

RCL Year B, The First Sunday in Lent, March 1st, 2009
 Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; St. Mark 1:9-15
 St. Edmund's Episcopal Church
 The Reverend George F. Woodward III

Our Ash Wednesday Gospel tells us how to fast, how to pray, and to set our hearts on God rather than money, but it stops just short of one of the wonderful passages in the New Testament. Jesus says ***“The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!”***

This passage is about how we form our perceptions...the ways in which we participate in shaping the reality to which we respond. It seems to me a useful passage as we think how we might make good use of this season of Lent.

I decided to go to bed at 10pm the other night. I have a bad habit of burning the candle late and lighting it early, and I thought it would be a good idea to try for eight hours of sleep. But I couldn't sleep so early, so I turned on the history channel and there was a show about the Ku Klux Klan, who are apparently and to all our consternation, experiencing resurgence in membership. The opinions expressed by those being interviewed were so vile that I wondered how it could be that we walked the same planet. It couldn't be that they were just ignorant people, though none of those interviewed seemed a likely PhD candidate. There was something willful about their ugliness. They are navigating the same world you and I are, but they are twisting and contorting their perceptions until the light within them is a great black hole of darkness.

We might call Jesus' figurative 'eye' the human spirit, the soul, the mind. It is the consciousness wherein perception receives value, interpretation, and moral heft. The eye must be made healthy, so that the life we indwell may be full of light. We've been called by Christ to get ourselves a sound eye, to clear away prejudice, lazy assumptions, judgmentalism, pride, self-indulgence and false perception. This is to be an active process. Passivity won't do. To use the language of the New Testament we are to practice ***“metanoia,” repentance***. We're to take an active part in the renovation of our thoughts, the filters through which we evaluate others, and the ways of thinking that shape our interaction with the world.

Those Neo-Nazis I saw on television Sunday night are usefully extreme examples of a human tendency which we all share. The Bible calls it “sin,” ***“hamartia,”*** “to miss the mark.” It isn't something to be casual about, as Jesus' metaphor reminds. We can lower the wattage on our spiritual insight incrementally and find ourselves in more darkness than we can well navigate. We can damn our own souls, and while we may not be certain what is meant by damnation, it seems a state and condition best avoided.

It is into the realm of metaphor that we need to lean heavily today. Our lessons began with the story of Noah and the rainbow in Genesis. The author of First Peter probably took the tale at face value, which we can no longer do, but he found in this story an image of Christian baptism, an appeal for a good conscience, and that is something we can seize upon.

A good conscience is something for which one must wrestle. The complacent and unreflective are not often in possession of good conscience. They may be content. They may be pleased with themselves. They may be like the Neo-Nazis in the documentary I

saw the other evening, so seared in conscience that they believe their wickedness to be the good. Good conscience comes only by discernment, by “*diakrisis*.” It was for this that Jesus ventured the Judean wilderness. We may not know quite what to do with the figure of Satan putting Jesus to the test, but we understand that the weighing of our inmost thoughts and motives, the unveiling of our core values, assumptions and commitments, is neither easy nor pleasant. In times when devils were believed in, one might well have thought one had a hand in such a difficult process.

The forty days of Lent are intentional. They mirror the flood suffered by the victorious Noah, and the testing undergone by Jesus in the wilderness. We are to subject ourselves also to *diakrisis* in pursuit of good conscience. We are to take steps to act intentionally in self-examination, and, when we discover areas in which we are missing the mark, we are to actively repent and turn from error.

The question asked of Jesus had to do with the purpose of His life. We look back at Jesus’ life as though His human purpose was transparently clear to Him, but He wouldn’t have been fully human if it had been. Any honest reading of the Gospels reveals a man for whom the inevitability of the Cross dawned slowly, struggled over and resisted right up and into the Garden of Gethsemane where great drops of blood were sweat in prayer.

Sometimes I think the great “call” stories of the Bible do as much harm as good. Moses had his burning bush, and young Samuel his conversation with God in the Temple. Mary is visited by an angel who pretty much spells things out, and St. Paul is dashed to the ground and blinded on the road to Damascus. But most of us do not experience our call to serve God in dramatic fashion. Rather we are compelled bit by bit in the sifting of our lives to follow Christ, to strive for God, to exercise the ministry of reconciliation.

Or else we demure and imagine that our true purpose is just around the corner. Things will be better, the course will be clearer, once we’re through college, or once we’ve married, or when we’re secure in our careers...once the baby has come, once the children are grown, once the house is paid off, surely in retirement. This present life under these present circumstances can’t possibly be what God has called us to.

We don’t articulate this belief to ourselves, but it is often there, dimming the eye’s light. The danger in such a perception is that it gives us permission to postpone full immersion in our own lives. If this life is not yet your real life, then why give it everything you’ve got? Perhaps this is not yet either the real neighbor you are commanded to love. Perhaps this is not yet the true church in which you are to be a disciple. Perhaps the spiritual life you are having today is not yet your real spiritual life, and you needn’t pray earnestly, or strive for that good conscience commended to us in baptism.

The way to get a clear eye is to return to the Lord with all your heart. That is private work, St. Matthew says. Go into your closet and pray. It is public work, too, says the Church, which tithes a full 10% of the year to Lent, to discernment, to rigors like fasting, reflection and almsgiving. Buckle down, says the Tradition, lest you miss your real life pining after the imagined life yet to arrive. If you won’t live the life you already have to the full, why should God think up something more challenging for you?

Wild beasts lie ahead of you these forty days if you dare the wilderness of discernment, sifting your core beliefs and convictions as flour is sifted for small stones before bread-making. The unreflective, ill-considered life is not of great worth. It yields

at the extremes twisted souls and Neo-Nazis, suicide bombers and narcissistic executives, people for whom the wattage is so low that the soul has gone dark. But it brings us, more commonly, dim, un-actualized lives dreaming of the call yet to come, the bright and perfect day of clarity sure to arrive in the misty future. But long ago ***Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the Good News of God and saying: "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has drawn near; repent, and believe the Good News."*** The day to get yourself a clear eye has come. Amen. GFW+