

The Fifth Sunday of Lent
The Reverend Smokey Oats
March 29, 2009

Christianity is a religion of exile. Ever since the ‘Primal Catastrophe,’ when Adam got too big for the britches he wasn’t wearing, humanity has been banished from the Garden and lives, henceforth, in exile, transient, a sort of eternal refugee. No one escapes this state of displacement. All of us are fallen. Everyone, by birth, lives outside the Garden, “East of Eden” so to speak. And so, we are all, religiously, homeless. This parish is a sort of transitional or half-way house for sinners! Human life, though essentially good and a gift of the Creator, nevertheless now occurs outside the Sanctuary, outside the holy place, on the outside of where we’re supposed to be.

The 1st couple walked with God “at the time of the evening breeze” (Gen.1:31), living in perfect peace with one another and within themselves, without fear or shame or grief. But now humanity, since Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden, lives an evicted life. It’s an exile filled with exilic pain –

from cancer, to earthquakes, to child predators, to drive-by shootings;

from starvation, to birth defects, to bankruptcies, to divorce, to addiction;

from depression, to anxiety, to a general emptiness and pointlessness about life; which, if the others don’t get you, these will.

We are a long way from home, Christianity maintains, and it is only by surrendering our lives wholeheartedly to God in Christ that we find our way back. Only through a commitment to live the Gospel – to willingly sacrifice for and gladly serve and share the Good News of God in Christ; to worship and adore and obey the one, true God, to see in everyone we meet a brother or sister in Christ, can we begin to experience a post-exilic life of grace.

A story to illustrate our exilic status: A rabbi asked his students, “When is it at dawn that one can tell the light from the darkness?” One student replied, “When I can tell a goat from a donkey.” “No,” answered the rabbi. Another said, “When I can tell a palm tree from a fig.” “No,” answered the rabbi again. “Well, then what is the answer?” his students pressed him. “Only when you look into the face of every man and every woman and see your brother and your sister,” said the rabbi. “Only then have you seen the light. All else is still darkness.”

This capacity to surrender, to give ourselves wholeheartedly to God, is, in itself, a gift of grace. The door is always open to return, to go home. Transportation back to the halls of Heaven is always free, runs around the clock, and is never overbooked or delayed. No one who gets on board ever gets bumped, unless it’s a self-bumping kind of thing. Even then, you can get back on at any time. There is no agent necessary to book the journey; you either show up for transport, or you don’t; believe the Word, or not;

honor God by serving others, or serve yourself without honor; and that's it.

But that's just the problem – showing up, believing, honoring. The obstinate human preference for remaining exiled, even when a free way home is offered, belongs to the dark mystery of human nature. It's the hallmark of our displaced disposition. We want to be in control, Captains of our own destinies and Masters of our fates, all the while denying our creatureliness; safe, secure, independent, self-sufficient, even if it means being apart, being lost and alone, being estranged from God; the Boss with a capital "B," especially if we were: born in America and fancy ourselves as players. We're a long way from home.

Dr. Victor Frankl, in a startling image from his book Man's Search for Meaning, reported the following about some of his fellow prisoners in the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau. For years these men had fought for their lives under the harshest, dehumanizing conditions imaginable. They had yearned desperately for their freedom during this cruelest of exiles. But when the Allied forces finally came to their rescue and opened the prison camp doors, Frankl witnessed something most bizarre. He said that some of the prisoners walked out into the sunlight, blinked nervously, and then silently walked back into the familiar darkness of their prison huts. They had become so accustomed to their captivity, the freedom they were being offered was too much to bear.

Whether it's the person staring back at us in the morning mirror or someone we know, who of us, on some level, cannot identify with these exiles and their resistance to

leaving the captive life? (Certainly one not defined by barbed wire and guard dogs but every bit as bound by addictions, death-dealing relationships, and misplaced priorities.)

Who of us, if we are rigorously honest, doesn't prefer the "security" of known captivity in the ways of this world to the high adventure of Baptismal release?

Who of us doesn't prefer to live life as dictated to us by the culture in which we are exiled to the Gospel life of mercy, service and grace?

Who of us doesn't prefer to live under the Pharaoh's heel of self-will rather than to live a life trusting in God's abundant and loving care?

(Answering these questions lies at the heart of today's Old Testament and Gospel readings, and is why we have Lent.)

I ran across an inspiring story that discloses, in human form, something of what it means to move from the "disposition of exile" to experiencing Jeremiah's "New Covenant" written on the heart. It has to do with being homeward, or as a great hymn says, Glory bound; with coming home spiritually, while, ironically, not coming home geographically; with being: on the road again headed back to right relationship with God and all those around us.

Gorman Williams, former missionary from India, shared this story in the chapel at Princeton University. He recalled an experience that happened in 1945. He had purchased his ticket for a long-awaited furlough back to the United States. Then he heard of some Jews who had escaped from Germany and had come by boat to India, hoping to

find refuge. The Indian government wouldn't allow them to emigrate, but did grant them permission to stay for a short time in the lofts of buildings along the dock, where they lived in cramped, inhuman conditions.

It was Christmas Eve when Williams heard about the Jews. He went immediately to the dock, entered the 1st building, and called out: "Merry Christmas! What would you like for Christmas?" Of course they said, "We're Jewish." "I know," Williams answered, "but what would you like for Christmas?" The weary Jews, doing the 1945 equivalent of 'rolling your eyes', replied: "We would like some German pastries."

Selling his ticket to America, Williams went and found some German pastries, lots of them, large baskets full. As he told the story to the seminarians, one brash, judgmental young junior stood up and reprimanded the missionary: "You shouldn't have done that. They weren't even Christians." "No, they weren't," quietly replied the missionary, "but I am."

In a few minutes, when I elevate the host – breaking it in two, as we sing "O Lamb of God....", the "Christian Exodus" is proclaimed. That act culminates a liturgy that means that the "ruler of this world" referenced in Jn 12:31-32 has been deposed; the "Pharaoh" of this world has been defeated, and the way out of the "Egypt of sin and death" has been plotted and paved. In the death and Resurrection of Jesus, God's ultimate act of deliverance has happened. We homeless have a way home.

With the path cleared and marked, exile is now optional. Through Christ, we can be freed from the power of sin, to live freely and gratefully and graciously as God intended us to live. We can live the New Creation, albeit imperfectly and haltingly, by faith through the Spirit.

So who lives in this engraced reality?

The ones who know they need it the most;

the ones who are most ready to entrust totally their lives to Christ;

the ones who know, who recognize what it's like to be exiled and enslaved and who want out.

They are the ones who, as an Indian mystic once said about those seeking illumination, "You must seek it as a man whose hair is on fire seeks a pond."

When Jesus says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself," (Jn 12:32); when he says that, they are the 1st in line! They want to go home.