

The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Dannals

Texts Exodus 17: 1-7

Saint Michael and All Angels

Psalm 95

3 Lent; Annual Meeting

John 4: 5-26; 39-42

February 24, 2008

“Discovering the Present Tense of God”

In Cecil B. DeMiles Movie The Ten Commandments, “Rabble” was personified in the character played by Edward G. Robinson.

Every time the going got difficult, he was the guy that kept saying: “Yeah Moses where is your God now?” Or as today’s text from Exodus reads: “The Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’”

The Rabble’s toleration for discomfort was low, and their capacity for complaint was high... that’s an unfortunate and infectious combination. It doesn’t take much for the strong craving of the Rabble to get everyone worked up in to a lather of anxiety and fear.

It was at the height of nervousness that they all began to say, “If only we had meat to eat!”

And looking closer at the text and into the individual heart, the most dangerous rabble are not the complaining people around us but the rabble that lives inside each of us. It’s as if we have a tiny little Edward G. Robinson inside who keeps tempting us to be anxious and fearful, making us doubt God’s abiding love for us, and, thus, our devotion to God.

As Elizabeth O’Conner reminds us, “Our many selves” speak at the same time, all screaming for our attention, and we have to choose which one is of God and which we will obey.

As Dante was trying to explain in The Purgatory of the Inferno, and as Moses explained in the wilderness, one of the frightening things is that God will honor the choices we make with our free will.

If asking “What is next, O Lord” is the means by which our faith in God’s presence is nurtured, then complaining, “if only” may be seen as our anxious separation from God.

Sometimes we say those words because we anxiously await the future:

- “If only I could get a better job.”

- “If only I could find someone special.”
- “If only I could afford to retire early.”
- “If only I knew how the market would turn out.”

Sometimes we use the phrase because we are anxiously focused on the past:

- “If only I had my health back.”
- “If only I had my spouse back.”
- “If only I could get my investments back.”
- “If only we could have that era back.”

Speaking with these words preoccupies us with either the future or the past. It assures us that our joy and purpose lies in those places that implicitly define our present life, and God’s presence among us, by what is missing or by what is scarce. Thus, the cry “if only” is always a judgment upon the present day and God’s abundant presence.

One of the greatest dangers in contemporary society is that we are losing our awareness of God’s present tense because things are moving at break-neck speed. Within a few generations we went from traveling around on horses to jet airplanes. Our computers and cell phones work so fast that we have to speak about nanoseconds, because a second is just too slow. Our children are hustled through their years at the same frenetic pace. Within a nanosecond of getting into high school someone starts talking about college.

“If only” we cry about both the past and the future!

Here’s the great danger of “If only”: When the present tense of God disappears in our life, so does our awareness of the water and bread of life.

Without an ability to detect how God is quenching our thirst and feeding our hunger today, we are forever anxious and fearful, never connected to our neighbor, and, thus, never grateful, joyful and generous.

In Ursula Hegi’s *Stones from the River*, a beautifully written Novel, we are introduced to Trudi Montag. She was born as a “dwarf” in a small German town, and when we first meet her she is hanging from a door frame, in hopes that stretching will help make her taller. The first half of the novel traces all the harsh

experiences she has as a little girl who is different. Trudi is constantly ridiculed, as are the overweight children, the slow ones, the poor ones, and the unattractive ones. Trudi was one of the strangers in her community. And this alienation gave her a unique vision that none of the “pretty” children had. The author tells us often that Trudi had “current eyes”- the eyes of wisdom usually given only to people who have seen too much, which was exactly her experience as a child.

The second half of the novel describes Trudi’s life as an adult. By then the Nazis have come to power and have initiated their awful campaign against Jews, gays, and the physically and mentally challenged. Trudi is horrified to watch the people in her small town, including the people in her church, turn against the Jews, who had been their neighbors for generations. Some lashed out because they had lived with a lot of anger for a long time but had not known who to be angry at until the Nazis came along and offered a scapegoat. Others were fearful, and they contributed to the abuses against these groups simply by being afraid to oppose the Nazi agenda. But Trudi chose to give Jewish people sanctuary in her basement. She knew what it felt like to be different.

As she huddled with these outcasts in her home, for the first time she was not alone. In this new community, filled with people who all had “current eyes”, she discovered another vision for life. Listen to the way Hegi describes it:

Trudi felt dizzy with the longing for peace, a longing as powerful as the passion with which she used to will her body to grow, as consuming as the passion that had fueled her revenge on the boys that humiliated her. And what she wanted more than anything that moment was for all the differences between people to matter know no more-differences in size and race and belief- differences that had become justification for destruction.”

Whether it is in the great sanctuary of a cathedral or in a crowded basement, authentic community is the place where differences are absorbed into a common thirst for another way of life. If it is God’s community, created by the grace of his Son Jesus Christ, it extends to anyone who has “seen too much” and is tired of being on the run.

On the occasion of our Annual Meeting we do celebrate the way God has worked in our history. In the 63 years of this parish’s existence some amazing events of ministry have happened.

We anticipate with excitement our future. We have cultivated an ambitious and robust updated strategic plan, and it will take a great faith and reliance and generosity to see it through...

But it is the present that I don’t want us to miss!

Within the long complicated history of Israel and the anxious future of the Christian movement, we learn in our gospel text for today that Jesus sits down at Jacob's well and cares for one outcast broken Samaritan woman... He cares about her present condition!

In the pulsebeat of her present transformation she invites her whole village to "come meet Jesus." You and I are invited to live in the present tense.