Second Sunday of Lent All Saints’ Church

March 1, 2015 Year B

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 Romans 4:13-25

Psalm 22:22-30 Mark 8:31-38

May God’s Name be praised beyond the furthest star, glorified and exalted above all forever.

Let’s enter into St. Paul’s world, full of pain, passion, and prayer. Like all the readings this morning, Paul’s life has been irrevocably marked by a Reversal. Convinced that his religious duty was to destroy the newfangled cult of the One Crucified, he meets Jesus on the Road to Damascus, and he is brought to his knees. He gives up his own source of authority and surrenders into the wilderness of God calling the shots.

His world is turned upside down, and he becomes the Preacher of love, forgiveness, mercy, grace and hope. He declares as he shouts in Galatians, in “ALL CAPITAL LETTERS” that in weakness and in vulnerability, there is strength. Religious belief is about giving yourself over to something bigger than you, and trusting in this hidden harmony of life. As frightening as it may be, you will be buoyed up with steadfast love and the presence of the Almighty.

One of Paul’s greatest challenges was how to include the Gentiles under the care of this new Jewish movement.

Paul’s critics reminded him over and over again that if you water down the religion to include everyone, haven’t you lost your identity, your history, your rituals, your calling, and even your purpose?

Point well taken. If you are everything for everyone, have you become nothing for no one?

And they are not asking much of these new Gentile converts: mark yourself by circumcision, commit to dietary restrictions and believe that the Law is a gift of security and freedom……Fairly simple.

Yet, Paul does not back down. These rituals and laws, he reiterates, are not the source of our belief. As beautiful and powerful and even sometimes necessary as they are, they are not the underpinning of our faith. We need to see our faith through the prism of REVERSALS- “to hope against hope.”

To hope against those who say hope is absurd. So absurd, one laughs, just as both Abraham and Sarah did when they heard that God had promised them a child in their old age. Paul is preaching that even in the barrenness of a desert, or the barrenness of a womb, or in the barrenness of a bleak cold winter’s Peterborough night, there is Life. In our service last night in the crypt, our youth talked about the Life they found in their conversations with those who are unhoused. In the Cross, there is Life. In our brokenness, there is Life. Even under occupation, there is Life. Paul is not promoting optimism, where everything is going to turn out All Right, but rather he is inviting us to a relationship with the Source of all Life, the author of life.

Just as Rumi, the Sufi poet reminds us, “does the breath of the musician belong to the flute?” Hmm…does the breath of the musician belong to her lungs?

Our very breath is a gift from Breath itself. It is the Spirit that creates, redeems and sustains our very existence. It takes practice to believe in this.

Paul claims, convincingly, that Abraham was not chosen as the Father of all Faiths because he was good, or an upstanding individual, or dutiful, or successful or righteous, but rather because he said Yes to this very Breath of Existence. Yes, he will surrender to this Source of Life and put away his identity as patriarch to his family, and become someone new; like the clay to the Potter, he will be shaped by this new Relationship, day by day. And it takes practice.

Irony of ironies. By giving up his identity as patriarch of his family, he became the Patriarch of All.

 A Reversal.

This is what Jesus means when he says you must lose your life, if you are to find it.

A Reversal.

Jesus and Abraham and Paul are lifting up the power of faith. Simply put- surrender yourself to the belief and the hope that there is something greater than your individual self. And in that act of letting go, you will find the depth of who you are.

Hope against Hope. This is Faith. Religions do not own this word. Let’s think about this for a minute.

What about the faith it takes to let go of your own skills as an athlete and give yourself over to your team. *Boys in the Boat* became an international page-turner, so taken we all were with those boys’ journey into the Power of their Union.

What about the faith it takes to believe in forgiveness and healing; confessing and trusting, instead of holding onto guilt?

What about those who stand at death-bed vigils, even though their loved ones can no longer sense any presence?

What about those late nights when you listen to your friend’s angst, able to do nothing but listen?

What about losing yourself in playing your instrument, where no longer you are playing notes, but the notes are playing you?

What about the sweet tang of wild blueberries on Gap Mountain and with that taste, your cheeks are wet with tears?

These are all moments of faith, and they actually influence your behavior. You become by your very core, inclusive. Generosity becomes second nature. You want everyone to feel this liberation.

Paul’s point. Faith is not about morality, righteousness, or goodness. It’s about saying YES to life and trusting in the mystery of a relationship with the Divine. And it takes practice.

When I was about ten, I was bored at recess because all the girls were playing dolls and hopscotch and I thought their games were silly. And so I wandered to where the boys were playing this really cool game with a ball and a stick. I asked if I could play and they said “no” because I was a girl. I asked my uncle about the game and he lent me his bat and ball and glove. We were living on a cattle ranch at the time, and every day after school, I played against the barn door. And every day during recess, I asked the boys if I could play, and they always said no. And then one day, a boy said, “Let her try.” There were protests, but he was the best player, so he had his way- they brought me to the plate. I had never had a ball pitched to me before. Three pitches- I struck out. There were taunts, and I as dropped the bat to leave, the same boy stepped up and said, “Those were lousy pitches. Give her a chance.” And then he handed me the bat and said, “Watch the ball. And have fun.”

The pitch came in… 50 years later I can still see it- the ball bigger than life over the plate, and I hit a homerun. There were cheers. The boy slapped me on the back, “Way to go. She’s on my team.”

This boy did not “step up to the plate” to “do the right thing.” I don’t know what he would have done if I had struck out again. Something else was going on. I know this. He had lost himself in the game and knew its beauty, its power, and its grace and he could see in me, recess in and recess out, my need and my desire. He stepped outside of himself and identified with me. He could see himself in me. It was natural. He knew joy. He wanted to share it. He invited me to the game.

This is Paul’s invitation to us this morning- with hope against hope, believe in the power of reversals. Faith in the letting go is power. You will gain your life by losing it. It takes practice to get inside this truth.

As Wendell Berry, the poet reminds us,

“Do something that won’t compute… Love the Lord, Love the world, Love someone who does not deserve it….. Ask the questions that have no answers…. Say that the leaves are harvested when they have rotted into mold. Call that profit. Prophesy such returns….Hear the faint chattering of the songs that are to come…. Expect the end of the world, laugh, be joyful though you have considered all the facts…. Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction.”

And then he ends his poem with the best line of all: “Practice resurrection.”

Ah yes, Practice Resurrection.

(the Rev). Jamie L. Hamilton