

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 22, 2009
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There is a story told about a poor family, a sage and a goat. A poor family of nine lived in a one room shack. They wore rags for clothes and had barely enough food to eat to keep themselves alive. Their lives were utterly miserable.

One day the man in the house decided to seek the advice of an old sage who lived at the edge of the village. "Great sage, my family is so miserable that we can barely stay alive. The noise in our house is intolerable, the filthy awful and the lack of privacy could kill a person. We seldom have enough to eat and we have come to hate each other. What should we do?"

The sage thought for a moment and then said, "Get a goat. Get a goat and live in the house with the goat for a month." The man looked at the sage in astonishment. "Get a goat? Live with a goat? How can that solve anything?" The old man insisted.

So, the family got a goat and brought it into the house. The noise was worse, the smell was intolerable, the goat ate everything in sight so there was no food, the goat even ate their clothes. At the end of a month the man went back to the sage. "We have done as you said and lived with a goat for a month it has been horrendous. How could you have given us such awful advice?"

The sage looked at the man and said, "Now get rid of the goat and see how peaceful your life can be."

Lent is a season of the church year when we are encouraged to reflect on our lives and the choices we make. Where necessary we are invited to repent and turn to a new way of being, a way that embraces to goodness of creation and our dependence on God. During Lent we reflect on our lives as a journey, a pilgrimage toward Easter. We use the history of the people of Israel as a reminder of our own passage as individuals and as a community from error into truth, from darkness into light, from sin into righteousness, from death into life.

This is a pattern we see lived out over and over again in Scripture. Out of the death dealing flood comes Noah and his family. Abraham and Sarah who are advanced in age and could not have children yet in their old age they become the parents of nations. Israel has lost all hope and is doomed to a life of slavery when God grants a Passover to new life. A people in exile find their identity and faith destroyed until God calls them home and restores their land. Of course for us as Christians, Jesus dies on a cross only to be raised from the dead so that we might have the promise of new life through him.

This is the pattern of salvation. It is the model of our pilgrimage. As we tell the story of God's people we find structure and significance for our own stories.

I believe that we get so focused on our own personal salvation that we forget that our story is part of a larger story; the story of God's presence in the life of God's creation. The Scriptures remind us of God's invitation to move out of our passive existence and concern for ourselves into a new awareness of the goodness and grace that surrounds us.

We are pilgrims on the Way, companions in this journey we call Life. The pilgrim finds truth and discovers Love while on the road with others. While each story of pilgrimage may seem unique; we find common themes on each of our stories of seeking and being found, of relief from burdens too difficult to bear, of the gratification realized when love and acceptance are found. Julian of Norwich wrote, "In this mortal life we can only travel by way of God's mercy and forgiveness, and they always lead us to his grace."

God is the One who meets us by our tents, who wrestles with us in the wilderness, who walks with us in pledges of loyal friendship and in the discovery of love, who turns us around when we want to run. The writer to the Ephesians in that portion appointed to be read today phrases this truth in this way: "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved - and raised up with him and seated us with him in heavenly places in Jesus Christ, so that in ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."

This story, this journey is what Baptism reveals to be the nature of our lives.

It is what we are called through baptism to share with others. In baptism we are incorporated into the story of God's people, marked as God's own forever. It is the story not just of people in ages past, but it is our story. In earlier days Christians used the story of Israel as an image for their own lives. The people of Israel were on a constant pilgrimage. Once their days of wandering came to an end with the settling of the Promised Land, the journey continued. Their journey continued as a spiritual journey of self discovery, of being connected to God and those identified as neighbor.

Along the way the people composed psalms like Psalm 107: "God gathered them out of the lands from east and west from north and south. Some were fools and took to rebellious ways; they were afflicted because of their sins. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble and God delivered them from their distress. Let them give thanks to the Lord for his mercy and the wonders he does for his children."

The Gospel this morning points to an additional support for each of us in our journey. John writes: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him."

We, the people of God are a people with a story to tell. That story spans the ages and has a consistent theme. God reaches out to the human race and calls us out of death into life calls us out of the deadly conventions of this world into a new, larger, fuller life. The marvelous fact is that each of us is part of this story. If we stop to reflect on our life and the lives of those around us we find many occasions when hope conquers despair, and joy overcomes sorrow. Those are our particular signs the story is true.

So, let us pause at this moment on our journey. Even at a time when things seem uncertain and a bit messy let us be refreshed for God is leading us toward Easter Day. Let us give thanks to God for God is good and God's mercy endures for ever.