



ALL SAINTS CHURCH

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

“Nevertheless”

A sermon preached by the Rev. Susan Russell
February 28, 2010

Lent is launched. In three services here at All Saints Church on Ash Wednesday we heard the words as familiar as their outward-and-visible signs etched on our foreheads: “*Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.*” Then on the first Sunday in Lent we sang together the ancient words of the Great Litany, as we prayed for “the whole state of Christ’s Church and the world” in solemn procession – and we heard once again the familiar gospel story that marks the beginning of every Lent: Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness.

The challenge, of course, is that the very familiarity of these Lenten rituals and stories can get in the way of our fully experiencing Lent as a journey.

You can’t live in Southern California and not know what it feels like to travel a familiar road without really “journeying.” When I was a new deacon I served up at St. Mark’s in Altadena – and I lived in Huntington Beach! I remember how easy it was to suddenly look up and realize I was in Duarte ... and wonder what happened to Whittier! That’s not a journey ... that’s a **commute**. There’s a BIG difference between the two – and what I want to urge you this year is to **hold out for a Journey through Lent – don’t settle for a Commute to Easter.**

It’s what I posted for my Facebook status on Ash Wednesday: “Wishing you a journey through Lent instead of a commute to Easter.” I got 33 comments. Including one from a priest who wrote, “*It really struck a chord with me. So not only was it on the sign out in front of the Church for a week, but it was the main thesis of my sermon on Sunday and of my Newsletter Article for March -- so as you can see I got a lot of mileage out of it.*”

I’m glad he got a lot of mileage out of it. I may start a file labeled “high mileage homily ideas.” Here’s another one that would go in that file: Whatever you do, do *not* give up epiphanies for Lent.

Do not become so focused on the commute to Easter that you fail to notice – to give thanks for – to respond to – the encounters we can and will have with the holy in the next 40 days – those “ahas” of God that will surprise, delight and inspire us. And let us not become so focused on our own “journey with Jesus” that we forget that as long as there are still strangers at the gate, walking humbly with our God is not enough -- there’s still plenty of “doing justice” that needs done as part of our Lenten journey.

And just in case anybody *was* tempted to settle into commute mode, today’s Gospel definitely gives us something to pay attention to. The Pharisees – think 1st century

equivalent of a combo of city council/vestry members – come out to warn Jesus that he’s finally gone too far with this peace on earth, good will to all stuff ... and that the IRS – ooops ... sorry! I mean, that *Herod* – was out to get him.

And what they get in response is not gentle Jesus, meek and mild – this is feisty Jesus, focused and riled. Not missing a beat, he comes back at them with a message of that is the 1st century equivalent of the 21st century “Bring it on.”

"Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way,

This is Jesus with some attitude.

He knows there will be consequences for the actions he is taking – the journey he is making. He knows there will be a price to pay for his obedience to the call to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor ... to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to let the oppressed go free. He knows that what is good news to the poor and oppressed is not so good news to the privileged and the oppressor – and that releasing the captives isn’t popular with those who hold the keys. It’s the same message that almost got him tossed off a cliff the first time he preached it to the hometown folks in Nazareth – and his poll numbers haven’t exactly been going up with the inside the Jerusalem Beltway crowd.

It’s what I’ve come to think of as a “nevertheless” moment -- as Jesus continues the work he’s been called to do and trusts the consequences to the God who has called him to do it.

Nevertheless. It’s a great word. It’s one we’ve heard used by the giants of justice of our own day and by the ancient psalmists of Hebrew Scriptures. Throughout the generations, when faced with seemingly impossible obstacles – the response to the doomsayers and the handwringers, the naysayers and the bad-news-bringers is one version or the other of “Nevertheless ...”

- ... we will hope
- ... we will press on
- ... we will trust that our God will be with us in the struggle.

I spent part of last week at the 30th Annual Assembly of the Episcopal Urban Caucus in Chicago. Established in 1980 to “provide material and spiritual support for those engaged in urban mission ... and to address the plight of our cities and their people” it is a group of people who have spent the last 30 years wrestling with seemingly insurmountable challenges such as poverty, racism, hunger and homelessness. Like the Jesus they follow, they have stood again and again and said “Nevertheless” in the face of challenge after challenge. And although the work is far from done, I know that both the world and the church are better for their courage and their witness. AND I know that some of the DNA of All Saints Church flows in the veins of the Episcopal Urban Caucus – as the list of founding members we celebrated last week in Chicago included the names of John Burt, of George Regas ... and of Lydia Lopez.

