

Meeting Christ in Our Everyday Lives: The Rev. Christine Chakoian
In Strength and Willfulness First Presbyterian Church
Deuteronomy 8:11-20 Lake Forest, Illinois
Luke 13:22-35 March 4, 2007
The 2nd Sunday in Lent

This is the second in our sermon series for Lent, sermons that focus on Christ's presence in our lives. As Christians we believe that following Jesus is the path of discipleship ... but we also believe that often Jesus comes to us, and meets us where we are. So it is that we find Christ present in our everyday lives, if only we will look.

We started our series last week by examining the wilderness times in our life, the times when we are weak and vulnerable, the times when we are lonely and afraid. Though we largely enjoy control over our lives, and ample resources, and the privilege of self-determination – though we are used to these things, we all find ourselves in the wilderness now and again. It is the human condition, and no one is impervious to the toll it takes on the spirit. We wander in the wilderness of loss or grief, illness or aging, a humiliation or defeat ... and often while we're there, to make matters worse, we find ourselves tempted – tempted to doubt; tempted to go it alone; tempted to try to wrest control back; tempted to escape altogether. We are tempted, all of us, in our weakened condition; we are tempted by a thousand siren voices. But Scripture tells us that Christ knows this wilderness too, and as he acknowledges his own hunger and thirst, we are able to face our own; as he recognizes his own temptation, we are able to see our own; as he feels no disgrace in claiming human vulnerability, we are freed to claim our own. As Christ faces his own wilderness, he comes to us in ours, with the comforting balm that we do not need to feel *ashamed* ... with the calming security that he is there for us, to strengthen us, when we do not have strength of our own.

But if it is true that there is temptation for us in the wilderness times, it is just as true that temptation also lurks in our times of strength; and just as Jesus comes to us when we are weak and needy, so also he longs to come to us when we are strong and utterly in control. That is the essence of our Scripture readings today.

I love the reading from Deuteronomy; it speaks to me as utterly true. The context is this: at the end of their wilderness journey. Moses is reminding the children of Israel of their bondage in Egypt, how God heard their cries and led them across the Red Sea to freedom; how God fed them in the wilderness with manna,

and gave them the commandments. Moses also reminds them of their failure in the desert, when they made themselves a golden calf to worship, and how, even then God had mercy on them.

And now the people are about to enter into the Promised Land, the land promised in God's covenant with their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is, Moses says, a good land, "with springs and ground waters, a land of wheat and barley, vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity"

At last the people can let down their guard, relaxing in prosperity and peace. At last their trials will be over.

But that's not what Moses tells them, is it? Instead he warns them of *new* trials ahead: the dangers of pride, and temptations of willfulness, and amnesia about the source of their power ... all the landmines that their new prosperity will bring. "Take care," Moses warns them,

"Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors."

What Moses warned of, many of us learn the hard way: just when we think we're secure, we find ourselves up to our necks in danger of another kind. We start to believe in our own PR; we forget the Lord who has blessed us with everything; we impress ourselves with our own self-righteousness; we disregard the warning-signs of corruption; and we reject those who criticize our willful self-absorption.

And this is exactly what happened in ancient Judah, according to our gospel lesson today. Jesus' lament over Jerusalem is the poignant indictment that Moses'

worst fears have come true. Jerusalem, the city that housed the Ten Commandments, cradled in the Ark of the Covenant in the center of the Temple ... Jerusalem, established by King David as a testament to the Lord's faithfulness ... Jerusalem has forgotten God and attacks God's prophets. The Pharisees, the keepers of the law of God ... the Pharisees have ignored God's desires while they puff themselves up with self-congratulations for their piety. And King Herod, the political leader who should protect his people ... Herod has become a voracious fox in the henhouse, destroying his own people in his insatiable lust for riches and power.

And lest we shake our heads in disgust at past generations, we would do well to pick up the mirror and look to see signs of ourselves in this story. For the Scriptures were written not so much to indict the past as to teach and to warn *ongoing* generations of believers. I suspect that we will find our experience of strength and power not so different from their own.

Is it not still the case that, when we are strong, it is easy to presume our right to be insiders? Like the city of Jerusalem, once we're the "chosen" ones, we assume we'll always be the chosen ones. No Empire in history has ever predicted its own demise. No ruling class has seen itself being replaced by another. No religious group foresees declining faithfulness. No wealthy family really anticipates losing its fortune. But Empires rise and fall, and ruling classes come and go, and religious bodies wax and wane over the decades, and wealth is made and lost, even within a generation. Insiders can always be replaced. "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see ... yourselves thrown out," Jesus tells us, but others "shall come from east and west and north and south" to replace you in the kingdom of God, and in the human realms for that matter. Being in a position of power tempts us to presume our place ... but we are all, each one of us, replaceable.

