**Lent 5**

**March 13, 2016**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

On August 28, 1565, Pedro Menedez first spotted the land that was to become the City of St. Augustine. This City was named because that sighting … August 28 … was the Feast of Saint Augustine of Hippo, the Fifth Century theologian that formed many of the ideas behind Western Christianity. One of those ideas is the Doctrine of Original Sin … that all humans are born in a state of sin, and that all humanity lives in a state of sinfulness … a state of perpetual separation from God.

This doctrine give rise to another doctrine … redemptive sacrifice. Specifically, that since there was nothing that humans could do to overcome this separation between us and God, God therefore offered his son, Jesus, as that sacrifice for our sins. That is how … for some people … John 3:16 is interpreted: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” This is also echoed in the words of our Eucharistic Prayers: “This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

But what if, as theologian and author Matthew Fox contends … Matthew Fox is former Catholic priest and now an Episcopal priest … what if we are born not into original sin but original blessing. Original Blessing! This is a foundational element of my faith. Let me be clear … I DO NOT believe that human beings live in a state of sinfulness caused by Adam eating an apple in the Garden of Eden. I DO believe that God created this world, blessed it and everything in it, and called it “Good.” I believe that we are all blessed children of God, and that we are all loved by God unconditionally and eternally.

If this is true, then there is no need for redemptive sacrifice. If this is true there is no need for God to offer his Son Jesus as a sacrifice for a chasm between humanity and God. From God’s perspective there is nothing that has ever separated us from God. God’s love is constant, unconditional, and forever. Oh, yes, we humans do sin … that is we behave in ways that separate us from each other and from God. But it is like a game of hide and seek … whatever we do that separates us from God cannot stop that constant, unconditional and forever love God has for each and every being in this creation … no matter where we try to hide.

Now, one of the consequences of this kind of thinking is a total reinterpretation of the traditional understanding of Good Friday. However, this is the Fifth Sunday of Lent … so you will just have to wait until Good Friday to hear the rest of that story. Today I am approaching something else. If we are all God’s beloved, then why do we suffer “bad” things in our lives? Do those “bad” things that happen in our life have to define who we are, or is there another choice?

My guess is that everyone in this room has either had some significant event happen in their lives that has changed them and of everyone in their family … or, if it hasn’t happened to you, you know someone to whom this has happened. Maybe it was an unexpected illness, or a tragic accident, or the end of a long and committed relationship, of maybe it was just a bad choice you or someone close to you made. In a family system everyone is affected when any one person in the system is affected. Life is changed not just for the one who experiences the significant event, but for everyone who is connected to that person. Yes, we are beloved children of a loving God … but sometimes bad things happen to good and innocent people … here in our own families, but also around the world in our global family. However, do we have to let these events define us forevermore, or can we still live as God’s beloved in a world that looks differently than we expected it to look?

Many of you have heard me speak of my son, Christopher, who was critical injured in an auto accident when he was just twelve. A friend of Christopher’s, Branson, was driving him home from a Boy Scout meeting one evening, ran off the road, and hit three pine trees at almost 70 mph. Christopher suffered a traumatic head injury as well as broken bones on every limb of his body. He was unconscious or semi-conscious for almost a month; he was in a body cast for five months; and he was in twelve different hospitals in five states over the following three years.

Christopher’s accident obviously changed his life … and it changed the life of everyone in our family, the congregation I served, and the small community in which we lived. Branson and his family were members of my church … his mother sat on the Vestry. As awkward as that relationship became, the congregation as a whole responded with loving care, especially my Senior Warden, David Williams. Then, just twelve weeks after Christopher’s accident, David’s four year old son, Michael, ran into the street in front of the church after Sunday services and was hit by a passing motorist. Michael died later that day lying in the same bed that Christopher had occupied in the hospital’s ICU. As I cried with David and his wife Jackie for their loss of Michael, they were also my tears for my own losses.

