

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

December 31, 2006 – Feast of the Expulsion

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First I want to thank Pastor Goldstein for the honor of this invitation to preach today, a day that embraces both sorrow and strength, pain and perseverance, hurt and hope...not only for you, but for so many around the church and indeed our world. I come from a congregation on the other coast that feels particularly connected to you, and not only because we find ourselves about equidistant geographically, and perhaps spiritually, from our national church headquarters.

After the three day trial in July 1990 that led to the expulsion of St. Francis, Naomi Frost, sister of Ruth, took the 1200 page transcript of oral testimony and witness statements and created a two-hour drama, entitled "Claiming our Voices."

I will read to you from Naomi's introduction to the project: *The characters in this play are real people with real stories, hard-lived testimonies to struggle, pain, joy and enlightenment. Getting these voices a broader hearing has been a project dear to my heart. I am immensely grateful to the Undercroft players and their host church, Trinity Evangelical Lutheran in NYC for their excellent efforts toward making that happen.*

"Claiming our Voices" was first performed, and later taped, at Trinity where I am now privileged to serve as pastor. In a few weeks, we will be hosting another showing of "Claiming our Voices," as we join the vigil around the trial that will take place in Atlanta, a vigil of fervent prayer that St. John's and Pastor Bradley Schmeling will not find themselves marking their own Feasts of Expulsion. Jeremy Posadas, a dear member of Trinity, who now studies in Atlanta, serves on the defense team. Thus our connections run deep and have a long history, which adds to my pleasure at your kind invitation to share this day with you.

We at Trinity are also hearing some new hard-lived testimonies to expulsion and hope. Last winter, thanks in great part to the efforts of Chris Wogeman, our seminary intern at the time, Trinity opened its doors to provide shelter for homeless gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual and, in at least one case, intersex youth. What began last winter as a three week program to receive an overflow of youth from a more established shelter, has grown into Trinity Place, our 365-night-a-year shelter for sexual-minority youth, age 18-21.

Currently, it is estimated that there are 10,000 homeless LGBT youth in NYC with only 75 shelter beds that welcome them, including our newly added ten, which is all that the law allows a church to have. Most of these young people have been rejected and pushed out of their communities and families and end up abandoned and homeless in the streets, subways and parks of the city where it is far easier to find a pimp than a paycheck, a hit than health care. They tell stories of abuse and violation. The stories differ, but each and every one is a story of expulsion...the young man from Utah, ridiculed and shunned...another all the way from Alaska.

I recently visited Jewel who had been taken from our church to the hospital. She had pneumonia and suffers from sickle cell anemia. She was in bad pain for which she was given morphine. But

the morphine couldn't dull Jewel's deepest hurt. She'd finally gotten the courage to reach out again to her mother, asking for help. Her mother hung up the phone.

Jacki defines herself as a transgender young woman. Last year, her face was badly damaged in an attack. After surgery to try and repair some of the damage, Jacki came back to Trinity Place to recover. It was her 21st birthday and we had a cake for her. She took bites through the bandages and told us she'd never had a birthday cake before.

Asia is also transgendered. The first time I sat next to her for a meal she turned to me and asked, "So, when are you giving me the lecture?" "The lecture?" "The one where you tell me I'm going to hell."

We know, as do you, that churches have had a central role in fostering the rejection experienced by many of these young people and we believe that churches need to play a central role in providing a welcoming, safe place for these youth to begin to heal and move forward.

Like St. Francis, we seek to be a place of resistance and refuge on the flight on to Egypt. I think the Bible has it right on when it introduces Herod's insane rampage with the insight: "he was frightened." He was frightened. And his fear led to terrible things. Before he began his assault on the babies of Bethlehem, victims of his murderous paranoia had already included his sixteen-year-old brother-in-law, whom he drowned, his uncle, aunt, mother-in-law, two sons and three hundred palace officials deemed untrustworthy.

Where did Herod's fear come from? We don't really know, any more than I for one can fully understand the homophobia that distorts the faith and actions of so many. It may seem a stretch to relate Herod's pathological violence to homophobia in our churches, but I remember an otherwise rational cabdriver in Ethiopia, a member of the MakaniJesu church with Lutheran roots, who told me that there were no gay people in his country. "What would happen if someone came out as gay?" I asked. "They would be killed," he said. "Do you, as a Christian, believe that is right?" "Well, not really," he said slowly. "But it would happen." And we know that in our own nation, even the most mild-mannered, well-meaning people who just don't get it contribute to a culture of fear and to many tragic, violent consequences, self-inflicted and otherwise. It is no coincidence that our shelter's largest donor is the sister of a gay Lutheran pastor who committed suicide.