Perhaps my favorite moment from the week was a conversation Thursday over lunch at the Allerton Hotel in downtown Chicago over celery soup. I was seated next to Pamela – who asked me not to use her last name, lest she “embarrass her Rector.”

Pamela is an eighty-something year old peace activist from Washington D.C. She told me she had to give up being arrested at peace demonstrations at the White House because her sciatica kicked in. And this eighty-something Washington matron, in her Saint John knit, over celery soup, said to me: “I took that as a sign from God that I was called to drive the getaway car.”

Now that’s a quintessential “nevertheless” moment . . .

And once I started thinking about it, I came up with a long, long list of “nevertheless” moments that inspire – in and out of the Season of Lent!

This Episcopal Church of ours was warned by the Archbishop of Canterbury in Anaheim not to take any further steps toward the fuller inclusion of LGBT folk into our work and witness. (Kind of like the warning Jesus got in this morning’s gospel only he brought the message himself rather than sending some Pharisees.) Anyway, duly warned the Episcopal Church replied “nevertheless” in the resolutions we passed in July.

The Diocese of Los Angeles was likewise warned not to turn those resolutions into a reality by electing a bishop whose “manner of life could cause strain on the Anglican Communion.” Our diocese heard those warnings and replied “nevertheless” by electing Mary Glasspool one of our Bishops Suffragan in December -- and now the whole church is poised to say “Amen” as we come closer each day to the necessary consents to her election.

Bishop Christopher Senyonjo – an Anglican bishop from Uganda who was told his pastoral care of gay and lesbian people in Uganda would be vocational suicide.

Bishop Christopher said “nevertheless” – and continued to be a voice in the wilderness of Ugandan homophobia, advocating for the most vulnerable as they become even more vulnerable in the face of the draconian anti-gay legislation pending in that country.

Serene Jones – who will be with us next month for our “Grace Trumps” Lent Event weekend – said “nevertheless” in a time of personal crisis and claimed the power of grace to triumph over trauma . . . inspiring countless others with her story of hope and redemption.

Because the Good News on this 2nd Sunday in Lent is that the Jesus we follow on our Lenten journey is as present in the personal and pastoral as he is in the political and prophetic. And those “nevertheless” moments of hope, of pressing on, of trusting that God will be with us -- come not just on peace marches or in get-away cars or in elections or at conventions. They come:

- Sitting at the bedside of a dying parent.
- Facing the life-threatening illness of a beloved spouse.
- Dealing with the challenges of addiction and recovery.

- Coping with the harsh realities of the economic crisis.
- Watching a son or daughter deploy to Afghanistan.
- Mourning the sudden death of a beloved friend.

In each and every one of these and so, SO many more, we have the choice to make our response “nevertheless”... “Nevertheless ...”

- ... we will hope
- ... we will press on
- ... we will trust that our God will be with us in the struggle.

As I sat at the Chicago airport, waiting to fly home—deeply relieved that my flight was only delayed and not cancelled—a man not far across the boarding gate waiting area stood up, put on his jacket, checked his Blackberry and fell over. Good Samaritans rushed and started to administer CPR for what seemed like a very long time. The whole waiting area at United Airlines was hushed while we waited for the paramedics arrived. And while we were waiting -- many of us praying -- right above this life-saving moment happening in front of us, on a large screen television, were the flashing images from CNN of the devastation in Chile.

And I thought, “What an icon of the fragile nature of this precious life we’ve been given.” And into that icon stepped those who said “nevertheless...” and leapt in to help save the life of this man -- who went off in a gurney with oxygen and an i.v. drip and our prayers.

It is an iconic moment of the truth that **in absolutely every moment something sacred is at stake**. Sometimes right before our very eyes.

My brothers and sisters, this life we have been given is too precious and too fragile to waste “commuting” ... to Easter or to anything else. Yes, there are challenges, setbacks and wildernesses ahead -- the journey will not always smooth or easy, and there may be warnings that we should give up – that the obstacles are too great – that the human race will never become the human family God created it to be.

Nevertheless ...

Amen.