

Sitting In The In-Between Time

A Sermon at Trinity Episcopal Church, Aurora

9:00 a.m. February 28, 2010

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

The Rev. Charles A. de Kay

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

Please be seated.

Good morning!

We sit, this morning, in the half-light time of before the dawn, the time of almost, but not yet. Let me explain what I mean.

In our part of the world, the days which began to get longer at the winter solstice in late December (by just a minute or two a day at first), are now becoming noticeably longer. The rate at which the length increases follows a curve so that the fastest changes occur around the vernal equinox (March 20), slowing down and stopping at the summer solstice. We're beginning to notice the change now, whetting our appetite for all of the longer days of promise.

Here, winter is beginning to wane, we can almost taste the spring, but it's not yet here. The very weather seems to reflect this in-between time, as the days warm up, regularly getting above freezing, only to drop below freezing as the light disappears. Looking at our five-day forecast, this is our lot here, this week: highs in the mid thirties and lows in the mid twenties. The oracles of weather conditions predict a mix of sun and clouds for us this week with a low but steady chance of precipitation, moving gently, slowly toward clearing and full sunshine late in the week.

The diffuse, growing half-light of the season shows us more and more, and not always what we want to see. We see more clearly the damage the hard winter, and its storms have wrought on our property, our homes and trees and cars, on our lives. We see the losses we have suffered with more clarity, as the daylight lingers on. As painful as some this may be, this is profoundly a time "of promise and hope. Contemplating the grimmest realities, [we, as people of the faith] may still precede with . . . confident trust and gratitude."¹ Spring is coming. New, rich, abundant life is coming. Resurrection is just over the horizon.

All the while the cycle of melting and freezing continues. Contracting and expanding, contracting and expanding, contracting and expanding. Creaking and cracking foundations, walls, and roofs, anything exposed to the elements – pushing out patches in the concrete roads, making driving some roads an obstacle course of pot holes. Melting and freezing again, melting and freezing again, melting and freezing again.

The ice is treacherous; it's as much a hazard for driving as for walking. We put out salt to melt it, but as more snow melts the salt is washed away, and more water collects, only to be frozen again. Some nights it snows, covering the danger, just enough so that we cannot see it, and we can be lulled into believing we won't slip and fall.

The spiritual journey each of us is traveling is reflected in the glowing clarity the season offers. Don't we sometimes, perhaps even regularly, when we are not at our best, grow cold, freezing out other people, freezing out God? Do we allow our compassion to become blocked

¹ Paul Simpson Duke, "Preaching in the Half-Light of Lent," *Interpretation*, January 2010, p. 61.

in ice? As the pressure lifts, like a general warming trend, we thaw, and with it – as our sense of well-being returns – so does our ability to be kind and loving.

Sometimes it's all mixed up together. Have you ever caught yourself being angry with the people whom you're with – at home or at work – a child or a co-worker has done something to set you off and you're just furious? And you're in the middle of expressing your anger, when the phone rings, and you answer it – “Hello, oh hi, how are you” [with interest and joy and delight]?

As the weather warms our hearts, as the coldness begins to vanish, we can forget the dangers of the ice lurking underneath. This ice is still treacherous. It can trip us up, landing us in a heap, breaking our bones, sending us careening off the path out of control, sometimes crashing, sometimes into inanimate objects, or worse, colliding and injuring others.

The cycle of sin (moving away from God, acting out of anything other than love), repentance (turning again to God, asking forgiveness, choosing to act in love), and forgiveness (real, deep, true restoration of relationships through cleansing the heart) – this cycle of being in-and-out-and-in again of our relationship with God, others, and even with our own very best selves, moving ever toward living right, in the warmth and honesty of living in the light, free of deception, free of fear, being faithful, progressing, and being perfected, in the midst of the sufferings of life – death, sadness, loneliness, hardship, and pain – this cycle is being played out continually in each and every one of our lives.

We contract, we freeze, we shut others out, and then as spring approaches with all its promise of new, unbridled life, we discover that we were not made to live in isolation, and we come to regret the poor choices we make, and we start over. It is the human condition.

Our lessons this morning address this cycle as they encourage us to imitate the faithfulness of Abram, Paul, and Jesus, himself, as we see a God (who may now be invisible or obscure to us) in the warm light of the scripture texts, a God who is continually reaching out to the people. “God’s habit is to draw near. This God who created light with a single command is also a God who will not let us go. There seems to be no good reason for God to draw near to us except God’s sheer love for creation.”² God drew near to Abram, acknowledged and approved the man’s steady faithfulness, and promised him a new land, a new life, children beyond number, and blessing.

While Abram’s heart is said to be constant (he may ask how the promise are to be realized, he never questions that they will be), the state of our hearts – contracting or expanding, freezing or melting – and the choices we make as a result are set in stark contrast in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, as he describes those who “live as enemies of the cross” and those whose “citizenship is in heaven.” And so Paul encourages us to imitate him, and to “stand firm in the Lord.”³

Likewise, Jesus contrasts the greedy, power-hungry Herod, as a fox, to the people of God as Jerusalem, whom He longs to gather together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.⁴ The fox and the chickens: it’s hard to imagine a clearer contrast. Tom Wright, Bishop of Durham in the Church of England, and prolific author and noted New Testament scholar,

² Kae Evensen, “Living by The Word,” *Christian Century*, February 23, 2010, p. 24.

³ Holy Bible, NRSV, Philippians 3:17 – 4:1.

⁴ Holy Bible, NRSV, Luke 13:31-35.

interprets Jesus' image this way: "There are stories of . . . [how] after a farmyard fire, those cleaning up have found a dead hen, scorched and blackened – with live chicks sheltered under her wings. She has quite literally given her life to save them. It is a vivid and violent image of what Jesus declared he longed to do for Jerusalem and, by implication, for all Israel."⁵

God waits on us, looking for moments of access to our freezing and melting hearts, sometimes expanding but sometimes contracting. God's habit is to draw near to us – out of sheer love. God longs to protect us from the disasters lurking both inside and outside of ourselves. "In Christ we know that God did not want to remain in heaven. Though the promise given to Abram has never ended, never changed, . . . God chose to enter our particular time and place and love us with a wild and magnificent love, even though we are difficult creatures to love. . . . Now our sorrow and hopes are taken into God. The only thing that remains fixed, the sole certainty [in a universe of change], is a heartbreaking promise, a magnificent love [that God has for all of us]."⁶

As we sit in this breaking dawn betwixt the dark and light, the cold and the warmth, let us give thanks and praise to our creator. In hopeful expectation of – and thanksgiving for – the light growing within each of us, as warmer winds thaw the frozen landscape, let us pray.

Loving God, who created us in your own image, soften our frozen hearts with the bright warmth of your love, break into our lives with new life as the light finds its way through the cracks in the walls/the chinks in our armor, that we might become more and more the people you created us to be. We ask your blessing in the name of the one who longs to shelter us under his wings, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

⁵ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, p. 171.

⁶ Evensen, p. 24.