

A Voice in the Wilderness ...

The newsletter of
The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist

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If March is generally our snowiest month, then we hardy souls in Grand County shudder (or shiver) to think what may be in store for us before we experience the glories of mud season. Heavy snowfall, high winds, avalanches—we have seen it all, or so we hope. Or perhaps we have just given up good weather for Lent this year. In any case, we look forward to April and to the glorious season of Easter, to spring, and to rebirth.

Our Lenten teaching program on the history, theology, and liturgical use of the Nicene Creed continues on Sundays the 4th, 11th, 18, and 25th.

You are invited to observe Lent with Morning Prayer with Fr. Spencer at the church at 8:30AM on Wednesdays the 7th, 14th, 21st, and 28th.

And finally, get Holy Week off to a good start by joining us for Palm Sunday worship Sunday, April 1.

A Word from the Rector

I cannot say that I have been deluged by requests for information about the recent Anglican primates' meeting in Tanzania and the demands that they are making on the Episcopal Church in the U.S. But I know that most of you have been following the newspaper accounts of Primates' meeting in Tanzania and the resulting communiqué challenging the behavior and the policies of the Episcopal Church, and I feel that I owe you some reaction. I apologize in advance for the length of the following reflections.

For the record, although we have not been directly touched here at St. John's, many of the Primates of the Anglican Communion have long been unhappy with ECUSA (Episcopal Church, U.S.A.) about the ways in which we have been moving toward acceptance and inclusion of gay and lesbian members, especially with the consecration of an openly gay bishop in 2003 and the reluctance to formally prohibit the blessing of same-sex unions. [In the background, there may be residual unhappiness over our acceptance of the ordination of women, as seen in the refusal of certain "global south" Primates to share Holy Eucharist with our Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefforts-Shori, the first woman primate in the communion.]

In the view of the majority of Episcopalians (certainly not all), we are making scripturally and theologically defensible changes, adapting to advances in our knowledge and to the pastoral needs of many of our members. It has become for many Episcopalians a matter of justice. In the view of many Third World Anglicans (certainly not all), ECUSA is a national church that is out of control, veering wildly away from traditional Anglican teachings, especially on sexuality. It has become for many Anglicans a matter of orthodoxy.

This kind of conflict puts great strains on our traditional mechanisms of unity and governance. It raises crucial issues of authority, obedience, and what the obligations of different national churches are to one another as members of the Anglican Communion. It raises issues of just how far the wider communion can demand changes of ECUSA, as well as what obligations ECUSA owes to churches who are deeply troubled by our actions.

At Tanzania, the Primates issued a communiqué, which in the interests of space I boil down, quite unfairly, to the following demands. (1) By September 30, ECUSA must prohibit any further consecration of sexually active gay bishops; (2) Also by September 30, ECUSA must make it clear that it will not formally authorize the blessing of same-sex unions. (This is a little confusing, since it seems to stop short of demanding that all such blessings be forbidden.) (3) Finally, the primates endorsed the movement toward the formulation and adoption of an Anglican Covenant—a formulation of doctrines that all churches must subscribe to in order to remain full members of the communion.

This kind of demand, a clear ultimatum, on a member of the Communion is unprecedented; it is justified by those making these demands on the grounds that the actions of the American church in abandoning orthodoxy are unprecedented.

Those who have been following the events of the past several years will have different reactions. For me, I confess that I am deeply troubled by these developments. In the relatively short time that I have been a member of our church—fifteen years, I guess—I have truly valued and cared deeply about our being part of a world wide Anglican Communion. I am not functionally a congregationalist. For reasons both theological and having to do with practical ministry, the Communion matters to me. And at the same time, I cannot imagine saying to so many active and faithful members of our community that the full acceptance of their persons and ministries is to be denied or even put on hold.