Within a few months of Christopher’s accident he was moved to a rehab hospital 90 miles away. So every day Christopher’s mother and I would go to work early … me to the church, and her to her job … and in the late afternoon I would pick her up and we would drive the hour and a half to two hours to visit Christopher, check in the with staff and doctors, and then drive home. It was a grueling schedule, and it wasn’t long before I was diagnosed with clinical depression. I began seeing a therapist and taking medication.

In the meantime, Branson … the boy who had been driving the car … had been awarded a heroism medal for pulling Christopher out of the car before it had burst into flames. And when he had earned his Eagle Scout award his family asked me, as his priest, to pin the award on his chest. I’ll be very honest with you … I was horribly conflicted … I wanted to stick the pin in his heart.

Later I shared that with my therapist. He asked, “Do you like Branson?” I responded with a “No.” He then said, “Then why is it that you allow your anger at Branson to run your life? It really is your choice whether you want to give him that power. Do you think he deserves it?”

My anger at Branson, and my resulting depression, was not a switch I could just turn off in an instant. But, that session with my therapist was the beginning of me regaining my “Self.” And, it was the beginning of moving beyond living life as a “victim.”

In the reading from Isaiah this morning we hear:

*Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing;*

Christopher was the victim of a horrible accident. But even Christopher has moved beyond letting his disabilities have such a power over him that he cannot “do a new thing.” The world is full of horrible things that victimize people: accidents, disease, dysfunctional families, sexual abuse, domestic violence, addictions … the list is endless. In every case there is a crisis period where we, as individuals and as a community, need to respond with appropriate care. However, there are those who choose to let their past … often a very horrible past … define them. And then there are those who make a choice, sometimes a very difficult choice, to move beyond the past … to regain their “Self” …their very soul … and “to do a new thing.”

The reading this morning comes from the section of the Book Isaiah that is referred to as Second Isaiah. Second Isaiah rings with the promise of Israel’s restoration to Jerusalem. This proclamation of salvation is God’s call, through the prophet Isaiah, to not let the pain and loss of the past burden your future. God, through Isaiah, was telling the Jews living in exile in Babylon … and is telling us today … live in this moment, and have hope for the future. Remember … you are all blessed children of a loving God … a love that is constant, unconditional, and eternal.

Notice how this morning’s reading begins with a brief retelling of the Exodus … a pivotal event in the history of the Jews:

*Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:*

We, in the Christian faith, have our own retelling of our faith story each week in the Eucharist. Our Gospel this morning … the anointing of Jesus with expensive perfume at a dinner at the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, is a prefiguring of his anointment with spices after his death. And as painful as the Passion of Jesus on Good Friday may be, it is the Resurrection that we celebrate each week. We are not burdened with the pain and loss … that is not what defines our faith. It is the “new thing” that defines us … it is the Resurrection. The reminder that we are all God’s beloved children and live in God’s love … constant, unconditional and forever.

Christopher’s story is sometimes painful to retell. However, I know that some of you have similar stories from your own lives. Stories of such horrific pain that the burden of your loss has the power to define you. Yet, you have also lived in a faith that says that there is a hope greater than the past, and you have chosen to live with that hope … that “new thing” … rather than have the pain of the past, or the anger over something you had no control over, define your life.

*Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;*

As we approach the end of this wilderness time of Lent, let us look to the “new thing” God is calling each of us to. Next week is Palm Sunday. We will bless palms and remember Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. On Good Friday we will read the Passion Gospel telling of Jesus’ trials, scourging, crucifixion and death. And then on Easter we will remember God’s “new thing” as we live into the Resurrection. We are all God’s beloved … born in original blessing … and sometimes things happen that change our lives. But we are still God’s beloved just as we were before the event happened … in the midst of the event as it is happening … and afterwards as we live with the consequences. We can choose to live as a victim of the event and let it define us. Or, we can live into our new life, still living as God’s beloved … loved by God constantly, unconditionally, and forever.

*Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing;*

Amen.