So I do not actually think it is a stretch to compare what are sometimes called witch hunts in the church to Herod's witch hunt to find and butcher baby boys in his desire to eliminate the threat he saw in the Christ child. In each case, beloved children of God pay a terrible price. Nor, blessedly, is it a stretch to compare the saving power of God moving through the mayhem, then and now. As Herod seeks to lure the Three Kings into his murderous conspiracy, they are warned in a dream to return to their own country by another road. Joseph receives a similar divine warning to take Mary and Jesus with him on a detour from what he had expected, another road, on what has been called the flight into Egypt.

When I told Chris that this was today's gospel, he said, but St. Francis did not flee, St. Francis stayed put, here in this place, in this church, in ministry and mission even after being expelled. Yes, but like the Freedom Marchers who sang "I shall not be moved" during marches as well as sit-ins, you have taken an alternate route, like the wise kings and the holy family, your journey

takes you along a different road, under a star that shines with a different light, toward a country of welcome and inclusion for all.

This road, this journey, receives surprisingly little attention in our text. One little sentence. A sentence that begins with Joseph in bed and ends with the family in Egypt. Nothing of the commotion and confusion of changed plans, of packing and setting off on a long trip with a small child. And to think that I felt stressed about getting my family to San Francisco... Would our flight be cancelled due to bad weather? Where would we go on New Year's Eve, and would the tickets to Alcatraz come through? We hear nothing of the anxieties Joseph and his family must have experienced. But artists have taken up where scripture leaves off.

The most frequently painted scene from the empty spaces in our text is titled "Rest on the Flight to Egypt." The artists correctly, I would say, imagine that a family on such a difficult journey would, at some point, need a rest stop. The painters of this scene take their clues from a non-Biblical text called the gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, written in the 12th century. According to this legend, Joseph and Mary stopped on their journey at a grove of trees; there the Holy Child ordered a palm tree to bend down so that Mary could reach its fruit. The baby also ordered a spring of water to gush forth from the roots so that his parents could quench their thirst.

My favorite version was painted by the artist Gerard David in 1519. In David's painting, Jesus holds a bunch of grapes on Mary's lap. She's about to take some to quench her thirst with their sweet juice, but the grapes might also remind us of the blood being spilled even as she rests. Mary is smiling, but over beyond the distant hills in the background, we know that other mothers wail with grief. Just as we know that this very morning, some of God's beloved children are engaging in self-destructive acts, some are being violated and some are sitting in pews crying tears that no one can see or hear but God.

The grapes foreshadow the bitter future of the very child Mary holds and the grapes also provide a foretaste of the feast where none shall hunger, thirst or weep again. Then David shows us Joseph. Rather than resting, Joseph is shown off in the corner, busily gathering fruits from a second tree, work that appears to require considerable exertion. He is beating the tree with a long stick to shake the palm dates free. You can almost hear his labored breath and smell his sweat. It seems that Mary's rest depends on Joseph's work.

This is part of the painting's tension and appeal for me. Rest and Labor. Stress and Peace. The flight to Egypt, to a safe space, is urgent, but so is rest on the journey. Even in the work of death-defying change, there is need for rest--perhaps especially in such work. But there is Joseph beating the tree, as later Jesus will be beaten on another tree, sweating blood, gasping for breath. There is Mary reaching for grapes with one hand and caressing her son's chubby thigh with the other.

So many contradictory images bunched together, and yet with all of them, David has created a scene of perfect balance and beauty. He has envisioned the tension and slaughter, sweetness and grace, work and sweat, fatigue and refreshment all at once, impossibly bound. He has painted a miracle.

Today, we celebrate just such a miracle. Expelled, yet gathered, rejected yet welcomed, here in a site of violation that is a sanctuary of healing, here as a community that bears the cross and a people who celebrate the resurrection. Here is rest and refreshment on the flight to Egypt. Here

is work on the road to the land where love has cast out every fear.

Here we are. Fellow travelers. Holy Family. And this very day, the child we adore, has again asked the palm tree to bend down and the pool of water to flow at the roots, that once again, we may take and eat and drink and continue on.

Thank you, St. Francis for your witness here, and thanks be to God!

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