

A Sermon for the 4th Sunday in Lent - March 15, 2014

Church of the Epiphany, Richmond, Virginia

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In the Name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Life, as we discover, is made up of a succession of transitions. It is part of our human nature, at least for many of us, to take note of milestones along our journey and to mark certain points along the way. Often we will note the halfway points. I know, for example, that when I am taking a road trip of some distance, I will be aware of the total miles to be driven that day and will note when I have reached the half-way point for the day. It is human nature to mark time and we each have our own way of noting those milestones, those halfway points. Whatever for us might be the effort, being halfway through, or even being part way through can sometimes bring either a foretaste of accomplishment or it can bring anxiety.

This Sunday, the 4th Sunday of Lent, finds at the midpoint of Lent. Soon as we will be approaching Palm Sunday and Holy week, our worship will take us through those significant moments as we witness Jesus' painful final days in his journey to the cross. And we will be called to remember the painful transitions of his disciples and those who lived him as they witnessed all that happened. They will be important steps for us to remember and upon which to reflect as we prepare for the coming of Easter.

In today's first reading from the Book of Numbers we note the connection to the Gospel reading in which John makes a cryptic reference to the serpent in the wilderness. The people of Israel are in transition. They are on a journey. We might wonder, however, what possible connection there might be between the lifting up of the Son of man and that of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness. What possible significance can this text we heard this morning have to us as individuals and as a congregation today? We have just heard of how the people of Israel are complaining . They are complaining about how their leaders are treating

them in their journey through the wilderness to safety. At the heart of the story is that the people fail to trust God and they do not trust Moses as well. Moses was focused upon empowering the people of Israel to move forward trusting that God would be steadfast in leading them to a new land, a new place of freedom and safety.

In any journey, there will be times of transition. Some of those transitions will provide us with a foretaste of accomplishment. Some will bring upon us anxiety. Especially during those times of uncertainty and anxiety, God invites to trust, and to trust even at times when we may find it hard to believe. Belief comes more easily to us when we are certain about something. Trust, on the other hand, can empower us to move forward even when what may lie in the future may be not so clear or certain.

In the gospel, we hear words that are among the best known and most loved words of scripture. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." John opens to us a rich awareness of the gospel in which the love of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit become basic to who we are. Eternal life encompasses the here and now for us as well as the time to come. Our fleeting moments on this earth are part of that continuum that leads to the hereafter. God's extravagant love for us invites you and me to respond with trust even when we may be in some form of wilderness.

Think, for example, about where we are as a parish here at Epiphany during this interim period as you prepare to call a new rector. Amid the hope for the future, it is a natural thing for there to be some level at least of anxiety that comes with any degree of uncertainty. You may be wondering, "Is there really someone out there who will be a good match for us and how will we know? How long will it take to find a new rector?" There might be some priest out there known to some that people think is just the right choice so why go through all the trouble with a search? Why not just call that one? Over the years, the church has come to discover that this interim period in a parish can be a very productive time. A parish need not stand idle or be in limbo as it goes through the process of calling a new rector. Such an interim period can be a time to be intentional about taking some necessary steps to become stronger in preparation for

the call of a new rector. It is not a time simply to still and wait. It can be a creative time. In that spirit, your vestry and leadership and so many of you are looking forward positively to making good use of this time to strengthen the mission and ministry of this parish in preparation for welcoming a new rector. I wish, for example, that you all could have been at the worship committee meeting last Sunday after church as well as the vestry meeting last Tuesday evening. The ideas offered and the trust in your future and forward momentum was palpable. There is much that is positive happening in our common life in response to God's call to us, and there is a resolve to strengthen areas of our common life that need to be strengthened. There also is acknowledgment our strengths as a parish as you look forward to the future. There is every reason to be hopeful for a good outcome. God is present in this time and during this process. God is calling us in this time of transition to trust and to be patient and to make the best use of this time given to this parish.

We are at the halfway point in our journey in Lent. Lent is a good time for us to consider our response to God's guidance to us and to God's invitation to us that we trust that God will be present in each step along the way during this transition. Lent is also a good time for each of us to consider our response to God's promise to us in our own personal times of transition when we may experience times of wilderness as you and I face the unknown. In these coming few weeks, we will witness those significant transitions in our Lord's journey to the cross and beyond to the resurrection. We will, on Palm Sunday witness his triumphal entry into Jerusalem as he is hailed by the crowds as a hero. Then on the following Thursday we will remember the last meal he had with his disciples. On Friday we will remember how so many of those who hailed him as a hero now shouted out, "Crucify him!" reminding us all of the potential of our fickle nature as human beings. Then, on Saturday, with a very simple service found in the Prayer Book for Holy Saturday, we will remember the grief of the disciples and those who loved Jesus as they buried him. Remember that they had not yet experienced his resurrection. All they knew was that he was dead. All of these transitions are important for us to contemplate before we experience the joy of Easter. If God was present with Jesus during all of these significant transitions on his journey, so God is present with each of us in our transitions. If obedience to God means trusting, as Moses said to the people of Israel, and as

we are promised in the Gospel, then during these days of Lent God is calling us once again to trust even when things are yet to be revealed to us. May these remaining days and weeks of Lent for each of us and for this parish a time of blessing and most of all, of hope for things to come. *Amen.*