

Holy Posture

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Trinity Church in the City of Boston
Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 26, 2006

As I walked along the Commonwealth Avenue Mall the other day I noticed that there were several young trees, roots bound and wrapped, lying on the ground waiting to be planted. They were actually quite tall - though they had very few branches and of course, no leaves. There was no sign nearby to explain what was going on just tree after tree randomly placed on the ground and waiting.

Who will come along to plant them I do not know. When they will get planted I do not know. I assume that someone in the city parks department has a plan, a strategy for seeing to it that these young trees are properly planted and cared for so that their roots will hold firmly in the earth. But for now they are simply waiting. You and I do our share of waiting as well. We wait in lines. We wait in traffic. We wait on the phone. We wait for our guests to arrive and sometimes to leave. We wait for lab reports. We wait for spring. We are waiting for a new Rector. We wait for birth and death and love.

But lest we think we have the cornerstone on waiting, Holy Scripture introduces us to a whole panoply of people who spend much of their time waiting. Abraham and Sarah waited a long, long time for a child. Anna and Simeon, on watch for the Messiah, waited in the Temple a long time until the day Jesus was presented. But waiting is not the property of individuals looking for their personal needs to be met. Whole communities of people have and still wait, wait for a sign of God's blessing and for the fulfillment of the hope of God's promises. Some wait patiently, others do not. The Israelites not only waited but wandered in the desert with Moses. They waited much longer - longer than they had anticipated or wanted. They grew impatient with their all their waiting and wandering and they began to complain both to God and to Moses. Now the story we hear today in Numbers could be called one of two things: either *The Israelites Whine to God* or *God Demands the Making of False Idols*. Both happen because the Israelites do complain to God and God does give instruction to make the serpent, neither action is at the heart of the story. More than anything else it is about finding life, new and abundant life, in the waiting. Something else neither we nor the Israelites are particularly good at, but we do it all the time. "Look up," Moses might have said to those disgruntled Israelites, "look up and live." God heard the cries of the people, even as they complained about the limited menu options and God gives them hope in the midst of their suffering.

Waiting is not something most of us enjoy. And, it seems, we are becoming a culture conditioned to think that we can have everything we want, anytime we want it. A store on Newbury Street drives home the point by listing their hours on the door. And right below the 9-5 listing are these words: "always open at www..." In other words should you find an urgent need to order a sweater or buy a necktie at 2 AM you can do it! There is simply no need to wait until the shop opens again in just a few hours. But waiting is a very Christian posture. And waiting is a very holy posture though we might not think of it as such. Customarily we think of kneeling or standing, with head bowed and eyes clenched shut as holy posture. But let me propose something else. I recently

visited a church and read through the large track rack in the narthex. It always feels like a wonderful church scavenger hunt. Give me 5 minutes at the track rack and I can tell a great deal about any church based solely in the material and pamphlets found there or the ones that are noticeably absent. One of the tracks was entitled "Church Customs Every Episcopalian Ought to Know" (Forward Movement Publications, 1991). Open it up and there is all kinds of fascinating information about why we stand or sit or kneel, about why it important to participate in the prayers, why silence is important in church, why the passing of the peace prepares us to approach the altar, why some people bow their heads as the cross passes by or as they enter the church, or at the name of Jesus.

There were twelve items listed in the small pamphlet, which seems reasonable and perhaps even Biblically based. The ninth item says the following:

Unlike some Protestant Churches which make the pulpit the focus of attention, the Episcopal Church places the altar in the central position because it is the symbol of the presence of the living God in his house. This teaches us that we do not come to church primarily to hear scripture, a sermon, or the singing of the choir, but to hear these in order that they may help us come close to the living God. God is the end; these things and all that we do in church, noble as they are, are means to make ourselves present to God.

We are here to come close to the living God. The Israelites wandered in the desert longing to come close to the living God, Nicodemus sought Jesus in the dark of night to come close to the living God. Sometimes we are powerfully aware of the presence of the living God in our worship and in our lives, other times not. But perhaps that is the time we might assume that very holy posture not of standing, not of kneeling, but of waiting.

In the Gospel of John that we hear this day we do not hear about waiting. Instead this is Johns attempt to let those who would come after him know about the love of God and the salvation of God. How could we believe in heavenly things if we do not believe in earthly things Jesus asks Nicodemus. In this passage we are eavesdropping on the conversation that happened at night when Nicodemus the Pharisee came to Jesus to ask what we might call some clarifying questions. John reports it as if he was there or had taped the whole conversation. But this is an exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus. This is what Nicodemus had said just prior to our appointed text. He said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs part from the presence of God." Jesus replied about being born again and Nicodemus was confused and perplexed and who could blame him? How can these things be? he asks. So our Gospel text today is Jesus reply to Nicodemus' confusion. Jesus reminds him of the story of Moses and Israelites in the desert. Jesus must be raised up just as the serpent had been so that all might believe and have eternal life. Jesus was trying to bring Nicodemus close to the living God. John wanted all who read this to come close to it as well. That is what we are here to do week by week and day by day. Come close to the living God.

John 3:16. It is hard to mention this and not conjure up images of giant signs held up in sports arenas all over the world. But we must not let this keep us, in our worldly sophistication, from comprehending the wonder that God so loved us, you and me, and every person past present and yet to come. God so loved the whole of creation, the good earth and all that is in it. God so loved

the sinner and the saint. God so loved the doubter and the disbeliever as well as those who believed that God spared nothing, not even the life of Gods only Son, in making sure that all the world had access to eternal life.

But belief is hard sometimes, some days. And we find it hard to be in the holy posture of waiting for it to be easier, clearer, simpler, and more palatable. We are like both the Israelites and Nicodemus, knee deep in water and dying of thirst. The Israelites had food, manna from heaven, but they wanted what they knew from before, what was familiar to them. Nicodemus wanted to understand that which he could not get his head around with an act of faith. God so loved the world with a wondrous love, a complete love, a love that is available to all yet forced on no one. On the north and south walls of this church there are murals painted there. They are dark and hard to see well, but week by week you and I walk right between the depiction of two stories from the Gospel of John - the story of Nicodemus on one side and the story of the Samaritan woman at the well on the other. It may be worth a pause sometime to look up and consider them carefully and what they say about our life. We walk between depictions of the story of Nicodemus and his search for meaning on one side, and the Samaritan woman and her quest for belonging on the other. Meaning and belonging are part of our earthly pilgrimage, part of this parish's identity and ministry and part of our Lenten journey. We walk past them as we come here to worship, to come close to the living God and we walk past them again as we go out into the world.

So back to those trees along side of the road, just waiting to be planted. They are waiting for their new purpose to unfold. To be planted, to bloom as their roots take hold and the long wait for spring finally ends. As I suppose we are as well. But our waiting is not wasteful. It is holy work, it is the most holy posture and it is ours to do this and every day.

Amen.