

A Sermon Delivered by
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Saint Peter's Episcopal Church
Glenside, Pennsylvania

First Sunday of Lent
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(Lord, may these words I have written be your words, and if they are not, may these clever people read into them, what you need them to know.)

You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. (Mark 1:9-13)

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, and we are beginning a new season in the church year; a penitential season. But how do we explain the ordering of the lectionary? Today's Gospel recounting Jesus' baptism makes reference to the Transfiguration of Christ, in that the same words appeared last week during the Last Sunday of Epiphany. It seems the church calendar posits a dramatic transition from an "Alleluia" season to a "Penitential" season by emphasizing the unique role that Jesus is to play in his earthly ministry as the Son of God. And we are advised in other settings and portrayals to pay close attention and "listen-up." In the wider scheme of things; the message is abundantly clear, "listen to Jesus," that's what it's all about.

In light of this, and mindful of the teaching moment that comes with the privilege of giving a sermon, I am aware the task of the preacher, on any occasion, is to proclaim the Good News. Unfortunately however, it's Lent, and the emphasis of this season does not lend itself to conviviality, good times, good cheer, or good news. In fact, positive messages are not always possible because there are so many sobering and disturbing voices out there. In the public domain it is rare that we encounter encouraging news at all these days, much as we would like to find it. Usually we are fed a steady diet of cautions, warnings and danger signs. For example, I came across two excerpts from a variety of different sources. Warning: they're both negative.

The first is a report from a large Wall Street investment firm giving an economic overview of the past year's activity to shareholders.

Dear Investors (it read, in part)

Economic activity in the United States fell sharply in recent months due to a combination of the ongoing housing slump, a vast intensification of the credit crunch, a decline in equity prices and a general loss of consumer confidence. Households and businesses have responded by reducing spending – resulting in severely depressed aggregate demand. While certain steps have helped prevent a collapse of the global financial system, the economy is still at risk.

OK. That pretty much speaks for itself. The other example is in a more academic vein: it's a sobering passage from an Ivy League professor assessing the world situation during a recent recognition of Charles Darwin's 200th birthday.

There are still some things we don't know. (he says) We don't know whether we have souls. We don't know where we came from; we don't know where the universe comes from. We don't know whether killing is necessary for life, as some people tell us. We don't know whether light is a particle or a wave, or something else entirely. We don't know whether we're alone in the universe; whether there's a god, or whether good wins over evil. We don't know what separates matter that is sentient from matter that isn't, or what counts as objectivity. And maybe most significant of all, we don't even know how big the unknown world is.

That may sound depressing. (he says) But it all depends on how you look at it, I guess.....

Well. OK. I guess.

So where do we go with all this negativity? My sense is that we could fill countless notebooks, innumerable newspapers, and voluminous archives in libraries with endless descriptions of how awful things are. And we would have to have our heads buried in the sand unless we acknowledged there is some truth to what the doomsayers are telling us.

But that is not the message of the church. That is not the good news we proclaim. Ours is a different message, because it comes from a different source. It is one that is based in reality, rationality and in history, yet grounded in a deeper sense of hope – religious hope. Well, what does that mean?

It actually means a number of things, and I would like to highlight just a few. First, as religiously hopeful people it means we are not in control of the eventual destiny of humankind. Sure, we have a stake in the world and where it's going, but it's not our world, it's God's world. God has even told us how we are supposed to live in it and has given us both commandments and promises to be used as guides. It's about time we paid attention to what God wants from us, not what we want from God.

Secondly, religious hope is non-judgmental. That is a tough concept to understand, let alone appreciate. It is difficult because it requires us to confront our own humility. Religious hope is non-judgmental since it trusts that God's greater judgment will prevail. Now I'm not naïve. I recognize that it is hard to go through a day without making snap judgments. To some extent it is inevitable, perhaps even unavoidable, that we make certain decisions if we expect to get out of bed in the morning, go off to work, or get to school. But I'm not referring to the choices that are rightfully and exclusively ours to make; rather I am seeking to keep the judgments we make in our decisions humble, and

we do that by not making comparisons to others, and by refraining from assessments that tend to see our own views as the gold standard, or our own methods as the state-of-the art procedure. Again, it's not about you, or me. It's about God. And more to the point, it is about God's universe and God's world. God has created life for us. We are to live life wisely, and we must be very careful not to judge others as we strive to work cooperatively, in order to achieve the well-being of all.

I recently came across a book review by one of Abraham Lincoln's more insightful biographers, Ronald C. White, Jr. It has some bearing on being non-judgmental. In the review, an interesting exercise was posed in a rhetorical way: What might Abraham Lincoln say if he were to give counsel to President Barack Obama?

Here's a brief list that admittedly is highly speculative, but I think, quite shrewd. Note particularly the unspoken concern for being non-judgmental.

MEMO:

TO: President Barack Obama

FROM: former President Abraham Lincoln

- 1) Write your own speeches, especially major ones.*
- 2) Take time for contemplation and reflection amidst the pressures of the office.*
- 3) Don't rush into solutions too quickly for the formidable problems that exist.*
- 4) Value ambiguity, the ability to see reality in its complexity – that is a sign of humility, not weakness. and...*
- 5) Have faith in God.*

Noting that Lincoln never formally joined a church, Ronald White suggests that Lincoln might encourage President Obama to at least make a case in our multicultural society for the religious and moral values of all people that provide the historical foundation and underpinning of our society.

So how does all that relate to us here at St. Peters Church in Glenside? I think it has bearing because I suspect by now each of you has determined what your Lenten discipline may be, and I trust you will be intentional about your objective. If there is still room for an additional piece of self-examination, however; in a similar vein to the counsel offered President Obama, I urge you to consider what advice Abraham Lincoln might give to you, in fact to all of us, who wish to use the time during Lent for purposes of examining our hearts, souls, and minds. We might find that counsel to be life-giving, and a good way to begin the Lenten season.

So to paraphrase:

- 1) Write your own speeches, or said another way – be yourself.*
- 2) Take time for contemplation and reflection – which of course is what this season of Lent is all about.*

- 3) *Don't rush to solutions too quickly – think about them first*
- 4) *Value ambiguity – it will teach you humility ...and*
- 5) *Have faith in God*

I said at the outset the point of the lectionary reading of the Transfiguration was to focus on the good news of God; and we've heard from God. God said: "*This is my Son, my beloved, listen to him.*" Listening to Jesus; that's what it's all about. And in listening to Jesus as his message has been interpreted and conveyed through the ages by prophets, poets, pundits, politicians, and yes, presidents, we have come to understand the everlasting promises and purposes of a loving God. May we continue with that interpretive quest...

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

CREDITS:

DWS Investments, Deutsche Bank Group
P. Struck: Associate Prof. Classical Studies, U of PA
Woodrow Wilson Quarterly, Winter 2008/9
Ronald C. White, Jr.; Christian Century, 2/24/09