

The Second Sunday of Lent
Revised Common Lectionary, Year C

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Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Threats and Trust
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector

‘Tis the Second Sunday in Lent, and just when we thought things couldn’t get any uglier, they get worse. Two weeks ago tomorrow, the Primates of the Anglican Communion, our leading bishops and archbishops, released their Communiqué from their meeting in Tanzania. It was a curious document, with five paragraphs devoted to what the Primates *did* at the meeting, one paragraph devoted to the Church’s mission in helping the most desperately impoverished people on the planet, one paragraph on theological education, and one on exploring how we interpret Scripture. . .and then no fewer than twenty-eight paragraphs devoted to how to cope with the “issue” of human sexuality, the Episcopal Church, and whether or not we can all stay at table together. Then there was an appendix of recommendations – recommendations because the Primates have no power over any one Church in the Anglican Communion.

But “recommendations” appear to me to have taken on a new meaning. The recommendations that made the headlines, as many of you might remember seeing, were to our House of Bishops to do two things: covenant with each other not to consent to the election of any new gay or lesbian bishop; and put an end to the blessing of same-sex unions. . .or else. But these were recommendations, so the implied threat was with the only leverage at hand: that if the House of Bishops doesn’t respond to the Primates’ satisfaction by the end of September, we might find ourselves out of the Anglican Communion, or at least in “impaired” communion. . .which is something we’ve already had to grow used to.

Then our Presiding Bishop came home and gently asked us all to fast for a season, it being Lent and all – fast from the full inclusion of all our brothers and sisters in the sacramental life of the Church. I’ll share with you I wasn’t at all happy with that suggestion. Nor were many of my colleagues and friends in the Diocese of California. Our tradition does not hold that we should ask *others* to fast, let alone for them to fast for the sake of our unity. Nor should we fast from justice, it seems to me. As we read from Isaiah on Ash Wednesday:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;

*when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

Isaiah 58:6-7

Lesser known in this unfolding story is Davis Mac-Iyalla, who represents gay and lesbian members of the Church of Nigeria. He went to Tanzania to the Primates' meeting to speak truth to power, to put a human face on the "issue," and then returned home only to go back into hiding, as his life was again threatened.

Also returning home was Peter Akinola, the Archbishop of the Church of Nigeria, who has been leading the charge against the Episcopal Church amongst the Primates as well as planting the flag of his own Province in this Church by offering episcopal oversight for disgruntled churches in Virginia. He returned to Nigeria just in time to see legislation he supports move closer to ratification – legislation that will make any public assembly around supporting gays and lesbians in that country punishable with imprisonment. A remarkable range of international and governmental groups oppose the legislation, from Human Rights Watch to our current Presidential administration. And it is no small irony that the legislation clearly violates the exact same Anglican documents that are presently being held against the Episcopal Church. The Primates and the Archbishop of Canterbury, publicly at least, have apparently been completely silent on the matter.

What an ugly mess we are in all together this Lent. With media that love to put the words "Anglican," "Episcopal," and "sex" together in the same report, if not the same headline. With threats from Primates and the growing and mixed public responses from our bishops. With the call for continued marginalization of some of our brothers and sisters, both as a Church and in secular law. I'm tempted to wish everyone might have stayed home.

Threats are a very human response, it seems, to a Gospel that calls all of us to account for the ways we treat each other – and into a radically altered community that does not follow the traditional boundaries we thought we all knew, boundaries and rules that would afford us a sense of protection – spiritual and otherwise.

In today's Gospel Reading, the Pharisees in Galilee come to Jesus to warn him that Herod, the regional king and puppet of the Romans, is out to kill him. Some commentators have speculated this is one of the only times – perhaps *the* only time in the Gospels the Pharisees side with Jesus – against a common enemy. Herod was notorious for debauchery and thorough nastiness. Mark and Matthew both say he had John the Baptist's head served up on a platter to please his wife's daughter, if you remember. Not the sort of man any of us would want over for dinner, and certainly not the kind of king any faithful Israelite in the first century would want.

But another interpretation, and one I'm inclined to agree with, is that the Pharisees found Herod's threat to Jesus advantageous. Getting rid of Jesus through threats, even from a mutual enemy, would rid them of this itinerant healer, teacher, and potentially Messianic figure who was stirring up the people and meddling with the traditions they were sworn to uphold. Even if he just moved on to another part of the countryside, it would be fine.

