

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert L. Hart, Lent 5, March 29, 2009,  
Jeremiah 31: 31-34, Psalm 119: 9-16, Hebrews 5: 5-10, John 12: 20-33

O Lord and Master of my life,  
Keep me from the spirit of indifference and discouragement,  
Self-importance and idle talk.

But, grant to me, your servant, the spirit  
Of integrity, humility, patience, and love.

O Lord and King, grant that I may see my own faults,  
And not judge my brothers and sisters,  
For you are blessed unto ages of ages. Amen.

Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian

+In the Name of Jesus, the crucified One, the great high priest of our salvation.  
Amen.

Last Wednesday night the Lenten Study group discussed the church's response to the disaster of Hurricane Katrina. We focused on the Diocese of Louisiana and the City of New Orleans. You remember the pictures from New Orleans - the people begging to be rescued, the devastation of entire districts of the city and finally its complete evacuation. For a time the city stood deserted. New Orleans, the Big Easy, died.

Perhaps the great Chicago fire or the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 equal what happened in New Orleans. But those events are way outside of anyone's living memory. The day New Orleans went down under Hurricane Katrina in part because of the failure of our man made levees was an extraordinary tragedy. We witnessed the death of a legendary city. Or so it seemed.

All things continue in motion until something stops them. That's true of a rolling ball, a moving car, a great city, nations and empires, and, yes, of each individual human being, you and me. We move along in a direction until what the writer Bill McKibben calls "the big something." It's the big something that brings things to a halt. Death occurs when the energy drains away and the forward motion halts.

The signs of the big something can fool us. The emerald ash borer attacks the Ash Tree. The top of the tree begins to die. Soon all the branches are dead but the trunk keeps sending out green branches in bunches. We look at it and think, "Oh that tree will make it. Let's just clear out the dead wood." In fact, the tree has encountered the big something, the emerald ash borer. The tree will die. Better to cut it down immediately.

In today's Gospel Jesus is trying to tell his disciples about the big something. As John writes, "He [Jesus] said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die." The crowd rejects the possibility of the big something. They say to Jesus that the scriptures indicate that the messiah is forever. This talk of death and dying is preposterous.

Of course Jesus doesn't help matters. He speaks cryptically of dying seeds that bear much fruit, of those who lose their life in order to gain it. Most difficult in this context are the words that where he goes they must follow – not what you want to hear if the speaker is talking about the big something.

What I would say is that, in fact, Jesus reveals a new pattern, a new paradigm, for understand the big something – the fact of death. All three scriptures readings testify to this. Isaiah says God will do something entirely new with Israel, completely unlike what has gone before – a new covenant. “I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts... They shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.” The Epistle to the Hebrews proclaims that in fact it is the big something, the death and suffering of Jesus, that is the source of eternal salvation.

But it is the section of John’s Gospel that teaches this most clearly. Jesus uses the metaphor of the seed. The ancients believed that when a seed was buried in the ground it actually died giving birth to the stalk of abundant grain. And this is not unlike what happens biologically – a single grain of wheat becomes a stalk full of grain. And grain ground into flour becomes bread to give life to the world. So, Jesus says that his death will be that which bestows eternal life. Life comes out of death in an unexpected change from what we so often experience. Then Jesus summons us to follow him and to make dying and new birth the pattern or the way of our entire life – the way we live.

The Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana like so many church groups along the Gulf Coast took the fact of Hurricane Katrina as a form of the Gospel. They refused to look at the death of New Orleans as the end of New Orleans. They saw the big something as the fact of new birth. This is what Bill McKibben, whom I quoted earlier, calls “the new mental model of the possible.”

The Diocese of Louisiana heard Jesus call them to a mission to bring their displaced neighbors home and to reclaim for all of them a dignified place in the building of a beloved community. They adopted MLK, Jr’s idea of the beloved community as their vision, their “new mental model of the possible” in the face of the big something, that thing we call the end of things. Now days the Episcopalians of Louisiana talk of biblical standards of human decency and justice that will not allow them to tolerate homelessness, hunger and the impoverishment and diminishment of their fellow human beings.

The Good News is the pattern of new life. A single grain is buried and a new plant springs up full of grain – life in abundance. This is the pattern of Christ’s death and resurrection. This is the life that we are called to as Christian believers.

This whole region and this big city has run smack into the big something. We are a disaster zone if ever there was one. And the question is do we have that “new mental model of the possible” within our souls? Do we have the paradigm of dying and rising as our way of life. Can we reclaim our region and our city as a dignified place, the birth of a beloved community?

As we enter Holy Week next Sunday, each of us will have to face the fact of the big something. Each of us knows some aspect of our lives is ending, the moment the ball rolls to a stop. That is when we must live in faith with God’s grace at work in us. It is a very personal time and a very communal time. We face this as enter the Gospel story both alone and as a people together.

Let the story seep into your being. Let it bring new birth. And let the pattern of losing life and gaining life speak to us personally, as a church and as

members of a larger community. “Now is the judgment of this world...” says Jesus. This is the moment we choose to face into the big something and allow God to live in us.