Sermons at Christ Church

Be God's Light That Shines In The darkness.

Lent V
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Many years ago I read a book-*Living on the Border of the Holy* by an Episcopal priest, William Countryman. That book helped me to fully embrace the idea of the priesthood of all believers-that each of us is a priest, you and me, and that our priesthood is rooted in the idea that the person we follow-Jesus Christ, who was himself a priest, calls us into his priesthood. The Book of Hebrews helps us to understand that Jesus' priesthood wasn't from any particular lineage, rather, it was by an appointment from God. In that same way, your priesthood and mine, couldn't be from any particular lineage-that would have been restrictive, it could only be by an appointment from God. As priests, we have been set aside as ministers of a new covenant that God shares with us through Christ.

Two points about today's gospel: First, a growing concern among Jewish leaders that people are beginning to turn away from the old covenant and embrace Jesus-the symbol of the new covenant. Even the Greeks who came to worship in Jerusalem are seeking Jesus. This provided them with one more reason to seek to eliminate Jesus. Second, it is through the sacrificial offering of Jesus on the cross that he can draw the whole world to himself, to make priests out of all those he draws to himself and establish a new covenant with them.

The idea of a new covenant began with the prophet Jeremiah who looks deep into the future and makes a pronouncement about a new covenant. The prophet argues that the new covenant would be markedly different than the old covenant. Whereas the old covenant was about deliverance from slavery in Egypt, this new covenant will be about God's salvation from exile-from the place of hopelessness to hopefulness, from the place of famish to the place of abundance, from the place of unbelief to the place of belief. It will be a covenant where no one will teach anyone about God because all will know God.

One of my tribal clichés is that no one teaches a child about God. The cliché makes the claim that within a child, anyone, innate within any human being, is a deep sense of awareness of the divine. Unfortunately, some of us deny even the existence of God, but that does not take away the fact that within us is that divine spark, and no one needs to teach anyone about the divine spark in you. You are a priest because of the divine spark in you.

The prophet was speaking at a time of great anxiety and deep anguish over the displacement of the people of God. The people of God are in exile-a situation they never thought conceivable much more possible. They find themselves so far removed from their homeland-the land which God promised them as part of his covenant with them. But the prophet was also aware that if the people are to return back to the land of promise, they could not go back with the same attitude as before the exile, there has to be some change. The old had to give way to the new. In order for all this to be worthwhile, there has to be a new covenant.

Remember, God's fidelity to the old covenant made possible the deliverance from slavery in Egypt. The journey from Egypt to the Promised Land was very challenging and testing for God but God kept His word and settled them on that land. The highlight of the journey from slavery was when God gave them the law-written on tablets of stone. Although the covenant included the Ten Commandments and other provisions, the Ten Commandments served as the rallying point for God's people. The Ten Commandments-which was written on stone became that central glue that held that society together, more than that, it provided the rules governing God's covenant with God's people.

Today, we hear the prophet's rallying cry against the old covenant. The prophet says that God will establish a new covenant which will be unlike the old covenant. In the old covenant, Israel was responsible for keeping the law as a way of demonstrating their fidelity to God. To break the law was to offend the covenant, and that often had consequences, sometimes terrible ones, like their present predicament of being in exile. However, the new covenant will be one where the covenant cannot be broken-because God has not set any conditions for you. The idea is to move you away from relying on your own capacity, your own self to meet any conditions or tests, and to rely on God's grace as the one thing that makes all the difference in your life.

There's a story of the prophet Nathan who goes to King David and tells him a disheartening story about a rich powerful man who had many livestock; cattle, sheep, goats among many others.

In that town was also a poor man who had only one goat whom he adored. One day, the rich man had a guest and desired to throw a banquet for the guest. But instead of using one of his many livestock, he took that one goat of that poor man and prepared a feast for his guest. When King David heard the story, he was enraged and immediately pronounced judgment on the man. The prophet looked at the king who was beside himself with rage and gently reminded him that he is the man. "You are the man."

You have everything. God has provided you with everything that you can possibly need? Why would you take that which doesn't belong to you and kill another person in an attempt to cover up your sin? It has been said that often times it is not the crime itself but the cover-up.

Upon being confronted with his own moral failings and a violation of the covenant, David laments his sin and makes this profound statement "Create in me a clean heart oh God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence and take not your holy Spirit from me. Give me the joy of your saving help again and sustain me with your bountiful spirit." This is a priestly prayer, and it sounds as if David prophesied about a future covenant where God will write his laws not on tablets of stone but on human hearts. The new covenant makes us priests who can recognize our own moral failings with the hope that we can always start over again with the goal of being better versions of our divine self

The old covenant wasn't only restrictive but exclusive as well. That covenant wasn't broad enough to cover even the Greeks who came to Phillip asking to see Jesus. If any covenant is to suffice, it had to take on a more expansive character, it had to be inclusive. The inclusive society that we seek is at the core of our new covenant with God but then we are confronted with the tragedy of people who still want the old covenant of exclusion. We have all noticed the recent rise in attacks on Asian Americans. It is as despicable as any attack on any one community and as priests of the new covenant, we are mandated to speak against that.

Remember, if the old covenant was about a priest making a sacrifice for you, the new covenant is about you making a sacrifice of service to anyone. Those who are called to follow are made priests whose lives are like grains of wheat. To bear fruit, they ought to die-die to self and die to the world.

The gift of being a priest then is to tap into your divine self. And so the question this Lenten morning is, do you desire to tap into your own priesthood? Do you want to die to self in order to follow and serve? The priest in you only desires to follow Jesus and serve all, for where Jesus is, there will his servants be also. Amen.