

Church of the Good Shepherd  
and  
St. John the Evangelist

4 Epiphany  
January 28, 2007  
Fr. Bill McGinty

**“Patterns of our Life”**

I once had a friend who was a young lawyer. He told me, “All my experiences tell me, that there are no co-incidences. Everything happens for a reason, or because people work to make it happen.”

At this stage in life, I would have to agree and I think that many of you would also. As your life unravels you begin to look back and see more and more distinctive patterns. Each of us shares those patterns and for all of us they have culminated on the Delaware River at a place called Milford.

Jeremiah too, in the first lesson, is recalling his life to his friend and biographer Baruch. Perhaps by the time today’s first reading is written, he is already languishing in exile or recovering from one of the many beatings he received from the High Priest’s Temple Guard.

Either way, in this passage he goes right back to the beginning, when he first heard God’s call in his life. He remembers how he fought and resisted that call because even then, he knew the pain and suffering it would bring. There are few ministers or people who answered God’s call, who have not found in this conversation between God and Jeremiah a common bond.

Thirty years ago this month the first women were officially ordained priest in the Episcopal Church. How they must have reflected on this passage from Jeremiah the night before the Bishop and hundreds of their fellow priests, lay hands upon them and passed on to them the power of the Apostles.

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.”

Ask any of those women today and they will tell you: “Oh no. I always knew that God was calling me to serve him. When I was only a girl of seven or eight, I knew. Oh, I didn’t know how or when or maybe even what, but I knew my life would be different and that God had something in store for me.”

I accept and believe what these women say because for them there were no choices to make, there only even was working for God. One of them told me: “I remember an Aunt in 1957 telling a crowded room: “How could she know. She’s just a stupid little girl of eight. She’ll change her mine soon enough.”

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She missed the point. The point was not whether she would change her mind; the point was whether God would change his. Perhaps, fifty years ago he had a plan and somewhere that girl's name was scribbled on the back of his hand. Jeremiah was not so lucky. He was sent to the troubled, decadent and sinful city of Jerusalem. It was a city that did not want to hear the words of a Prophet. It did not wish to have its deeds exposed to the bright light of day. Jeremiah was a steely little man with too much courage, and he was ready and prepared "to destroy and over throw, to pluck up and to pull down."

His resolve, through all the pain that his job brings him, is undiminished. His strength comes from the fact that he knows this is God's plan and God's purpose, and not his own.

All who are called to minister or respond to the Gospel forget that at their peril. 30 years ago this month the Episcopal women stepped forward before a church of thousands and with the eyes of the world upon them, to respond to God's call in their life. One of those women was Elizabeth W. Meyers, to be joined a little later by Gwendolyn Jane Romerill.

Betsy arrived at Good Shepherd in 1980 and she stayed for nineteen years. Besides the Rev Richard Aselford very few priests had stayed for more than three or four years. Betsy's time, saw the Rectory cease to be used as the Priest's house. The Child Care came in and many ministries to the Prison and elsewhere began. In celebrating the ordination of Episcopal women, we will this year invite Betsy to celebrate her own 30 years of priesthood before she retires completely and moves to New Jersey in the spring. I am thinking that the Cliff Park Inn might be the opportunity to do that.

In the Gospel today, the reading continues from last week's lesson. Jesus is in Nazareth explaining why he is unprepared to perform miracles in his own hometown. Despite his fame and reputation, they turn against him and drive him out of town. Their ears are closed to listening and learning from the lessons of the past. Instead, their lives are full of rage.

The Gospel contrasts so much with Paul's letter to the Corinthians. It is probably the most famous and well known passage from Paul's writing. It is requested often at weddings and funerals, but this is not the fiery Paul of the past. This is a Paul who is also looking back at the pattern his life has taken. First he was a Pharisee, a scholar, and a persecutor of the Christians. Then he belonged to the church in Damascus and Antioch for fourteen years. He battled with Jew and Apostle in Jerusalem before setting out on the first of his four missionary journeys. After the third journey he settled in Corinth for some four years. Here he was happy, because they were rough seafaring people, but he made many friends and he was happy and deeply loved. Now the years have rolled on and he writes to them possibly from Rome. The years have mellowed Paul. Now he can look back through the years all the way to his childhood, and now he knows the true meaning of love, in all its dimensions. The patterns of his life have unfolded and he realizes that when all the dust of life settles on our old age, there is only love which is worth anything.

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The patterns of life can be no less for us. We have to get to a place in our life where God's plan has taken over and our plan for ourselves has slowly disappeared. Jeremiah finds this true in his life to the extent that his life is tied up in God's mission.

In our psalm today the Old Testament people have grown in their dependency on this God, who asks so much of them.

“Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe you are my crag, my stronghold. For you are my hope, O Lord my God, my confidence since I was young. I have been sustained by you ever since I was born from my mother's womb. You have been my strength, my praise shall be always of you.”

It tempts us to ask if God is our rock, our stronghold. All the rest of it rings so true. From childhood God, our God has guided and sustained us. Oh, we may have strayed or gotten lost from time to time, but he has always found us again.

I am getting to the stage in my life where I am beginning to love my God like an old house that I can never move away from. Everything that I have ever tried has eventually turned to dust or I lost interest in it, except for God.

God hangs around, long past our failures and our inability to see his hand in the pattern of our life. In good times and bad times he is there. He has been so persistent that the day is not worth living, without first saying: “Good morning” to him each day in the Morning Prayer and thanking him as he sun sets.

All around us God speaks to us in the beauty of his Creation and in the wonder of his Universe. You and I know what the Nazarenes did not know, that as Paul says, God resides in love. Today's readings invite us to accept God as the continuing abiding presence of love in our lives. Let us accept that love and resolve to love God back. We have grown up with God loving us. Let us grow old loving God. Like Jeremiah and Paul let us too grow into the richness that is the love of our God. Then all the patterns of our life, all the pain and suffering will be just a path to our true destiny home to where our God will be.

Amen+

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