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Luther Memorial Church
Genesis 15.1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27
Philippians 3.17—4.1; St. Luke 1331-35

“Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. [Abram] brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.”

“Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.”

“He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory....”

Second Sunday in Lent February 28, 2010

Jesus has a date with death, and he will not miss it. More positively: Jesus’ date with death means we have a date with eternal life. The Lenten gospel conforms us to Jesus: his death and resurrection. As St. Paul has it, “He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory....”

We might imagine that for Paul humiliation means imprisonment, suffering, and execution. But in fact, he means the opposite. For Paul, true humiliation means living as an enemy of the cross of Christ. Eternal humiliation is living now apart from the glory of the cross—living as though our god were the belly, heavenly feasting amid earthly starvation, dwelling on gold medals while Haitians struggle for a meal, and Chileans a meal—insisting on everything large, and grandiose, and magnificent while the poor beg for a mite. There is, of course, a place in this world for magnificent things, good food, fine wine, and gold medals. But these magnificent things are helpful only when they direct us to Christ that we might live and serve more faithfully in this world.

This is why our reredos stonework has been restored—not merely that we might treasure its beauty, but that we might more clearly behold the Lamb inscribed on the altar, that its restored beauty might direct us to Christ, our heavenly home; that we might see more clearly our baptismal call to love our neighbors as ourselves. The magnificence of earth is only helpful to Christ when it enables him to accomplish his goal—his death and resurrection on behalf of the broken world which, this morning, includes the newly homeless of Chile.

If Jesus were merely interested in restoring fine buildings for purposes of great architecture, he would make friends with people like Herod. So when the Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod means to kill him, Jesus should reply, “If you would, please go and tell my patron, Herod, that I appreciate his zeal. Tell him that, as his friend, I can help guide his passion. I can advise him how to make nice with the Romans and profit all the more. I can show him how to butter up the priests and

increase his take from the Temple tax. I can teach him the finer points of scripture interpretation: how to use the Law to his own advantage, appearing publicly pious while privately practicing, lust, avarice, and greed.”

That’s what Jesus should say to Herod if he wants to feather his own nest and become an influential consultant to the government. But he doesn’t. Instead, Jesus says, “Go 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, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside Jerusalem’.”

Rather than taking the Pharisees’ advice and fleeing, and rather than making a deal with Herod in exchange for his life, Jesus calls Herod out—challenges Herod to put him to death properly—in Jerusalem—on God’s schedule; that’s what *must* means. Until then, Jesus will pray for Herod and Jerusalem—the very ones complicit in his coming death. He’s like a hen that gathers her chicks under her wings—but the chicks refuse her protection. Worse still, he’s like a hen that attempts to gather her brood, but rather than accept her protection, the chicks peck her to death. Even so, she persists in saving those who will kill her.

It’s instructive that Jesus chooses two ancient enemies to characterize himself (as a hen) and Herod (as “that fox”). Other than Aesop’s fables and Beatrix Potter stories, the fox kills the hen and eats her. That’s the way of the world: nature red in tooth and claw. But since the hen has no teeth, her claws will glow red with her own blood. In other words, Jesus perversely portrays himself as the helpless victim of those who would and do kill him.

It’s as though Jesus were the pigeon or dove Abram kills in making his covenant with God. That’s the point: when Abram makes a covenant, and God passes between the slaughtered animals in the midst of smoke and fire, it means that if either party breaks the deal—then the offender will be killed like a sacrificial animal. And in fact when Jesus eventually gets crucified like a chicken on a spit, he remains whole and undivided like the sacrificial birds in Abram’s covenant. Moreover, in as much as Abram and Sarah’s descendents (and we with them) prove incapable of keeping the covenant, they and we (not Jesus) deserve death. Therein lies the irony: rather than sacrifice Abram, Sarah, their descendents, or us, God sacrifices his own Son—in some mystical sense, God sacrifices himself when Christ suffers and dies on the cross.

This is the glory of which St. Paul speaks—laying down our lives for our unworthy neighbors even as Christ laid down his life for us. This is what St. Paul means when he says, “Join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction and their god is the belly; and their glory is their shame.”

Paul cautions us regarding our own lust for success, our taste for magnificence, our sumptuous tables, and our grand dwellings. To the extent these things beckon us to our neighbor in need, they beckon us to heaven and Christ's cross. But to the extent they turn us in upon our own selves, and away from all who suffer, they are shameful.

I suppose St. Paul enjoyed good food and fine wine as much as the next guy. But I also suspect he tempered his self-indulgence with the knowledge that such self-control—even a Lenten fast—occasional abstinence from rich things—might enable us to see our true home more clearly and our true calling to share Christ's cross with all who have ears to hear and eyes to see.

As a butcher's son, and an early practitioner of the art of slaughter, I can confirm what we would rather not imagine: that the slaughter of animals is a messy and sobering thing. Can you imagine how our freshly restored altar might look if we were to butcher a three year old heifer on it, a three year old goat, and a ram as well? Never mind the birds. All the blood and intestinal gore would make such a mess few of us could stand to see, let alone clean up. But this is the very mess—the very mess of our broken lives—that Christ's blood cleans by means of his cross. This is the glory to which Lent beckons us. This is the meaning of the Holy Eucharist, of our Baptism—in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.