently knew something about human nature. He once said this: “I cannot fail to be thrilled every time I read the things that Jesus said, and I am more and more convinced of the necessity of following him. What Jesus means to me is this: In him we are able to see God...”

We needn’t be spiritually blinded even by calamity and suffering in the world. When we look on Jesus, we see that the very heart of all being is love.

–The Rev. Dr. Perry T. Fuller

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**Fourth Wednesday in Lent**  
**April 6, 2011**  
**Isaiah 49:8-15, John 5:19-29**

Surely, it is God who saves me; I will trust in God and not be afraid.  
For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and God will be my Savior.

In the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The opening verses I have used today come from the 12th Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. These are the beginning lines of what is called the “First Song of Isaiah” which is one of the canticles for Morning Prayer. It was most likely actually written by Isaiah some seven hundred years or more before the birth of Jesus. It sings of faith in God to defend and deliver the people of God in a time of great peril and military threat, when the Assyrians were threatening to over run Jerusalem having already conquered the Northern Kingdom and effectively wiping it from the pages of history. Jerusalem was spared although it became a vassal state of the Assyrian Empire.

Our passage from Hebrew Scripture today comes from later in the Book of Isaiah—Chapter 49. This is a portion of the Book written in a much darker time in the history of the Chosen People of God. This portion of Isaiah, called Second Isaiah by biblical scholars, was written some five hundred years before the birth of Jesus, in the mid 6th century BCE during the time of the Babylonian exile. And just to make matters even more confusing, the last part of the book was written later still and is referred to as Third Isaiah. Much of Hebrew Scripture is like that—written and rewritten, edited and re-edited many times over hundreds of years before reaching its final form. But, I digress.

Our reading today was written during the time after the Babylonians had conquered and destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BCE. The Babylonian practice after conquering a neighboring nation, and they had conquered many, was essentially cultural annihilation. They would force the ruling classes of the conquered nation into exile in the capital city of Babylon which was located in what is now Iraq about 85 kilometers south of Baghdad. Once there they were able to freely mingle, intermarry, set up business and over time were usually assimilated into the mainstream culture, worshipping the local gods, raising their families and living happily ever after and thus eliminating any future nationalistic rebellious threat from the provinces.

This was the situation in which the people found themselves at the time of Second Isaiah, which is thought to have been written in Babylon during the middle portion of the exile. It was a time of great turmoil and dislocation, for with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, the center of life, the very core of social, political and religious existence for the Hebrews was suddenly removed. “By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered you, O Zion,” the psalmist tells us. Though secure, and even successful in Babylon, they were still captive and maintaining their faith

and religious practice became exceedingly difficult. “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange and distant land?” the psalmist asks. It would have been difficult indeed, living in a land full of many gods with names like Apsu, Marduk and his mother Damkina, the chief god Anu and his wife Nintu, the creator goddess who fashioned humans from clay among many others. Many fell away.

For those who remained faithful, however, there was great cognitive dissonance for the general belief at the time was when you were defeated by the army of another nation it was not just a military or political event. It was also a religious event, for another’s army could not defeat you unless their god or gods were also able to defeat your god or gods. How could this be the people wondered, if they were the Chosen People of God living in covenant with God? Was Yahweh really that impotent against Anu, Nintu and Marduk? Had God abandoned them? It was indeed a time of darkness and despair.

This was the time when Second Isaiah appeared on the scene, and he brought a message of judgment but also of great reassurance. God had not abandoned God’s people the Prophet explained, nor had God been defeated by the Babylonian gods. God was truly the one, all-powerful and only God, but the People needed chastisement for they had not maintained the promises they had made to God at the time of the Covenant. They had not listened to the prophets, God’s messengers, who had warned them of the ensuing devastation if they did not repent and return to the ways of Yahweh. The Divine Will was indeed being worked out on the stage of world events and God was fully capable of utilizing foreign nations and false gods to work to the purposes of God. This is what was accomplished in the defeat of Jerusalem and the exile.

God had never abandoned the Chosen People. Despite their infidelity God remained steadfast and certain. Isaiah was calling for a spiritual renewal and recommitment to the ways of God among the people. Second Isaiah delivers a reassuring message of an eternal, active and engaged divine presence in the course of human history, of a God that is the creator of all things, the ruler of all things and striving to restore all of Creation to the unity and wholeness which God had always intended. And that wholeness is anchored in the relationship that exists between God and the People of God, a relationship that is personal, constant, even intimate. Paul Hanson describes this relationship in almost poetic terms:

The Creator of the heavens and the earth who is the sovereign of all nations reveals the source of the divine initiative:

Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. (Isa. 43:4)

The majestic center of all creation is moved simultaneously by justice that cannot ignore evil and by love that cannot abandon the lost, even those lost in their own sin.

