

Coming Home -- Lent 4C

Just about three years ago, it was with excitement, gratitude and hopefully a little humility that we joined hands here in common life and ministry at St. Peter's by the Sea. We gave thanks to God for bringing us together, and asked God to fill our hearts with grace, charge our minds with creativity, and occupy our hands with benevolence in this beautiful, troubled world. Much has happened, much has been done; old friends have gone and new friends have appeared, but our prayers for spirit, character and mission remain constant and true.

With each new beginning, such as the one we made together, individuals, families and communities move out of their previous existence, when looking forward to something else was the primary frame of reference, to a present existence, when we are engaged in climbing a path – individually or together – a path that leads us onward and upward. The Israelites kept the passover in the plains of Jericho. On the day after the passover, they ate the produce of the land. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land that year.

Like the Israelites, while we are expecting and awaiting our beginnings, we eat the manna of hope. Once we make a beginning, we eat the produce of the land, produce that we ourselves cultivate. If we pay

attention to our culture and the welfare of one another, by pursuing justice, mercy and humility, our produce will contain its own manna, the seeds of its own hope. For God knows and God insists that we accept that there will always have to be new beginnings. The Lord said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." The Lord promises that tomorrow, with God's help, whatever disgrace, discomfort, grief or change we are undergoing will be rolled away too. We will once more taste of the sweet waters of grace. Justice will again roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.

What does the Lord mean when, in speaking to Joshua we hear: "Today, I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt?" What does the Psalmist mean when we say together that we are happy indeed only when our sins are covered and we no longer have deceit in our hearts because we are no longer silent? Whether or not we've been terribly riotous, we have all, perforce, like the Prodigal Son done some sinning – more than some, perhaps; less than many, propitiously – and it is always good to get back to a place we can call home, however new this home may be. Home is where a new beginning has been made, however recently. Home is where we can begin anew our quest for the joys of good living, as outlined above, however complex our challenges may be.

I visited Florida last week, where my beloved parents live, and had the delight of kayaking through a vast mangrove forest with my daughter, looking at more water birds up close than you can imagine, and glad that alligators keep to the fresh water ponds nearby. We saw a big one of them too. The mangrove is a strange and wonderful plant, preserving the stability of the barrier islands, but also always expanding its territory, in ways that can be aggravating to human beings. We like to carve out our own spaces and have them to ourselves, but the mangrove doesn't pay any attention. A lovely analogy might be drawn from the mangrove for the impulse of mission: reaching out to one and all, to the ends of the earth; making new footholds and new islands wherever we go.

But I was struck by the bizarre tendrils the mangrove produces. Coming down from its branches are long rootlike cords with what looks like an ancient battle mace at the end of each one. The feelers at the end of the tendril go off in all directions, constantly searching, searching, searching for a new place to dig in, get rooted and start the process all over again. They are never home. How many of us are like this, always slightly discontented, and thus disconnected with the soil in which we have our roots; always looking for new territory, new faces, a better offer?

What is there in our lives that, in being rolled away might set us free of our discontentment and feeble

connectedness? What is there in our lives that we keep silent about and deceive ourselves about – that secretly sets us groaning and second-guessing all the day long: looking to move on? The 12-step programs of recovery – by which they mean re-discovery of the benevolent higher power often known as God – are full of proverbs that help people stay on “the beam.” One of them says, “You’re only as sick as your secrets.”

Each of us has a different list, a different order of secrets ranging from little habits to stubborn resentments and all the way up to life-threatening forms of institutional or interpersonal violence against ourselves or others. The circumstances and architecture of our enslaving Egypts – our besetting sins -- are uniquely ordered and constructed. They are built with mysterious, encrypted blueprints over the courses of our lives, out of parental influence, societal vagaries, coincidences and our own, ever-changing brain chemistry.

The tough nut, as the psalm had us singing about a few minutes ago, is that secrecy, that silence. We are enslaved when we deceive ourselves about who we are. There is no way God can cover up our sin and give us new chances if we refuse to acknowledge – to ourselves – what they are. It helps a lot to have other people to come clean with; that’s why a community life is richer than a solitary one . The good news is that God keeps on trying – standing there behind before beside and within

us with a strong arm to pull us free from whatever it is that holds us back, the instant we ask.

And this is a bodacious, audacious god. One who will try anything and everything to get our attention and offer us assistance. Who, so they say, once actually blurred the line between human and divine in order to triage our condition, diagnose our secret sinfulness and commence treatment. St. Paul is writing about the necessity for us to remain aware of the un-humanness of God, for us to tap into and embrace the part of ourselves that transcends our worldly understanding, to know ourselves as very members incorporate of the body of a divine being in order to become free. Writes James Runcie: “God is neither darkness nor light, neither error nor truth nor, all told can God be affirmed or denied, whose incomprehensible transcendence is incomprehensibly above all affirmation and denial.”

But God does consider us family. Which brings us to the Prodigal Son. What are we to learn about life and sinning from this fellow? Is it an object lesson warning us against dissolute living? Not necessarily. Sure he spent everything, but if there hadn't been that darn famine, who knows? Maybe he would have done a start-up and raised his own fortune. Ten, twelve years, he could have sold out for a bundle, had a couple kids of his own, divided the loot between them, and continued the cycle. The famine was not a punishment, it was an opportunity, a time-out, a do-over.

Jesus' life, death and resurrection are God's way of providing the time-out humanity so desperately needs. In Christ there is a famine of sorts, a complete absence of machination, of silence, of stratagem. God is with us in the flesh and so we can, if we are willing, safely encounter and accept complete knowledge of who we are, what is holding us enslaved. It won't kill us – on the contrary, the awful truth will bring us back to life. All we have to do is listen and we can, as did the Prodigal Son, come to ourselves. His prodigality is not so much to return to others having failed to fulfill their hope and expectations, but a return from the despair and self-alienation to which he exiled himself.

He's out there in the fields, feeding the pigs. This is a humiliating job for a nice Jewish boy. Not only that, he's so hungry the stuff the pigs are eating starts looking plenty good. But he can't have any or he'll be punished – maybe killed – for stealing from the owner. Presumably he will get paid for the swineherding at some point, but he feels like he's going to die of hunger first. So, with the clarity that can come from weakness, he realizes who he is

He realizes who he is and merely determines to say it out loud to someone at home. And that's the whole game. His dad forgives him before he even says a word, while he's still a mile off; it's the intention that matters. Notice "I have sinned against heaven and before you" is

the whole story. His father won't let him get out the words, "and I am no longer worthy to be called your son," because they are wrong. We do not lose our identity, our nature as children of heaven, as daughters of man and sons of woman by sinning, but only by self-deceit. It is the truth, not purity or perfection that sets us free. The truth is in our hearts, and will result in a changed life. If it's only on our lips, then we stay in Egypt's land, instead of coming home.

This is how we claim our kinship with the resurrected God. Like the Prodigal Son, we were dead and we become alive; we were lost and are now found. We kept our secrets, even from ourselves, but as we begin to see glimpses of ourselves of face-to-face, we are liberated.

Of course with knowledge comes responsibility. Little by little, we have to address the various tendencies, low self-esteem behaviors and negligent or violent habits that can pile up into new prison walls. It helps to have a community like this one, based in faith and mutual accountability, where we can come and share our willingness to embrace our ever-new freedom. In our worship, work and friendship together, we enjoy God's embrace and find the spirit that propels us out into a secretive, complicated, dangerous, beautiful world as ambassadors of steadfast love.