

Lent 4

March 30th, 2014

Cristi Chapman

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

As many of you know, I have been visiting Episcopal seminaries over the last several months. Earlier this week, I was in Austin at the Seminary of the Southwest. It was great to be home, and I realized I felt a comfortable sense of belonging at Southwest.

The first night I was there, the seminarians took us to a contemplative Eucharist at All Saints Episcopal Church. All Saints holds a special place in my heart. It is where Chris and I met, where Chris was confirmed, and where we were married almost 22 years ago. From almost every window on the Southwest campus, I could look out and see my alma mater, the University of Texas. One evening I took a walk around the UT campus. Many of the buildings are the same ... although like me, some are starting to show a bit of their age. Even the student union smelled the same way I remembered it so long ago.

At the same time, everything about the visit seemed strangely unfamiliar. I felt like I was experiencing everything for the first time, with a new set of eyes...a completely new perspective. How could the comforts of home feel so completely foreign and new? I remember telling one of the seminarians that somewhere, in the midst of this strange sense, some theological insight was waiting to be uncovered. Everything stays the same...and everything changes. Apparently, I'm still wrestling with that paradox, so much so that [PULL OUT THE KEY] I brought the key home with me from Southwest! Maybe unconsciously, I'm hoping it will unlock a mystery.

In this morning's Gospel, we hear another mystery, and we hear about the full continuum of human response in the midst of this great miracle.

There are the disciples. Try as they might to understand their Messiah, they keep missing the point and fail to see the real redeeming power Jesus brings. There are the Pharisees. All they have known is being systematically challenged and undone. With each passing experience, they hunker down, further withdrawing and denying what is right in front of them. There is the man born blind. After spending his entire life unable to see, he miraculously gains his sight and then tells anyone with ears to hear about this 'astonishing thing.' And finally, there is Jesus. Distraught and moved by the suffering of the world, he continually seeks out those on the margins, restoring them back to wholeness.

The coming of God's Kingdom brings great change. The mission of the Church, our mission as Christians, is to restore things to unity with God and each other through Christ. At the heart is this is a call to respond, to act. We are challenged to move away from the familiar worldly ways

that bind and oppress toward the liberating freedom found in Kingdom of God. Sometimes, it can be hard to let go of comfortable ways to see things in a new way.

The rhythm of the liturgical calendar creates space for us to see things in a new light...a way for each of us to explore and respond to the great mysteries of our faith. During Lent, we are invited to refocus our perspectives, moving from self-centered portraits toward a world where God is at the center.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams describes Lent as, “springtime...[a time] to sweep and clean the room of our own minds and hearts so that the new life really may have room to come in and take over and transform us at Easter.”

This is only part of the story though. At the end of Lent, we commemorate Good Friday and then celebrate the great joy of Easter. These are extraordinary events, but they are not isolated to a specific time in history independent of our own experiences here and now.

So when is Good Friday? When is Easter? Are these events that happened just one time with the Messiah? Jesus died. Jesus was resurrected. We remember these things, but is that it? For some of us, perhaps all of us, the experience of Good Friday and Easter happens EVERY day.

The suffering of Good Friday is not reserved for one special day a year. Instead, we experience the pain and tragedy of the Cross each day. A cancer diagnosis resurfaces, this time with unrelenting vengeance and unprecedented efficiency. A good friend falls into a bottomless pit of despair, and those who remain are left to wonder...“how is this possible?” As we have seen in the past week, nature can unleash unpredictable and devastating destruction in the blink of an eye.

Amazingly though, in the midst of suffering and tragedy, there is an incredible possibility...the possibility that we experience the redemptive power of Easter. Death is not the end...as the empty tomb shows us. This is the great mystery of our faith...perhaps the ultimate paradox. Jesus meets us in the heart of our suffering and invites us to wonder what new beginnings are possible. The Spirit begins to mend the cracks, bruises, and holes in our lives. As our souls are mended and when we are ready, we begin to envision what is possible next.

Each day, we choose how to respond to this mystery. Like the disciples, we might stand by baffled, wondering what just happened. Like the Pharisees, we can run away from suffering, arguing about its cause or denying its very existence. Like Jesus, we can seek out those who suffer, and start to bring life giving wholeness in their lives. Like the blind man, we can accept the gift of healing and then tell anyone who will listen about this astonishing miracle. Choosing how to respond is what the season of Lent is about. Choosing how to respond is what the season of Life is about.

I close with a prayer. This is taken from the Gates of Prayer, Jewish Sabbath Prayer Book:

“Days pass and the years vanish and we walk sightless among miracles. Lord, fill our eyes with seeing and our minds with knowing. Let there be moments when your Presence, like lightning, illumines the darkness in which we walk. Help us to see, wherever we gaze, that the bush burns, unconsumed. And we, clay touched by God, will reach out for holiness and exclaim in wonder, “How filled with awe is this place and we did not know it. Blessed is the Holy One, the holy God!”

Amen.