Our reading this afternoon concludes with a most tender depiction of the love and compassion God the Creator shares with us, the Created.

Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?

Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.

It is a most compassionate reassurance that in times of change and turmoil and even devastation we are never alone or abandoned. In all times and in all places, in dark despair and in joyful triumph God remains steadfast, loving and present and the Divine Will continues to be enacted in all matters great and small. We are at all times in the loving embrace of an enduring Creator who will not forget us, for despite our infidelities, our frailties and our shortcomings we remain, now and always, Children of God. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Richard Effinger

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**Lent IV Sunday, April 03, 2011**  
**1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41**

O God of all the nations of the earth: Remember the multitudes who have been created in your image but have not known the redeeming work of our Savior Jesus Christ; and grant that they may be brought to know and worship you as you have

been revealed in your Son. In the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, here we are—still in Lent, still in the Gospel of John with another marathon reading. Today we get all of Chapter 9. Next week we get almost all of Chapter 11. Our deacons are getting a real workout and meeting the challenge admirably.

And once again we are faced with the contrast between light and dark that runs throughout the Fourth Gospel, today presented in the very real contrast between blindness and sight. Although this story appears on the surface to be another miraculous healing by Jesus, we should know by now that in the Fourth Gospel things are not usually what they seem and the apparently simple story always has several layers of meaning. As it turns out, our reading this morning is really not about miracles and healing at all, but about the nature of sin, faith and salvation.

We begin by simply being told Jesus sees a man blind from birth. This precipitates the question and discussion with his disciples regarding the acquisition of sin by this man that he was born blind, for it was common thinking at the time that physical illness and disability were the consequence of sin either by the person affected or by his or her parents for the sins of the mothers and fathers could indeed be visited upon the children. Such thinking about the interrelation of sin, suffering and disability persists even to this day. But the answer Jesus gives shifts the entire discussion to a new way of thinking. “Neither sinned,” he responds, “he was born blind so that God’s work might be revealed in him.” We are once again told that Jesus is the light of the world, a familiar theme in the Fourth Gospel, and he is about to demonstrate the truth of that statement.

For those seriously into literary composition, there are actually formal elements of a miracle story: “a situation of need, the miracle and the attestation or witnessing of the miracle.”<sup>1</sup> Notice that in the opening verses of this story Jesus and the blind man do not speak, nor does the blind man ask to be healed. His presence is simply noted as a statement of fact and becomes the catalyst for the ensuing discussion about sin and revelation between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus himself explains the situation of need in this encounter—“that God’s work might be revealed in him.” This, therefore, is not a story about the nature of the blind man’s sin, or even his healing, but rather a story about the revelation of the works of God in the person of Jesus and the responses of those who witness it.

And the gift of sight is given to this man who was born blind.

Most of the remaining chapter is given over to the responses of the now sighted man and those around him. Jesus does not appear again until the end. The reaction and responses of the characters in this drama are remarkably instructive and give us keen insight into how salvation is viewed by the writer of the Fourth Gospel.

Let us start with those around the formerly blind man. These include the Pharisees, his friends and acquaintances and even his parents. All of them respond with incredulity, outright scorn or thinly veiled fear. None of them are able to move beyond their preconceived notions of who the blind man is, why he was blind or what has been truly accomplished in this encounter with Jesus. We are reminded of the response of Nicodemus two weeks ago, who saw the signs but was unable to recognize the very presence of God right in front of him.

Contrast this with the response of the sighted blind man. We are able to follow the expanding growth of his vision from sight to insight as he comes to fully comprehend the person and nature of Jesus. We are with him as he steadfastly witnesses to his healing and moves from physical sight to spiritual sight, first referring to Jesus as “the man who healed me,” and later as a “prophet” and finally as “sent from God.” We see this beggar as he resolutely confronts the Pharisees, no longer operating from a position of fear and uncertainty but besting them at their own arguments in his new found understanding and faith. When he is rejected by all, Jesus returns to the narrative, seeking out the man. When Jesus identifies himself to the man, the once blind man makes his confession of faith (“Lord, I believe.”) and worships Jesus. With this final act the man demonstrates how fully developed his vision has become by acknowledging the light of the world, the very presence of God incarnate in Jesus. His role now finished he exits the drama. How very different from Nicodemus and his exit. As you may recall, Nicodemus was never able to see the light in the darkness and simply faded back into the night.

