

Heavy Laden

Luke 12:32-40

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

The Rev. Este Gardner Cantor 8/12/07

We have heard some beautiful and some hair-raising things in our readings of this morning.

But there is an emerging theme that can only be good news for us slowly evolving Christians. The theme is perfect freedom. Jesus has been called our Passover- our Moses who leads us from slavery to freedom and our angel causing death to pass over us that we might have abundant life. Jesus frees us from the death-like grip of our great burdens, not only of possessions and sins, but of our fears, our worries- our great bulky lack of faith.

"Do not be afraid, little flock." Jesus tells us in today's reading. But he goes into a lot more detail about those fears of ours in the passages just before. He goes into detail about the nature of freedom: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear." He points out that if God has clothed the lilies of the field in raiment more glorious than king Solomon, how much more will he clothe us- we of little faith.

We may not see lily-like raiment, that field of ever-growing crops, that over-flowing table. But faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. With such affection, such fondness, Jesus calls us his little flock and tells us not to be afraid- not to worry, to have faith.

In our Old Testament reading, Isaiah thunders out the disgruntled word of the Lord. It seems an amazingly harsh and detailed liturgical critique on the part of God- God hates sacrifices, including burnt offerings of rams, blood of bulls or lambs or goats. The trampling of God's courts (God is talking about religious processions) and all offerings. And incense is to God an abomination, a viewpoint shared by some modern parishioners as well. The sacred and required festivals of the new moon and apparently all other appointed festivals are also hated by God. Most heart-breakingly of all, God even rejects the prayers of the people- the "stretching out of their hands." Because, as he says, your hands are full of blood.

Jesus later said to the law-obsessed Pharisees, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Isaiah is saying that if we don't wash our selves clean of our violent natures, cease to do evil, learn to do good, and seek justice, the most elaborately beautiful liturgy in the world is nothing but empty pomp. Apparently God wants us to be stripped down, essential, without pomp and circumstance, without pride and grandiosity. Another very similar liturgical critic was Amos who said, in the words of God, "Take away from me the music of your songs, I will not listen to the melody of your harps, but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

In keeping with Jesus' conception of God as a loving father, he echoes these same thoughts in a kinder, gentler way. We are to be free of our justice-defying obsessions, but most of all, from our worries, our fears. But that freedom can never be ours unless we fulfill our obligation to the powerless, to justice. Jesus gently urges us away from those things that will not truly bring us salvation in this life or the next.

But too often, we seem to prefer to live in our comfortable slavery of property, dissention, violence, of being first, of being other than who we really are, which is all God wants of us. The rich young man who sought the Kingdom of Heaven was looked at lovingly by Jesus. Jesus wanted to free this young man, but was unable, for the time being. And so the young man walked away sad, and we are all walking away sad.

I was riding BART the other day and I saw another young man. I'm sure this was not a rich young man, but he was apparently not free of the all too common obsession with money and violence. He was wearing a black store-bought jacket with metallic gold logos all over the place. It's bad enough when the garment makes you a walking advertisement for the brand name, but this was much worse. I was so stunned when I read the logos that I discreetly jotted them down. They read: "Criminal Minded," "Most Wanted," "Get Rich or Die Trying," "Money, Power, Respect," "Blood Money," "Road to Riches," "Gotta be Thug," and most poignantly, "I was given this world, I didn't make it." This is the gospel taught to young people in our world right now. These are the violent and greedy impulses that are fostered. This is the level of anxiety that is maintained. The wearer of this jacket was not free. The culture we live in seems determined to bind us evermore tightly into our modern form of slavery. It encourages debt, greed, self-obsession, indeed, self-loathing if we don't fit the advertised norm. It encourages violence and narcissism, not justice and freedom. Can we be beacons in the world for our young people to show them that there is something more valuable than

money, some way out of the necessity of blood sacrifices? Can we ourselves be willing to let go of our desperate, enslaved clinging to life as we must have it, at all costs?

Jesus wants us to travel light. "Come to me all you who travail and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." He wants us to be able to pass through, as he puts it a little later in Luke, that narrow door. But where are we without our possessions, without our fears and worries, without our regrets and obsessions? It seems that we are hovering over a void that most of us will not want to enter- a gap we are loath to fall into.

Annie Dillard, in her glorious hymn to the natural world, "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek," says this:

Ezekiel condemns false prophets as those who have not 'gone up into the gaps.' The gaps are the thing. The gaps are the spirit's one home, the altitudes and latitudes so dazzlingly spare and clean that the spirit can discover itself for the first time, like a once-blind man unbound."

In fact, whether we are willing to let go or not, what we are actually hovering over is nothing but the welcoming hands of God. Part and parcel of letting go is giving substance to our faith in God, providing ourselves with purses that will not grow old, even though we, in our great vulnerability, surely will.

In the beginning of Luke's gospel, the angel Gabriel asks the impossible of a young woman. But she proves herself able and willing to enter through that narrow door. "Here I am." She says. "The handmaiden of the Lord." And then the soul of this young woman does indeed expand to 'magnify the Lord.'

Jesus wants us to expand to the grand dimensions of the transformed mustard seed. He is the author of transformation, and it is transformation, not security that he brings us. He calls to us whether or not we answer. "Stay awake- stay with me," he calls, urging us to keep our lamps lit, to keep our eyes open. He calls to us again and again, "Do not be afraid, little flock." It is your Father's good pleasure to set you free- to lift your burdens, to give you the kingdom.

Amen