

## Lent II Year C 2016

Your delegates and Mary, Ruth, and I have just returned from our diocesan convention... the forty-fifth convention of the diocese of the central gulf coast. This was our new bishop, Russell's first convention as bishop... and so mostly it was about celebrating his episcopacy... his new call in the life of the church... as it should have been. Our new bishop is full of enthusiasm... He works incredibly hard. He is open and transparent... down to earth... He is most likeable. He'll be a good pastor to his clergy.... This convention unlike any I have attended before was the bishop's convention.... And by that I mean every detail was of his making... from the opening Eucharist to the final benediction.... Russell used this time to let us all know what he hopes for this diocese... what his style will be... what his theological predispositions are... A good deal of our time was to take stock in where we are as the Episcopal Church in this southern coastal corner of God's kingdom... We participated in a three hour long session of conversations naming what things are good about our churches... and then how we can do better... Everything was positive, lots of accolades and thanks to the people who do the good work of the diocese.

It was one of those mountaintop sort of experiences for us dyed in the wool Episcopalians that happens when we get together and talk about how good it is to be Episcopalians... It reminded me of the way I felt as a young layperson when I first got elected delegate to the convention.... Basking in the glow of this unique and quirky church that we love... and all of that is fitting, proper... meet and right.

But I have to admit I left with something of an empty feeling.... Maybe it is my age... or maybe it's because I had a root canal this week.... Maybe it is because of where we are at All Saints right now, with the painful recognition that we can't afford two full time clergy.... Or perhaps a combination of those things... But whatever the reason, all the celebrating just felt a little hollow to me. Outside of the lavishly bedecked walls of the convention, I mused, was the world... the world in ruins.... After so many millennia of so-called human progress, including the witness of the church, we still live in a world that suffers from violence and injustice... a world rife with shame and indignity and greed... Ruin.

Now I don't say that to be overly dramatic, nor do I say that in despair... But it is Lent... the time when we pay attention to the ruin around us, and the ruin within us... And perhaps we should take heart... Every civilization ever established,

was established upon the ruin of another.... Perhaps we should take heart that what I'm talking about is the mystery of death and resurrection.... But that is a mystery that I think we are content to leave as an abstraction.... If truth be told I think we like the resurrection part, and short circuit the death part.... One of the lost arts in our culture I think is the art of lament.... So here at the heart of our gospel reading today is a lament... Jesus lamenting over the ruin of Jerusalem.

Now, as you know, Jerusalem is not just the capital city of Judea. It is the center of the universe for the people of Israel. It is home to the Temple. Home to the government. Home to the arts and culture. It is the world.... And it has forever throughout its history been a city in ruin... It was assaulted by the Philistines in the time of King David... It was sacked by the Babylonians, sacked by the Assyrians, occupied by the Romans, the Ottomans, the British... It is the place that has been called the city of God by three great religions and yet it has been at the heart of some of the greatest violence civilization has known; its rulers and overlords corrupt and compliant to the whims of power... A city in ruins... a city unreal, but very real.... ruin.

Jesus and three of his disciples have just had a mountaintop religious experience, only to descend the mountain and encounter their world in ruins.... In microcosm, a demon possessed boy and his desperate father racked with anxiety... and the road stretches on towards the macrocosmic... Jerusalem, the city that kills her prophets... Jesus on the road to ruin... everything points to it.... It is inevitable....Ruin, whether it be our own health, whether it be our relationships, whether it be our institutions... whether it be our church, whether it be our very way of life... It will come. It is the way of things...Why in the face of History herself, would we think otherwise.

So here's what I want to say.... Jesus doesn't condemn the ruin. Jesus loves it. He loves the ruins unrelentingly like a mother. He laments the world falling apart, but it is the world he loves, and the world that God calls good.... Brothers and sisters, a metaphor for the life of faith is, as Walker Percy coined it... "Love in the Ruins"... This life of faith, the life of the church has to get over the triumphalism of the past... And the life of religion is not an escape. We are a people called into the ruins. We are hope amid the dust and ash of destruction.... We are sent into the dark and dirty corners of our world... and there we lament, and then... act in Love. As disciples of the gospel we are to, with all due diligence, as disciples, that is, learners... become fluent with the ways the world works, or doesn't, and then act in the Spirit of love, which for us is a Spirit of restoration...

repairers of the breach as Isaiah puts it.... Ours is not to condemn or hate the ruin around us... Ours is to love the ruins.... If we are faced with the choice of the mountaintop, or the valley of the dry bones.... Dear people of God choose the bones... choose the ruin of our world to make your dwelling, because it is in the ruins, the dust and ash of our world, and our lives... It is in the dust and ash where new life germinates surely. It is in the dust and ash, the ruins, that are the rudiments of God's creativity and promise of new life beyond our imagining.... But first lament honestly... If we don't embrace the ruin of our world, the ruin of our lives, we'll never know the astounding mystery that love begets life in the ruins.... One such sign is hope.... Hope an artifact from God's future... I am asking you this day to consider believing that. I am inviting you into a mature faith.... A faith that is not abstract, unreal.... But real.... And really alive.