And so this nameless blind man becomes the vehicle to show us how the writer of the Gospel of John viewed the concepts of sin, redemption and salvation. In most of the New Testament sin is viewed as essentially a moral concept based on an individual’s behavior. This is a concept with which most of us are very familiar as it has been rather dominant in the life and history of the Church. This way of thinking considers sin to be generated as the result of a person’s actions when they oppose the will of God. Since it is essentially human nature to oppose the will of God and therefore sin, we are all guilty

and carry the indelible stain of our transgressions, the deficit of which is only redeemed through the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross.

John, on the other hand, redefines sin in theological terms based on one's relationship with God and for John the defining factor of one's relationship with God is one's faith in Jesus as the manifestation of God in the world, the very Word incarnate, the true light of the world. We are therefore not redeemed from sin by virtue of Jesus' death; rather salvation from sin becomes a function of Jesus' life. It is his very presence in the world that allows us all to move from darkness to light, from blindness to sight, from sin to eternal life. And in the incomprehensible, unconditional love that is God, the light of the world is available freely to all. The only way to be excluded from this offer of salvation is to not accept the gift, to remain blind to the very light in our presence. It is without question the most radical concept of salvation by grace in the New Testament.

As we continue on our Lenten journey, let us remain mindful of the fact that we are all sinners on the path, sometimes stumbling in the dark, always seeking the light, sometimes coming into its very presence and like the man once blind seeing, believing and worshipping.

Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Richard Effinger

<sup>1</sup> O'Day, Gail, R., *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX* (Nashville, Tenn., Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 652.

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**Sunday, March 20, 2011**

**Second Sunday in Lent**

**Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17**

Contrast and tension.

Contrast and tension. Options and choices and the consequences of those choices.

Our lives are often consumed with these very issues. Our scripture readings this morning reflect these same issues.

Our Gospel lesson today gives us the well story of Nicodemus coming to see Jesus and we are immediately confronted with one of the contrasts that runs continually through the Fourth Gospel—that of darkness and light. For John, darkness represents separation from the presence of God. By contrast light represents the very presence and splendor of God. Think back to the Prologue of this Gospel, wherein “the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” John also casts this contrast in terms of blindness and sight. In two weeks our Gospel reading, all of them from John from now until Palm Sunday, again plays on this theme and tells of Jesus restoring sight to a blind man—but I get ahead of myself.

So, Nicodemus comes to see Jesus. We are told he is a Pharisee and a leader of the people. We can assume he is a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling supreme council of ancient Israel and therefore an important and powerful man. He calls Jesus Rabbi, a sign of respect, and speaks of knowing of the great signs Jesus has performed. But the Gospeler gives us a big hint as to what is really going on, for Nicodemus comes to see Jesus at night. As the conversation between them proceeds, we come to see that Nicodemus is caught up in the physical, empirical context of what is being said and is unable to truly grasp the spiritual message Jesus is giving. He sees the signs but is unable to hear the message.

Some of the difficulty arises in the choice of words Jesus uses as related by John. Unlike Hebrew, Aramaic or English, the original Greek word translated in today's reading as being born “from above” also means at the same time anew or again. This is part of the tension in the reading. There is not a primary and secondary meanings; there is no main text and a footnote. Rather one must hold all three concepts simultaneously and equally. Jesus is challenging Nicodemus to expand his thinking beyond the physical realm he understands and thinks he can control. But Nicodemus is unable to make the transition, hearing only born again in a very concrete and physical way.

Jesus tries a new approach, speaking of being born of water and spirit. Now water certainly speaks of the physical aspects of childbirth. For the Christian reader water evokes our new spiritual life in baptism. One is also reminded of Jesus referring to himself as the living water from which one will never thirst, the very wellspring of eternal life. We will hear this story in

our Gospel reading next week, but again I get ahead of myself.

Poor old Nick remains confounded and unable to comprehend. “How can these things be?” he asks, and that is the last we hear from Nicodemus. He emerged from the darkness in search of the light and not seeing it even when in its very presence, he apparently fades back into the night from whence he came.

Contrast the response of Nicodemus with the response of Abram as we hear it in the Hebrew Scripture this morning. God calls Abram to pack up and leave—his home, his family, his country, everything he knows and holds dear—in order to go... someplace. “To a land that I will show you.” And in return Abram and his descendents will receive blessing. And Abram’s response? The reading is remarkably concise. “So Abram went.” No “How can this be?” or “Where are we going?” just get up and go!

