

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 19, 2015. Bill Skubi

House of Cedar

True to form it wasn't until after I volunteered that I realized I had no idea how to write a sermon. When I prayed for guidance and inspiration, God asked me what sermon has most inspired me this past year. I remembered it was the sermon given by Carla Robinson in the spring. So I went to our web page to look up Carla's sermon and found there every sermon delivered from this pulpit in the past year faithfully reproduced except April 19, the day Carla preached. So, again I cried out in prayer for help. And God directed me to Carla's blog, where on April 17 she posted under the heading, Carla goes to Whidbey Island: "The sermon is taking shape. I like the four pillars on which this sermon rests: The risen Christ brings his followers a gift of peace, an invitation to come closer, a glimpse of the divine plan and a proclamation of identity. Preaching is an incarnational act for me; it is about making these ancient texts present for people. It is about embodying these stories so that the people of God encounter the risen Christ in the Word and are built up in faith."

Those are pretty clear marching orders. I'm new at this so I'm going to tell you the four pillars of my homily up front.

- Pillar number one: god is way better at being present where we are than we are at putting god in a box.
- Pillar number two: The point at which we think we have arrived safe and secure is probably only the beginning of our journey with god.
- Pillar number three: to be a person of faith is to have a powerful story and god's power within each of us is made manifest in the telling of that story.
- Pillar number four: god uses simple things like rhymes and songs as the portable Holy Ark out of which can be manifest the power of god's Holy Spirit in our lives.

Let's start with the last pillar first - I am going to anchor what I have to say in a nursery rhyme and a folk song. You all know the rhyme, it goes like this: Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the door and see all the people

Our reading today is about King David who has just gotten a load of Cedar Logs and a building crew from Hiram king of Tyre. Hiram builds David a house of cedar and apparently has some logs left over. So feeling like he has got it all together, David tells his advisor Nathan he is going to build God a House of Cedar, too.

It might be good to review David's CV at this point, shepherd boy makes good. Best friends with the bosses' son, takes the bosses' job and marries the bosses' daughter in what might be called the ultimate hostile takeover. At barely 30 David is rich, David is king, nobody says no to David, nobody except God.

So here I would like to ask your indulgence, and ALA Carla, let me literally inhabit this story about David's house of cedar and his proposed Church of Cedar.

In the year 1965 I was sixteen years old, I lived in the world of wonder that is typical of that stage of life, but MY world seemed especially blessed. A congenital heart defect, destined to shorten my years had just been repaired by one of the leading heart surgeons of the age, I had a brand new Washington state driver's license that made me king of the road, and had been elected class president for the following year. That summer my family completed work on a small but comfortable Cedar Home on nearby

Sunlight Beach. I attended local teen dances at the Bayview Hall Saturday nights and Sunday mornings I attended services at a little cedar A-frame Episcopal church in the Woods. In a couple of years I would be off to college. My world was perfect and secure. I had no doubts that God had made it that way. So there you have it. I was healed; I was richer than David at that point having both a House of Cedar and a Church of Cedar. If there was a single cloud my horizon it was the assassination of President Kennedy of two years earlier, but to my 16 year-old mind that was already ancient history.

Four years later, I was standing outside a church in a different part of the country, arm in arm with other protesters. We are facing off a police cordon that is surrounding the church. The police are there to arrest two draft resisters seeking sanctuary inside the church. The police have guns, and we are standing fast and singing songs. This is the last time I will participate in any church event for the next 8 years. I have friends who have been killed in a senseless war. There was rioting in the streets of Chicago and Watts. Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr have been gunned down the year before. I have lost my faith in both my country and my God.

Now you might expect that the following 8 years were awful dark days for me, most of them spent in self-imposed exile outside this country, alone in the world without my god and the fellowship of Christian believers, but it was quite the contrary.

