

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Lent 4-B; 11 March 2018
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201803101052)

The Son of Man Must Be Lifted Up

In nomine...

I. Intro

Dirty diapers. They're one of those facts of life you just have to deal with. Nobody really likes them. But what are you going to do?

I have a sibling twelve years my junior. That means I learned to change diapers at a formative time in my life. I got lots of practice. Becky, on the other hand, *was* that younger baby in her family. Not much practice.

Therefore when our oldest child was born and we took her home, Becky had a slightly panicked look on her face. But I knew what to do: no problem. I can change a diaper. I tried to do my part. Though I think I wasn't as helpful in the middle of the night.

But whatever the time of day, there's no arguing with a dirty diaper. If the diaper's dirty, it needs to be dealt with. I never read any books on diaper changing. I never made a retreat in order to meditate on diaper changing. I never wrote a sermon about diaper changing – until this week. Dirty diapers are just a part of life and we deal with them.

Child-rearing is not an easy thing to do. Dirty diapers are only some of the first obstacles. But if child-rearing is your calling, then it's totally worth it. We love our children. Most of the time they love us back, even if they do so in their own special ways. It's how the world works.

II. Lessons

A. Numbers

Our lessons today speak of people coping with difficulties they didn't especially want. In the first lesson, the Israelites have recently been transformed from an enslaved labor force into a

wandering band of nomads who constitute their own nation, responsible for their own sustenance, defense, and governance. It is a scary proposition, and they quite naturally lash out in their new sense of insecurity. “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water and we detest this miserable food.” Their newfound freedom turns out to have some significant down-sides! It’s like when that beautiful new baby makes her first dirty diaper. What now?

Even though first lesson spoke of fiery serpents, I wonder if it is the people’s own anxieties and dangerous doubts that are the most potently poisonous agents in their new community. They are facing the same old problems, but without the resources they used to count on. They have not yet learned to trust the daily presence and provision of the living, loving God. Change and insecurity are the crosses they bear.

B. John

Our Gospel passage today contains a verse you may have heard before. “For God so loved the world...[that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.]”

But you’ll notice that’s not the beginning of our reading, nor the beginning of the thought. The thought begins with Jesus referring back to the crazy-odd event in our first reading with a bronze serpent being lifted up on a pole. Jesus refers to that event as a foreshadowing of Jesus’ own work upon the cross. It was upon the cross that the Lord of Life was lifted up, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. Even disappointment and death cannot stop the Kingdom of God. The cross looked like evil, but it was upon that cross, right through the middle of the evil, that Jesus achieved victory. Jesus demonstrated that the Universe is cross-shaped, and that our God is victorious over it all.

III. Bearing Crosses

Here’s what I mean when I say the universe is cross-shaped: If I always got my way, able to do what I want, when I want, how I want, all the time, that would seem like a pretty great world to me. But what happens when my will comes into conflict with myself? I wish I could eat more cookies, and I wish that my stomach wouldn’t hurt! Alas that is my cross to bear: I can’t have more cookies and not have a tummy-ache.

But it gets worse. What happens when what *I* want comes into conflict with what *you* want? Eventually, one of us is not going to get our way. That person will call that experience evil and see it as a cross to bear.

And so we have a world with 7.6 billion people who can't even agree with themselves! 7.6 billion individual wills all colliding with one another like the biggest ever game of billiards. Each time one will crosses another, somebody bears that cross. Usually multiple somebodies. And that's a lot of crosses. That is a whole world of crosses. It's a cross-shaped universe where nobody gets their way all the time – not even God!

You can look around at the world *around* you, you can look around at the world *within* you, and you can see quite clearly that even *God's* will is being crossed constantly. God continues to bear a cross to this day every time a child goes hungry, a heart is broken, or a body is abused. God continues to suffer right alongside us – not getting *God's* way! And as Jesus demonstrated in the resurrection, that suffering is *no obstacle* to eternal life. In fact, it is a sign, a reminder, that we were made for something better than suffering. Suffering is not an *obstacle*, but a *pointer* to eternal life with God.

It's like a dirty diaper: verification that all systems are go and the baby is still growing and thriving, but she just hasn't reached the potty-training stage, yet.

Suffering is not an *obstacle*, but a *pointer* to eternal life with God.

IV. Good News

For Jesus, a cross is not an obstacle, but a throne of victory.

The Creator of the Universe put on flesh and lived this messy life among us as a human being named Jesus. Dirty diapers and all. And Jesus, the Lord of Life, suffered a painful death on a real, actual cross in order to communicate something to us. Even though the universe is cross-shaped and full of one person's will crossing another, these crosses are no obstacle.

Disappointment, pain, even death are unpleasant but Jesus can work right through each of them.

The invitation of God is to seek the good, but to rest in God. We can nurture our relationships with love and service and patience – but those we love will disappoint or even leave at times. We can raise our children with care, love, and support – but sooner or later (probably sooner) they will make their own choices and we are called to let them go. We can care for our own bodies with good hygiene, healthy food, and appropriate exercise – but eventually our bodies will become fragile and uncooperative. We can engage in politics with discussions, campaigning, and voting – but sometimes our candidate will not win. We can strive to feed the hungry and house the homeless – but the poor will always be among us.

Sometimes – often, even – the complete “good” we hope for won’t come to pass.

All the “goods” that we try to accomplish in the world are right and appropriate. But they are inadequate lodgings for our identities, for our hopes and dreams and aspirations. When we place our hopes and our identities in the goods we find around us, they become idols and take us away from resting in the greatest good, which is God.

Dirty diapers are a part of life. So are all kinds of other messes we get ourselves into. But they’re not signs of failure or of God’s abandonment. Rather they are reminders that we’re not home yet, the end has not yet come, we are still in the process of becoming, just like a little child struggling to grow up. God is patient and lets us grow at our own pace.

For God so loved the world.

The dirty diapers, the pains and disappointments and struggles, aren’t there for us to argue with or even understand. They just are. And as we look to the Son of Man who was lifted up on the cross, we can remember that the path to eternal life is not around or underneath, but straight through the messiness of life and into the arms of our loving God.

FIN