So, where do we fit into this often complex mix of contrast and tension and choice?

How often do any of us, when confronted with something new or unusual or different from what we are used to react like Nicodemus? “How can this be?” we ask. “We’ve never done it that way before!” we protest. “It’s just not done that way!” we insist. I must admit I am no great lover of unexpected surprises—unless, of course, they come in small, exquisitely wrapped packages or maybe in envelopes with a small oval cut in the front exposing the face of a dead president—or better yet Ben Franklin. Truth be told, I must confess I have used all these arguments and many more when faced with uncomfortable circumstances that I didn’t particularly want to face or with concepts I wasn’t quite prepared to wrap my head around or with events that moved me out of my comfort zone. I am afraid I have probably channeled poor Nicodemus more often than I care to admit.

But Jesus is telling us that in our knowledge and certainty and even our discomfort we must remain open to the workings of the Spirit in our lives; we must be prepared to at least consider what we are given with new perspectives and an openness of our hearts and minds. We must consider viewing things through the focusing lens of our faith rather than the often smudged spectacles of our own certitude and comfort.

It is a challenge issued to us all. Jesus, the true light come into the world to enlighten everyone calls us all to continue our journey with him in the dazzling light of unending day and the brilliance of eternal life.

Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Rick Effinger

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**Sunday, March 6, 2011**  
**Last Sunday after the Epiphany; Transfiguration Sunday**  
**Exodus 24:12-18; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9**

Nothing is as certain as change.

Most of us have heard this adage countless times over the years and as much as we may hate to hear it we know it to be true. Some call it progress. Some call it disruption. Some see change simply for change sake. But like it or not, accept it or not, change comes to us all.

A most obvious example, among many, is the cell phone. I daresay many of us here this morning are old enough to remember the days before cell phones—and voice mail and caller ID and call waiting. The list goes on and on. What did we do before cell phones? It’s hard to imagine, isn’t it? If nothing else, they have totally changed the way we pick up our family and friends at the airport. Now we simply call when we have our luggage and are waiting at the curb and our ride swoops in from the cell phone lot. How different from the days before cell phones. But of course, back then was also when you could actually park your car at the bag claim area for more than 23 seconds. Back then was when flying was actually fun, the airlines were still a service industry and going to the airport was not an issue of national security.

Change comes to us all.

Today’s readings from both the Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament are all about change—physical change as is obvious, but emotional and spiritual change as well. They both involve times of change and uncertainty, anxiety and even

fear among the people and the awesome yet ultimately reassuring presence of God among them.

Our reading from Exodus today joins the Hebrews after the dreadful night of Passover and the exultation of liberation from slavery. They are now at the beginning of their time in the wilderness gathered at the base of Mount Sinai. At this point the Promised Land is still just a promise, what security there was in Egypt is now far behind them and ahead lies only change and uncertainty. At God's bidding, Moses climbs Mt. Sinai and comes into the presence of God seen as a cloud covering the mountain and great light. While in the Divine Presence, Moses receives from the very hand of God the Law which instructs the people how to live as the Chosen People of God and binds them in Covenant with God. The God that has delivered them from their bondage and led them to freedom now reassures them of the continued presence and protection of God.

Similarly, the Gospel reading today joins the disciples just six days after Jesus has asked them "Who do you think I am?" and Peter responds, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Jesus then tells them for the first time of his upcoming suffering and death on the cross. For the disciples this changes everything. Their concept of the Messiah was more one of triumphal warrior king than suffering servant but now Jesus is telling them otherwise. It is a time of uncertainty and anxiety. It is at this point that Jesus takes his inner circle of Peter, James and John with him up the mountain.

And there, they too come into the very presence of God seen as a cloud covering the mountain and great light. But even more, they see Jesus transfigured before them, his face shining like the sun and his body and clothing becoming dazzling white as light. Unlike Moses whose face reflected the glory of God when he came back down the mountain, the disciples see Jesus shining forth with the very radiance and splendor of the glory and presence of God. And if this is not enough, they are then surrounded by the radiant cloud of the glory of God and hear a voice telling them, "This is my Son, the Beloved. In him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" They are, of course, terrified and fall to the ground. Any doubt over the identity of Jesus is now dispelled for they have personally experienced God in the presence of both the Father and the Son. They have been shown nothing less than a glimpse of the new life that awaits beyond the cross, the sure and certain hope that lies beyond the uncertainty and fear.

