

Sermon for the Second Sunday after Pentecost
RCL Lectionary, Year B
Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15; 2 Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34
June 14th, 2009

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Caveats and Green Shoots
by **The Rev. Richard E. Helmer**

School's about out for everyone – it's already out for many of us. Graduation is here for some. Summer is already at the door, the urge to go outside and stay there for awhile is almost irresistible. It's fitting in an odd kind of way this morning that we gather with the Dipsea passing by our front steps, the parking a bit of a bear. It's the annual reminder that life at Church of Our Saviour is now transitioning into the summer months with the scattering of the flock, the drop in weekly attendance, the membership embarking on vacation (though many scaled-back much more this year from previous years.) And, yet, the race is on!

We open the long Season after Pentecost – what some call “ordinary time” – this year on an uncertain foot. But it's an uncertain foot we've almost grown overly accustomed to, with all of the economic uncertainties of the past couple of years. Still, the questions remain: Where are we headed? And if we can answer that question with a bit of foresight, how are we going to get there?

Our Youth Minister position remains unfilled, but not due to lack of effort. Two of our beloved members have passed away, leaving more than a bit of a gap in our midst. Some of us remain unemployed. Others of us remain uncertain of whether we will be employed in the coming months. And we still have to get everything organized for Fall, from retreats to Outreach to adult education to our children's programs before much of our leadership disbands for the summer.

Some of your lay leaders and I have been wrestling with our habitual pattern of frenetic rushing about to shore things up in the ongoing life of transition in our parish – of trying to keep everything in the air when things tend to drop; of fixing and fixing and re-fixing. Like this week when the youth minister search went into double-overtime on the one hand and mechanical failure and a power outage took out office equipment on the other – just when Rose and I thought we had things up and running! Maybe that's me just moving from the sublime to the ridiculous, but the experiences mirrored each other in a curious way. We have to wonder in both cases if we're getting ahead or not, getting on top of the situation we find ourselves in or getting further buried in it!

Next to the greater world, of course, we as a parish could count our blessings. Wars abroad and economic problems everywhere hang like a cloud in the summer sky – a cloud that won't

seem to go away. I'm starting to feel a general malaise set in even as the constant parade of prognostication on the air, in print, and over the net begins to soften in outlook. Maybe we've hit bottom, but the climb out looks to be a long one. Must be something like the last leg of the Dipsea feels to some of the runners – the last, agonizing, inexorably long push of the race seems to remain before us.

And what's the good Marin response to that? The one I am tempted to keep on falling into – the one so many of us fall into: Keep on slogging away, keep on perfecting, keep on looking, keep on fixing, keep on picking things up. Keep on keepin' on. If truth be told, in the midst of all this freneticism, there's a little caveat I like to put on my faith in God's grace. "God will make it happen," faith says, but then comes that little prideful caveat – often unspoken – "God will make it happen. . .with a lot of hard work from me." In a good, Western egotistical, almost John Wayne-like fashion, I like to take command when things are tough – even take command of what I reckon is God's plan. I rarely stop to invite, even less wait for grace to turn out. Best to beat it to the punch! But the question remains: When we feel spent, as so many of us do right now, do we have the gusto to try beating grace to it anymore. . . especially right now when some of us feel a little (and others a lot) tired, run down, and some of us downright in exile?

Today's poetic vision from Ezekiel speaks right to the heart of this question. Ezekiel was probably among the first priests sent into the Babylonian exile, brought about by King Nebuchadnezzar when he overthrew Jerusalem in 597 B.C.E. Much harder than a nasty recession, more irrevocable than the re-ordering of a free market democracy, infinitely harder than the reconfiguration of parish programming and leadership, the Babylonian exile was the complete disintegration of a way of life, a people, a nation, a way of being with God. The Temple was lost, and with it the heart of religious observance and devotion for ancient Israel. The power of kings was utterly undone, and with it the sense of rootedness to a longstanding line of leadership – both good and bad. And the land was taken away, along with homes, livelihoods, and family history. So what was left? Dead wood. A lifeless tree. Fading memories cloaked in bitterness. Utter despair.

Now, if Ezekiel were a good Marinnite, he might start considering how to fix the situation. Maybe mobilize some political action, send an editorial to the Babylonian equivalent of the *II*, plan an uprising if he were more of an extremist. Organize like hell or heaven (Take your pick)! Take on King Nebuchadnezzar! Don't let things drop or stand still for a moment! But instead of engaging in all this frenetic activity, Ezekiel like his other prophet contemporaries chide the Israelites for their half-hearted faith. . . and place the outcome of exile utterly in God's hands with a remarkable image of the divine taking a sprig – a green shoot – from the tender twig of a lofty cedar.

It's a strange image, the more I contemplate on it. Most sensible folk who take care of trees know the best way to cultivate growth and new life is to cut away the old, dead wood. Most of us trying to find our way out of tough times set out to fix things, solve problems, sort the situations out ourselves. We look for the trouble to rectify. With great, frenetic effort, we

seek out the dead wood to clear and get to work. But God, in radical opposition to our problem-solving, wood clearing nature, simply seeks out the green shoot of new life and replants it. Or, in the language of Jesus in today's Gospel, causes the greatest of all shrubs to arise from the tiniest of seeds.

I reflect on all the energy we spend as a parish and indeed as a Church in solving problems and fixing things, and wonder if we sometimes miss the tender green shoots among ourselves. We follow our own sense of importance as problem-solvers sometimes without thinking, too often without prayerful reflection, when the divine example is to simply and lovingly build on new life already germinating among us. Our caveat on God's grace is that it will be delayed only until we fix or solve *x*, our unspoken and somewhat faithless myth is that somehow God's love will only wait until we have made the conditions for it just right.

But our exiles, tough times, uncertain futures, ongoing searches notwithstanding, we are told in today's readings that God's grace requires no caveats, no special preparation from us. Even as we prepare with so much activity and uncertainty for the summer ahead, some of us to leave, some of us to stay, God's grace has already sprouted, growing green shoots that we often miss for all of our busy-ness. It's a grace that restored the dignity of an exiled people so many centuries ago. It's a grace that keeps this community of faith going, the love supple and strong like new growth, the life rooted in sacraments and prayer, the eyes outward on a world in need. It's the grace that will see us through the thick and thin, even when the thin seems to be the end we're getting most days at this time.

We only have to turn to this grace and live out of it. We don't have to *make* it happen, any more than we can cause a tree to grow by staring at it. We do not know how it works, even in our hyper-informed age, just like the sower cannot fathom the seeds' sprouting in Jesus' parable today.

So those of us engaged in the search for a new Youth Minister and planning for the Fall and shoring up contingencies get a bit of a breather today, by the grace of God in Christ. Maybe many of the rest of you get a breather, too, a break from the race this time of year brings, as you prepare for summer, and consider how you will navigate uncertain futures of all kinds. The Gospel is that God has beaten us to it and is already planting new life among us and within us. All we must do is live into our humble place in the great drama of God's creation and remember to respond faithfully with love and wonder. *Amen*