

## ***“Lent is the Birth Canal of Easter”***

*A Homily by Stephen Martz for the People of St. Nicholas*

*25 February 2009*

*Isaiah 58:1-12 + Psalm 103 + 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 + Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21*

Re-reading T.S. Eliot’s “Ash Wednesday,” which I am wont to do this time of year, I was struck last week by one of its lines: *“This is the time of tension between dying and birth.”*

Eliot, regrettably, has never spoken to me as deeply as he speaks to many others. Even so, I return to him for lines such as this, flashes of brilliant insight that illumine some aspect of our human journey. I’ll come back to his line.

But first I want to turn to another poet who touches my heart and soul more profoundly and consistently. Denise Levertov’s poem, “Shalom,” begins with an everyday experience, whose significance we might easily miss, and finds in it a depth that speaks to the extraordinary journey we begin anew this night.

*A man growing old is going  
down the dark stairs.  
He has been speaking of the Soul  
tattooed with the Law.  
Of dreams  
burnt in the bone.*

*He looks up  
to the friends who lean  
out of light and wine  
over the well of stairs.  
They ask his pardon  
for the dark they can’t help.*

*Starladen Babylon  
buzzes in his blood, an ancient  
pulse. The rivers  
run out of Eden.  
Before Adam  
Adam blazes.*

*‘It’s alright,’ answers  
the man going down,  
‘it’s alright – there are many  
avenues, many corridors of the soul  
that are dark also.  
Shalom.’*

It seems to me that both poets have it right. Lent invites us to descend the dark stairs and corridors of our souls. This is almost never an easy journey. Caught in the *tension between dying and birth*, between death and new life, it is hard, at this distance, to grasp the paschal mystery.

This is because we live within the finitude of human existence and, from this perspective, dying seems logically to lead...well...to death. It appears to us, understandably, the end, not the beginning.

Yet Jesus, the Christ, tells us that life and death are not what they appear to be. The Christian journey generally and the Lenten journey particularly are invitations to enter the mystery he embodies, a mystery of new and eternal life that fully reveals itself only in the dark night of Easter.

Tonight, gripped by the *tension between dying and birth*, we enter Lent. It is at once a season terrifying and captivating. Terrifying because it asks us to let go of our familiar ways and comforts. To move from the *light and wine* of our comfortable existence into something deeper, more mysterious.

Captivating because we have heard the Easter story of hope, and we yearn for the abundant life it promises. Because **Lent is the birth canal of Easter**, and we yearn to be born anew.

The paradox is that we reach Easter only by going down the dark stairs and avenues and corridors of the soul, much as Jesus in death is said to have descended among the dead. His journey makes him Virgil to our Dante.

God provides us many markers for the journey. Throughout this season, the readings return again and again to the theme of Covenant, reminding us that we do not journey alone.

Paul marks the beginning of the Lenten journey in his own forthright way, telling us in this evening's second reading: *Now is the acceptable time...now is the day of salvation.*

Isaiah, in our first reading, offers another marker, reminding us that the Lenten journey is not to be a time of morose humility dressed up in empty gestures or rituals:

*Is not this the fast that I choose:*

*to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?*

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,*

*and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

My favorite marker is the one Matthew provides in tonight's gospel. Over and over, we hear his refrain that *your Father who sees in secret will reward you*. Will reward you:

- when you give alms in secret,
- when you pray in secret,
- when you fast in secret.

Why all the secrecy? Because God must be known in the privacy of the soul before we ought to dare speak the holy name in the public square. The older I grow, the more skeptical I become of religious leaders who dare to preach – myself included.

We tend to speak so confidently, blithely of One we purport to know, whose ways we urge others to follow. Yet how do any of us really know that the God we preach is not our projection, created for our benefit – the very thing Jesus condemns in tonight’s gospel – rather than the object of our deepest and most passionate longing?

Ethan sent me a poll this week that showed only three per cent of American teens consider clergy a role model. They may be onto something. I shouldn’t say this since I’m preaching the next five Sundays, but: Forget the preachers this Lent! Go with the poets! They are much better role models.

This is not the place for a class in modern poetry, yet let’s return again to the third verse of Levertov’s poem. In response to the old man’s friends asking *his pardon for the dark they can’t help*, Levertov writes:

*Starladen Babylon  
buzzes in his blood, an ancient  
pulse. The rivers  
run out of Eden.  
Before Adam  
Adam blazes.*

What if we begin our Lenten journey with the twin recognition that we are dust and to dust we shall return **and** starladen Babylon *buzzes in our blood, an ancient pulse*? Or think of the journey before us as both our *dying and our birth*.

There is much to commend the ancient piety that sees Lent as a time of penance. All of us have parts of ourselves that need to die. We are often experts at fashioning wombs for our personal comfort.

Yet the danger of that piety is that it invites us into a vision of our humanity that dwells too long on our sin, emphasizing our misery and wretchedness so scrupulously that we lose sight of the birth and new life that are our Lenten destination.

Lent is the birth canal of Easter, not a grave – even though, in order to be born anew, we must pass through a tomb.

So let us now go forth to explore those dark corridors of the soul, but let us do it aware that *starladen Babylon* – or in more familiar language, the light of Christ – *buzzes in our blood*.

As we do, we may just find that, along with a bit of misery and wretchedness, our soul's corridors also contain more than a little long-neglected wonder.

We enter the dark ablaze with the light of the holy. That internal fire, that *ancient pulse* of life, along with the many outer markers we have been given for the journey, makes everything alright.

Shalom.