And then the presence and reassurance of God is given them in a most intimate and human way—Jesus gently touches them and tells them to not be afraid. The awesome power and presence of God comes in radiant cloud and thundering voice but also in the reassurance of a single gentle touch.

These stories are also for us. While perhaps not as dramatic as 40 years wandering in the wilderness or as wrenching as witnessing the Passion and death of Jesus, we too continue to be faced with change and uncertainty, and even anxiety and fear. As we approach the season of Lent we move from the joy of celebrating the Incarnation to the more introspective time of self-examination and intentional discipline.

Bethesda and our faith community have been fraught with change for several years now. Change and uncertainty continues to face us on several fronts. In addition to the process of discerning a new rector and anticipating the changes that will bring, we are now faced with the acute concerns of serious health challenges faced by Fr. Perry and Rio, our sexton. And we all know more change is in store as all these processes move toward completion and, as we heard in the Gospel message last week, tomorrow brings worries of its own.

But all is not hopeless. Like the ancient Hebrews at the base of Mt. Sinai, we know that we remain in Covenant with God and that God remains present with us. Like Peter, John and James we too have a glimpse of the glory of God and the sure and certain hope that lies beyond the uncertainty and fear. Like them, we also know the gentle reassuring touch of the hand of God and the still voice that tells us to not be afraid.

I know I have only been here four months and have not shared most of this change and uncertainty with you. But coming late to the party I can tell you what I see.

Transfiguration is defined as change, but change so as to glorify or exalt.

While change is inevitable, transfiguration is not.

Here at Bethesda I see a faith community transfigured in the face of change and uncertainty. I see a community charged with compassion, empathy and concern that has not been afraid to convert such motivation into action. I see joy and engagement in worship, not mere obligation. I see the Gospel message being spread in perhaps the most effective way possible—without words. In the midst of change and uncertainty I see the reassuring presence of God—in the outreach

ministries, in the responsibility of stewardship, in serious committee work, in lay leadership, in the cheerful greeting, in the gentle touch.

As we bring the Season of Epiphany to a close amid the awe and majesty of the Transfiguration, I see a community that knows God by the simple name with which we opened the season all those weeks ago—Immanuel: God with us.

Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Richard Effinger

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Wednesday, March 9, 2011

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:1-2,12-17; Psalm 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Salvation.

Well, here it is again. That Ash Wednesday/Lent time of year. It always seems to sort of sneak up on us, doesn't it? Even this year—when it is practically as late as it can possibly be. I don't understand how after nine weeks of Epiphany--that's over two months!--we are again caught off guard.

Part of the problem, I think, is that many of us still tend to view Lent with some of the leftover perspective we remember from childhood, when Lent was almost a punishment—or at least a great inconvenience—for reasons that never quite seemed fathomable. Give up chocolate? Give up chewing gum? How does that make God happy? Give up pizza? Give up movies? What did I do to deserve this? Many of us still feel we have to suffer for some reason during Lent but are still unsure why. Probably the most frequently asked question today is “What did you give up for Lent?”

Our Gospel reading today, however, cautions us about such superficial practice. Lent is a time of discipline and self-control, to be sure, but more importantly it is a time of openness and even vulnerability in our exploration of our relationships—our relationships with ourselves, with others, with God. It is not a time of punishment and retribution. Rather it is a time of critical evaluation and enrichment.

In addition to the discipline of giving something up for Lent, consider the concomitant discipline of taking something on for Lent. We live in a busy, sometimes hyperactive world. We all have those special needs, activities and relationships that often get overlooked, postponed or simply deleted. You know what they are. Consider the goal of reading an appropriate book that you have not quite been able to find the time to finish—or even start. Perhaps you have long planned to take that special course, join a Bible study or a contemplative prayer group but have never quite been able to make the time. Perhaps you have been meaning to volunteer in some capacity but scheduling is always difficult. Perhaps you have been meaning to spend more quality time with those you love—your spouse or partner, your children, your parents, your friends—but other responsibilities and commitments often seem to infringe. Beginning to make some of these changes is certainly an appropriate Lenten discipline-- and probably better than just giving up chocolate.

Think about it. Pray about it. Be honest—with yourself and with God.

In a few moments we will all receive ashes on our foreheads—an ancient sign of penitence and humility and a mark of our mortality. But while we are mortal, we are not hopeless. Accepting the disciplines of Lent help us begin to more fully live the life given us as Children of God. One of those short inspirational phrases I've seen once comes to mind: Life is God's gift to us. What we do with it is our gift to God.

I invite you all to a holy Lent. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Richard Effinger













































