



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Second Sunday in Lent

March 12, 2017

The Rev. Sharon K. Gracen

There are two things about being Christian, following the way of Jesus, that are a challenge for us to accept and remember. The first is that, however much we may get out of the church experience personally, our hour of calm and peace, our spiritual battery recharge, our sense of being loved and part of something greater than ourselves, those aren't why we have been called together by God. It has been said that the church is the one institution that does not exist for its own members, but for those who have not yet come, for those who have not yet known the truth of God's love. So if you are already here, that's just the beginning of what Jesus has in mind for you. The second is that being a Christian is to dwell in a state of constant change. We can only grow spiritually if we continue to work on the next thing. I remember being frustrated and grumpy with the best voice teacher that I ever had. She never let me enjoy having finally gotten something. She immediately pushed me on to the next thing. I always wanted to complain, "wait, can't I just feel good about that for a minute?" But, she was scary so I didn't even go there. I let her shove me out of my comfortable, celebratory place and into something new that I had to struggle with, constantly starting something new. Today's lessons reflect these two challenging aspects of our faith. And to help us with this we have William Cowper's poem and a bonus poem.

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org 203-488-2681 e-mail rector47@trinitybranford.org



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William Cowper was a much celebrated British poet of the 18th century. He was a contemporary and collaborator of John Newton of *Amazing Grace* fame. While he achieved success and some measure of fame for his poetry in his lifetime, his life was one of contrast – sublime experience of God’s loving presence and recurrent bouts of depression and suicide attempts for which he was institutionalized. His is a poignant story of someone who persevered throughout his life to celebrate God’s presence through poetry in spite of times when he couldn’t feel it at all. I chose this poem today, *Light Shining Out of Darkness* because it felt to me akin to what happened to Abram when he said yes to God’s call to leave all that was familiar and trust. Cowper repeatedly stepped out of his despair and discovered strength and grace. And besides, who doesn’t like iambic pentameter!

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God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.
Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill,
He treasures up his bright designs,
And works his sovereign will.
Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence,
He hides a smiling face.
His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.
Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain;
God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain.

Cowper's ability to know God, even when he wanted to kill himself is a testament to what happens when we trust and step out of where we are, even though it's the last thing we want to do. Cowper discovered such beauty and mystery when he said yes to God.

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I never ascribe to the school of pastoral thought that responds to tragedy with “well, God has a plan” as if what had happened was a part of God’s plan. Instead I see the mystery that is God more as a chess player, countering the assaults of life with unexpected moves that open new possibilities. Or perhaps God is a composer, always composing the universe and us with it into greater existence, finding a way to harmonize the sour notes that we produce. In the midst of adversity, suddenly a new melody emerges. In either example there is an element of mystery and newness.

Abram and Nicodemus both encounter an invitation into mystery and newness. Abram receives God’s invitation to strike out into the unknown and start life anew. Actually, so does Nicodemus, but his invitation is to be reborn, to start life again in his heart and mind, not his location. Both men become dependent on God to show them the way. For Abram and his entourage, the journey takes them to strange places and forces them to make a life with unfamiliar people and circumstances with God popping in and out of the story, but always present in mysterious ways.

For Nicodemus, he enters into the life of Christ, challenging all that he thought he knew. That life will take him to the very tomb of Jesus and all of the uncertainty and wonder in the days and years ahead. Both of these men and so many in the millennia since then have said yes to the invitation to journey into the mystery. Where did these invitations take them? For Abram a new home and new relationship with this surprising God. For Nicodemus, a new relationship with everything, himself, humanity and God.

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These readings are a good moment for us to see our response to God's invitations and to mystery. How adventurous are we? How willing are we to be uncomfortable? Our human selves want to know exactly where we are going and what it will be like when we get there. Mostly it wants to know when the job will be done. When will I be done with this stepping out into the mysterious unknown, into something that I don't know how to do? I'm afraid that the answer is, "never." That's where Cowper discovered the beauty of God's mysterious ways. Only by stepping off where we are, will we have even more experiences of beauty and wonder, things beyond our current knowing and imagination. Leaving where we are is how we meet those who might really need to know that they are beloved.

So, our bonus poet of the day Edwina Gateley, a woman who stepped out of her comfortable British life to go to places like Uganda and the streets of Chicago where she worked with drug addicts and prostitutes. She knows a bit about the hard stuff of faith. She also knows the beauty and blessing of it.

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Letting Go

From Edwina Gateley, ***There Was No Path So I Trod One*** (1996, 2013)

It is time to go.

I can smell it.

Breathe it

Touch it.

And something in me

Trembles.

I will not cry.

Only sit bewildered.

Brave and helpless

That it is time.

Time to go.

Time to step out

Of the world

I shaped and watched

Become.

Time to let go

Of the status and

The admiration.

Time to go.

To turn my back

On a life that throbs

With my vigor

And a spirit

That soared

Through my tears.

Time to go

From all I am

To all I have

Not yet become.

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I give thanks this morning for the courage and witness of William Cowper and Edwina Gateley and pray that we all may, in our own way, be as brave. Amen.

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