If I am asked where I personally come down in response to Tanzania, I will for now follow our bishop Rob O'Neill when he recently wrote "the recent communiqué from the

Primates requires not our immediate reaction but instead our considerable prayer and thought.” It is a time for prayer, for listening, for reflection. It is also a time for confidence. We do not know how all these issues will be sorted out; perhaps ECUSA is being called to humble obedience and perhaps it is being called to a more prophetic stance, prayerfully and faithfully calling the Communion to a new direction. However this turns out, and whether in my eyes or your eyes we get it “right,” we know that all things work together for good to those who love the Lord. Whatever pain we may be experiencing today and however we may foul things up, God will use this mess to advance his kingdom. There will be a faithful way forward that the Lord will honor and that will make it possible for us to continue to be the best church we can be here at St. John’s in Grand County.

Please continue to pray for the Anglican Communion, for all its members—those who support and those who are opposed to the actions of ECUSA—and of course for our own Episcopal Church.

✠ Fr. Spencer

Notes about Ministries

Regime change at St. John's

The vestry of St. John's welcomed four new members at February's vestry retreat and all vestry members were installed during the service of Sunday the 18th. Joining holdovers Fr. Spencer, Brad Orr and Jeannine Aberg-Maes, are Don Hicks, Jeanie Kemp, Terry McFee, and Eric Mowrey. Please feel free to approach any of these folks with any questions or concerns about our continued life and work here.

The best laid plans ...

The scheduled 1 ½ day retreat at Fr. Spencer and Karla's home didn't go precisely as planned. The scheduled Friday evening meal and "bonding" time was canceled due to one of the worst blizzards in recent local memory. Not only could two members not get up the hill from Denver, but Fr. Spencer couldn't even get home from church. When US Highway 40 was closed between Granby and Fraser, he was marooned at the church for seven hours!

Those "other" Muslims you don't hear too much about

Professor Fred Denny visited St. John's Sunday, Feb. 4, to do a teaching on Islam. There was a large turn-out that filled the parish hall for very interesting talk and an extended, and lively, question and answer session. Fred spoke primarily about the lesser known "progressive" Muslim teachers, whose work is vitally important but which also places them in great danger at the hands of violent extremists. His talk was enthusiastically received. If you missed it and wish to see a text of the address, please contact Fr. Spencer.

A really "fat" Tuesday

Betty Clark, perennial organizer of our yearly Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper, reports a record turn-out and a record amount raised to go to local charities. We served well over a hundred people and raised over \$1200, to be split between the Mountain Family Center and the Samaritan Fund. The dinner was also a great success socially, bringing together many friends from the community and especially from other churches in the east county area. Jerry Woods returned from Pagosa Springs to wield a mean pancake flipper, and there were too many people to thank for turning out to help to risk trying to name them all here. But thank you! You know who you are.

If I had a hammer

Well, Al Clark and Don Hicks have hammers and much else that they are putting to good work in building shelves, cabinets, rods for hanging clothes, etc. for our major storage room down stairs. Aply assisted by Gene Ackley, they are remodeling this space for more effective use. Putting up with the considerable mess in our common area there is a small price to pay for this improvement of our facilities. They also plan to construct special shelving for the flower room just off of the Sunday School classroom. Thanks so much for this gift to the church!

Updates from the Church Family

Slip-sliding on ice

We regret to report that Sally Ackley took a nasty fall on a patch of ice (on her birthday, no less!) and suffered two broken bones, including what the surgeon called “a very, very, bad” fracture of the humerus. She underwent surgery late Thursday afternoon (the 1st), and that surgery went very well. She will likely come home by the week-end of the 3rd/4th for rehab, so she is on the road to recovery. Please keep Sally and Gene in your prayers.

Pet therapy to the rescue

Once Sally is home in rehab, she will have the wonderful therapeutic services of Cady, a lovely three year old Golden Retriever that she and Gene had just adopted. We are all looking forward to meeting Cady, especially a particular Black Lab church dog that we all know. (How are you bearing up, Gene, under the shock of having a dog named for a radical feminist?)

An early end to a season

Nichole Fuqua’s basketball season came to an unwelcome early end during a late season game when she fell fighting for a rebound and struck her head on the hard court floor. She suffered a mild concussion and was not cleared to play the rest of the year. She has fought through the headaches and problems sleeping, however, and is feeling much better. Fight on, Nichole!

