

Sermon by Teresa Rhodes McGee, 3/19/06  
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York  
Text: "Let the words of my mouth...."

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

We all have rituals that we use to restore a sense of order and harmony when life feels overwhelming, too busy, and too chaotic. I would like to be able to say that my ritual in such circumstances is to sit quietly and meditate on scripture – which I rush to point out is part of my life – but when I am really in trouble and need the energy in my life to shift, I take what I call the soft scrub cure. I put on my CD of The Essential Simon and Garfunkel (because everyone knows that vacuuming and chant don't mix) and I clean anything that doesn't move, and a few things that do. Even the dog stands clear when I am on a therapeutic cleaning bender because I approach it with the intensity of an Olympic Event. I burn off the anxiety, wear myself out, and believe it or not – think things through – while cleaning. The process is so restorative that it is not too great a stretch to think of it as meditation in motion.

Last Saturday with some deadlines hanging over me, a profound feeling of hopelessness and grief about the state of the world and a desire to take control of things, I started cleaning. Just about the time I had half of the house smelling like a YMCA swimming pool, I heard the gurgle. Backing up out of the lowest drain in the house was what the plumber euphemistically called "grey water." I will spare you the particulars of our sewer system and the spill, but suffice it to say that what came next was a hole in the front yard big enough to bury a VW, and an hourly report on conditions in "the pit." These reports coincided nicely with my rising panic about how much this was going to cost (the answer being the price of the last year of college and first car combined). It has been a while since I have had such an experience of cancelling myself out; the drainage system hiccupped all over my newly cleaned floor. The chaos I was ordering as if I had God's own power of creation deepened into the pit in the front yard that was costly indeed. The main news from the pit in the front yard and every other pit I have ever encountered in life is the same: we cannot save ourselves.

When I read the Decalogue – the ten words passed orally through the generations and then recorded in the book of Exodus – the Ten Commandments that form the heart of religious and ethical tradition – it is sometimes hard not to yawn. They do seem obvious and yet so much injury in the world could be prevented if the Decalogue was taken seriously not just as a monument or plaque that splits the community, but as a way of living that honors our covenant with God through what the Buddhists call "right relationships." It is interesting to note that the commandments begin with God invoking the memory of the Exodus from Egypt and the deliverance from slavery. To protect the liberation of the covenant, God sets down the code for living. The first commandment is that there is no false gods and the making of idols promises to be punished down to the third and fourth generation. Knowing who is really God is the fundamental commandment, and many times it is the trickiest to follow.

There are many ways to create an idol or to worship at the altar of a false god. These ways are often like trying to take control of the universe with a bottle of soft scrub, only to learn that chaos has other plans. A right relationship with God means that we must be ready to be confused, confounded, limited in our knowledge, and tolerant of the pits and messes in human life. It is difficult to live that type of faith relationship when, as the plumber poetically told me, “trouble manifests itself at the lowest point in the house.” We are often most deeply wounded in the low points where we have been hurt before, pain comes in the areas of greatest vulnerability, and we must be willing to embrace that vulnerability lest we create false gods of understanding or attempts at control.

It was my privilege this week to visit – and in all likelihood say goodbye – to a colleague who is dying of a brain tumor at the age of 57. This congregation has prayed for him over the past several years, beginning with his initial diagnosis of lymphoma, through a very difficult treatment and in thanksgiving for five years in which he lived, as he put it “like a speed skater on thin ice.” He is perhaps one of the most energetic and loving people I have ever known; gifted in language both as a writer and in his oral turns of phrase. He cannot speak or write these days, though he communicates volumes through his eyes. I went to tell him that he is surrounded by love, that so many people are holding him in their hearts, that the earth is a much better place because he passed through it. We both teared up at the unspoken reality of his imminent death, something he has been quite aware of since the first signs of the tumor presented themselves a year ago. I am tempted to think of his illness and early death as a design flaw, as something I would not have allowed if I ran the universe, something that offends my sense of order and expectations of life. The suffering of someone so good seems to be a rupture in how deep in my unconscious I hold on to the reality that if we do something good for God, we’ll be able to strike a good bargain of goodness for ourselves. But being there, his 87 year old mother who stands poised to bury yet another child, (the third she will lose to cancer with another son diagnosed with terminal lung cancer) and yet still concerned about offering hospitality to visitors, the love in everyone’s eyes, the moment was deeply vulnerable and deeply holy. God is living in that hospital room. We are all speed skaters on thin ice, the knowledge of which is often too powerful to comprehend or accept. So much better to create god in our own image.

St. Paul’s epistle echoes a question I once heard posed by a scripture professor. Who said that we should always approach the familiar scriptural and life texts with the inquiry “What does this mean if it doesn’t mean what I always thought it meant?” What do we learn if we shake loose from familiar understandings and patterns of belief in order to find something unexpected? Is this not what Jesus suggests when he speaks of the destruction of the temple? Such destruction was the greatest imaginable rupture, as we witness these days in temples burning in Iraq and our own country. How could Jesus suggest that something decades in the building could be destroyed and rebuilt in three days? It is important to remember that John’s gospel was the last to be written. Like a Japanese painting the picture is drawn from memory that has been contemplated and lived with for a long time. The downside of that timing is that struggles within the

Jewish community in the last years of the first century are written into the text in a way that has fueled anti-Semitism. The gift of the years of reflection is that we encounter Jesus speaking in symbolic and poetic ways that, as in the synoptic, his listeners frequently miss. John's gospel is filled with people asking for signs and Jesus responding indirectly. I wonder sometimes if Jesus was not tempted to say to his followers "God, you're literal," a euphemism for "God, you people are dumb." It was difficult for people to step out of the understandings that created structure in times just as broken and violent as our own. How could the temple not mean what we always thought it meant? How could God be so different – and so much more – than what we originally believed.

What if the meaning of the temple is expanded to include the bodies and souls of all people on earth, just as Jesus refers to his own death and resurrection as "destruction of the temple." This past week a sad, poignant and holy moment taught me yet again that the true God lives among us in what Alice Walker called "The Temple of My Familiar." We honor God in our hearts and in our homes not through power and order, but through the unpredictability of life, the love that flows in the grey waters, the ruptured places, the very firmament of our souls. When our own meditations and understandings fail, God is there and we experience that presence in new ways and new meanings. We begin to know then that what a particular scripture or life experience has always meant to us might be in need of redemption and liberation; maybe the worst pits of our lives were not what we thought – maybe they were the temples where for the first time we hear the call of God.

When the Israelites wandered around in circles for 40 years seeking the promised land, their hope was nourished not by an unseen possibility but by the memory of God's fidelity in their past. From that fidelity came not only the Decalogue a code of living, expressed later in the books of Exodus and Leviticus as the Hospitality Code. The Israelites were instructed to care for the person least among us, the widow and the orphan "because remember you were slaves in Egypt." The memory of brokenness and liberation carry beyond the three or four generations and into our own experience. Perhaps most especially the inexplicable and most threatening and vulnerable moments of our lives are potential turning points away from the gods of our own creation and toward the living God of love. A professor of mine in graduate school once wrote in the margins of a paper on pastoral counseling "Relax, Teresa. God's job description has not been posted." With that in mind, the mess of life reveals a holiness that rescues us from the pit over and over again.