Like King David in our reading, I was firebrand in my twenties, and the years 1967 to 1978 were excellent years to be a firebrand in your twenties. I burned my candle from every end imaginable. I made movies, studied philosophy and politics, wrote articles and poetry, like David, I danced like a madman and listened to music, because Brown, London, Oxford and Berlin were a moveable feast of music and youth revolution at the time. Hardly ever did I cross paths with people of faith, the only faith I knew was for that welling tide of youth that refused to trust anyone over 30.

I will put it simply, I had no time for god, but that did not prevent God in the person of Jesus coming after me beginning around late summer of 1974. It bugged me and didn't pay all that much attention at first. But, nevertheless, Jesus shoe horned his way into my life, a life in which I had made no room for Jesus. Jesus was like an embarrassing childhood friend who moves into your first apartment and makes you and all of your friends feel uncomfortable and weird. It wasn't that I gave up my apostate ways overnight, I didn't. I could then, and still can, come up with a much better rational argument for why god could not exist than for the existence of god, but the experience of God's love will trump human reason every time. Oh Jesus, I would plead, please to not come out of the closet and embarrass me at dinner with friends. To this day I am not beyond expounding on what god can and cannot do, even after a lifetime of experience that shows god's power to be without limit.

The first inkling of this power was in the spring of 1975. My brother's fiancé, a newly minted MD had been serving on a mission to help young children, mostly orphans, in DaNang, Vietnam. She was in DaNang right up to the time the North Vietnamese Army overran the place, and just managed to get on one of the last planes to leave. Not knowing much of what happened there I remember getting word that she would be visiting me in Berlin before returning to the states. The person who showed up on my doorstep was hardly recognizable as the lively young woman I had met once or twice before. She was shattered, the experience of leaving her young patients behind and forsaken had left her a completely broken person. For the next ten days I did the cooking and showed Jane around Berlin, but Jesus came out of the box I'd hid him in and he did the healing. When she boarded the plane bound for home renewed in spirit, there wasn't much I could do but say wow. I didn't have any bible where I lived, or Christian friends, I didn't have any box that could contain the miracle I had just witnessed, but I did have

a favorite record album, SweetHeart of the Rodeo by the Byrds, that had been a pretty constant soundtrack to my peregrinations from 1969 to 1974 and on that Album was this song:

I'm a pilgrim and a stranger, just traveling through this wearisome land, I've got a home in that yonder city, and it's not, not made by hand. I'm going down to the river of Jordan, just to bathe my weary soul, if I could just touch the hem of his Garment, then I know he'd make me whole.

King David never did make a church of Cedar for god in Jerusalem where he ruled for 40 years. Of those 40 years we read that David was not always where God wanted him to be, but God was always with David. This is how it is in our lives, too, we set out to be rulers over our world, and discover we cannot even rule over ourselves without Gods help. As the years roll on it is not so important to remember what we think we may have accomplished on our own, but vitally important to remember and retell what God has done in our lives. This is the light we, Episcopalians especially, tend to carry around under our bushel baskets. Why is witness to our faith so darned hard for us?

Last week in her homily our beloved sister MK gave us the perfect allegory of an Episcopalian, as someone who would rather stay lost in the desert with nothing to drink but six tiny beers than be witnessed to, or witness to a faith in Christ. Maybe because in worship we surrounded ourselves with candles and vestments and liturgy and cathedrals, grand things that make our own experiences with the divine seem humble, but that is good, God is into humble.

Our individual witness may not shine with all the glory of the transfigured Christ, but it can be touched and it can touch others, and sometimes it is the only thing that can. Our Christian witness is the fringe, of his garment, worn and ragged and maybe dragged through the dust of our pilgrim's path, still it is true today as it was on the shores of Galilee, that "all those who but touched the hem of his garment were made whole."

So, my brothers and sisters, speak freely to one to another about the living Christ in your life, and I will rewrite the rhyme and close:

It's not about the church building'

It's not about the steeple

It is all about the open door

And the living witness of God's people.

And the preacher said, Can I get a witness?