Going down under

Showing that they know how to manage retirement, Stu and Marilyn Findley are away vacationing in New Zealand. We eagerly look forward to their return and to stories of exotic adventures.

A “Friendly” update

Pauline Friend continues to recuperate and gain strength at son Bruce’s home in Denver. On the right track for sure, she still hopes to see Arizona before it would be time to journey north to Colorado in any case.

Sermon of the Month

Sermon preached by Fr. Spencer February 25th, 2007

This morning I want to commend to your attention three wilderness stories. This first is of course the wilderness story told by Luke in our Gospel lesson. Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness, and after 40 days of fasting he is tested, tempted, by Satan. The second is a story that is clearly in the background of Luke's Gospel—the story from Exodus and Numbers of the Hebrews' 40 years of trial and testing in the wilderness of Sinai. The people of Israel are called out of Egypt with a mission: they are to take possession of their Promised Land, and they are eventually to serve as a light to the nations. In the Exodus they are born as a nation, but they are not ready for their mission. They need to be tested, strengthened, and prepared for 40 years before they are ready to pass into the land and to the work they, as God's chosen people, are called to do.

Luke's story (and it is also in both Matthew and Mark) makes Israel's story Jesus' story also. The story of the temptations in the wilderness comes at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. All that precedes this story are birth and childhood stories, genealogies, the work of John the Baptist, and—Jesus' baptism by John in the River Jordan. Jesus is baptized by John for his ministry. But, like Israel come out of Egypt, he is not yet ready. He, too, must be tested, strengthened, and prepared, not for 40 years, thankfully, but for 40 days before he is ready to undertake the work, the ministry, that he has been sent to do. Luke's readers are invited to see Jesus as taking on the role that Israel had been called to play. His story becomes Israel's story.

In our Men's Bible Breakfast discussion yesterday we heard one commentator's interpretation of Jesus' temptations. According to this commentator, William Barclay, Jesus' temptations are unique and could apply only to someone with his unprecedented powers. For none of us could be tempted to turn stone to bread, to have dominion over all the earth, or to have God intervene to save us from certain death. Barclay, in emphasizing the great powers Jesus is tempted to use, seems to treat the Jesus of the temptations as the Jesus who is fully God.

But I think there is a more powerful way of reading this story. For we are fully human, and Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine. We cannot be tempted to turn stone into bread, but we are tempted—all the time—to put materialist goods ahead of our values. We are constantly tempted by materialism, even as Jesus was. And if we see Jesus as the fully human person that he was, and we see him being tempted to sell out to satisfy his hunger, then we can see this story as not just about a divine Jesus, but also very much about us. This wilderness story becomes, then, not just about the Hebrew people and not just about Jesus, but very much about us as well. It becomes our story. And this becomes the most powerful use of scripture that there is: taking it as our own, internalizing it.

Similarly, we are not tempted to grasp power over all the earth, but we are tempted—all the time—to grasp for power over those around us. We are tempted—all the time—by control and manipulation to arrange the world the way we want it. We are tempted by power, even as Jesus was. And though we might not be tempted to throw ourselves off a high building so that God might intervene to save us, we are tempted—all the time—to make our faith about our comfort and security, rather than to make it about service. We are tempted by an over emphasis upon our personal security, just as Jesus was. These are temptations not just for those with special powers, but for people just like us. For people as human as Jesus.

So the third wilderness story is ours, and it is a story of our Lent. Lent is our 40 days of testing, strengthening, preparing for the work we are called to do, even as it was for the Hebrews and as it was for Jesus.

Last Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we heard here an invitation to a Holy Lent, issued to us by Betty Cranmer. We are called to our own ministries, but we are not ready. We must be tested, strengthened, and prepared if we are to do the work we are given to do. A Holy Lent may look very different for different people, but at the very minimum, I suggest, a Holy Lent is a Lent that tests, strengthens, and prepares us to resist a little bit better the temptations we know we will face throughout the year—specifically the temptations of materialism, power, and security. These were temptations the human Jesus faced, and he faced them because we must face them. And this is why Luke tells the story the way he does. To make it our story, to make it your story.

Have a Holy Lent.

✠ Fr. Spencer