

SERMON - THE 5th SUNDAY OF LENT - 29 MARCH 2009
St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Heb. 9:11ff.

John 8:46ff

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Over 40 years ago my parents packed my belongings and shipped me off to the University with the expectation I would receive an education, or at least in lieu of gaining wisdom, that the highland Tennessee dialect might become less pronounced and I would exit with the skills necessary not to live at home!! Within a day and a half my informal, but crucial education had begun. I learned 2 required lessons: 1) the first was that my last name was not "normal" like Smith, Jones, or Brown, as witnessed by the inability of everyone around to pronounce it correctly; 2) that it was possible to eat something that isn't fried!! All in all it was a **strange new** world filled with the unfamiliar and sometimes threatening, and at the same time offering glimpses of **new vistas** and exciting horizons that could not have been imagined beforehand. The world of faith, too, often follows the same pattern; mysterious and inexplicable, and yet offering us hope and comfort.

Today begins Passiontide, the two weeks prior to Easter. It is a time for us to contemplate and entire into the journey of Jesus from a joyful and triumphant entry to Jerusalem through personal agony in realizing his fate to bitter rejection and death, and finally resurrection. It is a trek along a path that is both unfamiliar and threatening and yet also filled with possibility and openness to God's future.

The Epistle appointed for today is from Hebrews, a very well tuned and written document. It is also very difficult to comprehend. This passage is full of imagery that for us in the 21st century is mysterious and might as well be Greek (actually it is!!), but for those in the 1st it would call forth pictures which were living annually in memory. This is photograph of Yom Kippur, the most holy day of the Jewish year; The Day of Atonement. The image is of poor people who had indebted themselves by putting up their very property to another owner, and they stood to loose everything unless it was "redeemed" or bought back for them. The high priest would take the blood of the scapegoat, enter the Holy of Holies where he alone was allowed to go, pass through the curtain and tent, the incense billowing up, and then before the Ark of the Covenant both pray for his

peoples' forgiveness and place the blood between the Seraphim on the Ark. The sacrifice had been made and it was both *terrifying and exciting all at the same time*. Why? Because nothing is more sacred or dearly held than a life offered up to God. The Scapegoat stood in the place of the people and bought them back. Now go back and look at Hebrews for in it Jesus is both the High Priest and the Sacrificed life. Only the sacrifice is not to appease the anger of God, but rather Jesus takes everything that we love and hate; all that we hope and cower from in fear; each loss and anticipated gain and He offers it up to God's heart. In doing so He insures that NOTHING in this existence stands outside the concern of His Father. He makes us one with God. In his humanity He takes what is ours, both fallen and faithful and presents it to Our Father, and we are not rejected, but forgiven and given the promise of a new covenant. We are brought into a new relationship with God where our sins and lack of faithfulness and even our mortality cannot stand in the way of His care for us. He offers us a heavenly reality rather than the partial one we already know. WE are bought out of slavery to sin and set free.

How this happens is a mystery of God's own making. But the writer of Hebrews gives us a brief look into that swirling cloud of incense. He tells us that Jesus himself decides to become the sacrifice which redeems us. What is the power in sacrifice? Let's think about it.

A number of years ago Sigourney Weaver and Kevin Kline made a romantic comedy called "DAVE". The story line is about a man who desperately wants to make a difference in the world and to be loved, but always seems to fall short. He is dreadfully ordinary. As it turns out the President of the US, who is a real scumbag, has a massive stroke and falls into a deep and lasting coma. His staff is on the verge of some major legislative maneuvers and need to find a way to cloak the president's condition until they have succeeded. As luck or fate would have it Dave, physically at least, just happens to appear like a twin brother to said president, and is quickly scooped up and forced into playing the role. Little by little he begins to see the truth and attempts to do what is right for the nation in the face of a multitude of lesser people with smaller motives. Late one evening while having a snack in the White House kitchen he begins to have a conversation with a member of the Secret Service, Dwayne. Dwayne has been with him through all the twists and turns of this journey and knows full well Dave is not really the President. But in a moment of self-disclosure the otherwise silent Dwayne reveals why he does his job. It is for the sake of the nation that he protects the president even to the

point of taking a bullet for him, and then he confides, "Dave, I would take a bullet for you". It is a turning point for Dave. He comes to see himself in a different light and of a new found worth. It is not a worth or value he has created for himself however, it is discovered because of someone else's willingness to sacrifice for him all that he has to give; his life!!! That is what is called PASSION. Our culture has turned the concept of passion into a hot and lusty moment, or a flash of anger grown out of being wronged or embarrassed. We speak of being passionate about a new store or vacation spot, as if such things could really contain our deepest hopes and desires. But, Passion, as the Christian Faith speaks of it is about loving God and the life He has given us with such wholeness that nothing else can dissuade us from following the path He gives. We speak of Holy Week as the week of the Passion and the Gospel of Mark gives fully ½ of its proclamation to the Passion of Christ. WHY PASSION? Perhaps it is because to be passionate is to fully and completely embrace another and to be willing to put aside self so that the one we love is the whole focus. Christ loves us not so that He can get something in return, but because it is HIS NATURE. He is both our Great High Priest and the Sacrificial Victim just because he is so passionate for us. Only one who loves that deeply can give Himself away even to death. In the Eucharist that self-giving continues over and over and over for all time and in all places. In receiving it (Him) we are receiving the power of His life given for us, and we offer back to him ourselves in the hope that we may dwell in HIM for He is our truest image. By journeying with Him in these days of Lent we are being formed by His life and love.

Julian of Norwich, the great English mystic once wrote, "The passion of Christ is comfort for us. He comforts us readily and kindly and says: All will be well, and every kind of thing will be well." Or as St. Leo the Great put it, "You will appreciate the passion of Christ when you look with the eyes of your heart and see yourself reflected in Him." We live in the shadow of that passion; a passion that led to sacrifice. Looking back we see in history God's action in Christ redeeming the world, and looking forward we, in hope, anticipate what God has in store for us as we are made One Body With Him. Amen+