Jesus not so subtly responds that their clever attempt to get rid of him (not to mention Herod's) doesn't move him at all. He is not about to answer to corrupt puppet kings or religious authorities sometimes self-absorbed, cunning, and wily as foxes. He is called to answer only to God and the people to whom he has come to bring the Good News. And he points to what he sees as his probable end in Jerusalem, presaging the triumphal entry we will remember on Palm Sunday and the impending crucifixion that will come soon thereafter. *That*, in Jesus' eyes is the path God has placed before him. And he will not be deterred. Even less will God be.

Likewise, in today's ancient story about Abram, we hear about the threat of a different kind. For Abram and many people of ancient times, a great threat, if not the greatest, was to have no children -- no natural heirs to carry on the family legacy. Identity was passed from father to son. About as close as one could get to a sense of immortality was through progeny. So when God shows up in a vision and promises Abram and Sarai protection and a new land, the promise also includes descendants. And God seals the promise with an ancient form of covenant, as strange as it might appear to our eyes and ears -- the sacrificed animals and walking in the midst of them are a sworn testimony of God's devotion to Abram, Sarai, and the promise between them. God will be Abram and Sarai's shield, supplanting all other false forms of security. Abram trusts, and God "reckons it to him as righteousness," for that is all that God wants from us in the end. . .trust -- complete, unreserved, open-eyed, open-hearted, and loving, even as we step into the impossible.

And that is precisely the problem for all of us in the Second Sunday of Lent, be we parishioners, Archbishops, priests, deacons, or ordinary folk whose heads swim when it comes to church politics, threats, and power. God asks for our trust. . .trust as we step into the impossible. This is how God responds to ultimatums and all the fears we wrestle with inside and with each other. We are called to trust God, and to cultivate trust with each other. And if we do, as did Abram and Jesus, it is reckoned to us as righteousness -- trust is simply the right thing to do in relationship.

The challenge for so many of our leaders in the Anglican Communion right now is that there's a great deal of fear in the water. Fear that our notion of Communion will be or already is broken. Fear that our most hallowed rules, interpretations, and boundaries might be at risk because difference is allowed in the door of our common life. Fear that we might not be good enough to inherit what God has promised to us already in this itinerant Teacher, Prophet, and Messiah -- Jesus the Christ -- who loves us *anyway* even as we struggle through our tendency to fall into traps of fear and power-over-others, even as we stumble into the sin that breaks relationship and hurts ourselves and one another. . .the sin that calls us from doing justice into self-absorption and, frankly, odd obsessions that distract us from the pressing needs all around us.

The problem and the promise of the Second Sunday of Lent is that we are reminded that God's promise is there for us, threats of Kings, Archbishops, religious authorities, the stranger, or our own worst fears of the future notwithstanding. And that's Good News for everyone right now who worries about where things are headed and what we should do next. Hope even for those of us who couldn't care less about the Anglican Communion and are just trying to work out God's will in our own lives. God has promised. The challenge of faith is only to trust that God is carrying that promise out in us and in our midst.

As far as the Anglican Communion is concerned, let us pray only that the response of our House of Bishops to the Primates' recommendations engenders trust, even if it is a clear "No," as some of us believe it ought to be, because sometimes a clear *no*, like Jesus offers the Pharisees in today's Gospel, is more faithful, trusting, and trustworthy than any fearful equivocation.

Let us pray that we may engage each other, even when and where we most strongly disagree, without the easy power of threats, and instead with the loving grace of God that calls for mutual honesty and trust.

Let us pray also that we learn together how to trust our sisters and brothers in Christ who have suffered so much at the Church's hands for centuries. . . trust them to discern, with our love and support, God's will for their most hallowed relationships and their full involvement in the sacramental life of the Church.

And let us pray simply for a deeper trust in God. . . A God who made promises to us first and intends to see them through despite our best efforts, just as God did with Abram and Sarai, with the first apostles, and with the Church for thousands of years. A God who offered us Communion first. A God who offered us love first. A God who gives up life first, so that then we might all have it, and have it and share it in abundance.

And then to find a remarkable thing: that then, we might be truly freed from fear, and see ourselves as we truly are – welcomed into the powerful and loving arms of the One who holds us all in hope – a divine hope that shines light into our darkness.