And is it not still the case that, when we are religious, it is easy to presume our place as righteous ones? Like the Pharisees, if we're church-going, tithe-giving, sincerely committed leaders in our places of worship, don't we deserve to think of ourselves as, well, worthy? The problem, of course, is that we're never altogether worthy, are we; and being the fragile creatures of flesh that we are, it is outrageously easy to start confusing *looking* righteous with genuinely *being* righteous. The fallen evangelical leader Ted Haggard comes to mind: not charlatan, at all -- I do not doubt his sincere desire to serve the Lord. But power, and

popularity, and success can be enormously seductive, and they can easily become our gods, even when we do not know it. I'm reminded of a devastating story Tony Hendra tells in his tribute to his spiritual mentor, Father Joe. Hendra, a founding editor of *National Lampoon*, and friend of Monty Python stars John Cleese and Graham Chapman, goes to Father Joe whenever he has lost his way. In one encounter, Father Joe asks him when he's happiest; he admits to Father Joe that he's happy when he's writing humor. But he also worries about what he sees happen to funny people: "You'd think that constantly making people laugh, being around laughter all the time, would have a very positive effect on a person, right? But quite the opposite seems to be the case." Hendra recalled a time, years before, when he'd appeared on the famous Jerry Lewis telethon: "I was waiting to go on," he said,

"standing beside Jerry off camera. It was twenty-odd hours into the show and mine host was well into his *n*th bottle of the good stuff. One of 'Jerry's Kids' was on camera, a severely disabled young man who was desperately trying to pick out a solo on his guitar. The noise was excruciating. Jerry had turned to the floor manager and snarled: 'Get that [expletive] cripple offstage!'"¹

Success, even religious success, even moral success, can make monsters of us – self-righteous hypocrites who forget that we can never, ever save ourselves. Which leads us to our final point.

Is it not the case, that in the end, power distorts our sense of human vulnerability? The image Jesus paints for us is one of a fox lurking at the door of the henhouse ... and we don't even know that we're in danger. Like those who once put their trust in Herod, we cozy up to human power as if it will protect us, and only then discover that power will eat us alive. I suspect that Anna Nicole Smith really thought celebrity would bring her happiness; from this angle it looks like fame mostly brought her parasitic "friends." Politicians from both sides of the aisle nearly have to sell their souls for campaign contributions; and once in power all their special interests come expecting their repayment. And look for a moment at the use of our language of money: we talk about what someone's "worth" as if our financial assets really determine our value; we use words like "shelter" and "security" and "foundation" as if wealth can ever really protect us. It is an insidious myth, and we willingly buy into it. But wealth doesn't protect us, does it? It doesn't shelter us from heartbreak ... it doesn't give us meaning ... it doesn't protect us from illness and death. It's temporary, ephemeral ... as fleeting as dust in the wind. This pile of shredded paper on the table below the pulpit? It comes

from the basement of the Federal Reserve; it is worn money, taken out of circulation and shredded into smithereens. This little pile? It was roughly worth \$10,000 once. And as long as we're turning to human power and money for protection, we are willfully turning away from the true source of our shelter: the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus longed to gather the children of Jerusalem under his wings, but they were not willing.² Jesus longs to gather us still, to protect us from the dangers that lurk outside us and within. I can't help but think of an image from Yosemite some years ago, when after a huge blaze, the firefighters went in and found the charred remains of a mother bird, still standing upright on the ground. Under her wings, they were astonished to find a little brood of chicks; her little tiny baby birds still lived.³ Beloved in Christ, this is exactly what our Savior yearns to do for us ... to shelter us under the loving span of his everlasting arms ... to shelter us under his wings, stretched wide on the cross, wide enough to cover us all. Amen.

¹Tony Hendra, *Father Joe* (NY: Random House, 2004), p. 196.

² Leanne Pearce, Pastor, Montevallo Presbyterian Church, Montevallo, Alabama, in her paper for the 2007 Moveable Feast preaching consortium.

³ Reported by Gail Ricuitti, Professor of Homiletics, Colgate-Rochester Divinity School, at the 2001 Moveable Feast.