

Lent 3
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

March 23, 2014
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The Center of the World

I want to take you on a journey in your mind. Imagine if you will, a small round house made of sticks, mud and adobe bricks. It is cold outside, the wind whips over the endless Siberian grassland with nothing to stop it. Huddled inside are a number of people. The center of attention is focused on two people. One is a small boy, who looks to be about eight. He lays on a wool mat on the floor, obviously wracked with a raging fever. The other one is a woman dressed in long flowing black robes. Feathers ruffle around her head and neck, beads adorn her outfit. She carries a small hand-drum and stick and she is dancing and chanting around the center pole of the round hut. The pole is planted firmly in the compacted earth of the hut's floor, and extends through a hole in the center of the roof.

Other people line the walls, two, a man and a woman, are obviously the child's parents. They look worried for their child, but confident in the ministrations of the woman. The woman's dancing gets more and more frenzied. Suddenly, with a wail, she collapses on the floor, hands grasping the base of the pole. No one moves, everyone seems to nod approvingly, watching expectantly. After a time during which her body twitches and her eyelids flutter she opens her eyes. She struggles to her feet, and someone hurriedly brings her a stool to sit on. She speaks, and an interpreter lets you in on what she is saying. "I have traveled up the pole," she says, "and down. I have seen the realm of the spirits and the land of the dead. I have seen the source of this boy's illness." She delivers her diagnosis and prescription for the cure.

This little story sounds exotic and strange, and my little story is fictitious, to be sure, but it is rooted in anthropological reality. The pole is the vehicle by which the shaman travels to the land of the spirits, it is the means by which truth is deduced, it is the unifying axis of the world, around which everything revolves. By means of it all the realms of existence are held together, and are accessible to the one who knows the secrets of it. Anthropologists call it the "Axis Mundi," the center of the world. It is more than just a vertical rod of some sort, stuck in the ground, it is the icon and symbol of the central idea that holds the whole world-view of a people together, the Rosetta stone of the culture. Get this, and you got the essence of it all.

The Church has an Axis Mundi as well—and you've guessed it. The fact that I'm doing a series of sermons on the Cross should have given it away. The Cross is for the Church the center of the world, the icon of the central explaining idea that makes it all make

sense. Get the meaning of the Cross and you get the meaning of what it means to be a Christian.

What is the story of the Cross? In this morning's Gospel lesson Jesus speaks with a woman of Samaria. There are some problems with Jesus' behavior here. First, he is a Jew, and Jews looked down on Samaritans in the most awful way. Jews told "Samaritan jokes"—in church. Second, he was a man and she was a woman. For a Jewish man to speak with a woman in public she'd better be his wife, or his mother, or rumors would fly thick and fast! So what is Jesus doing? You see from the story that Jesus makes no division between Jew and Samaritan, or between man and woman. Jesus has come to love ALL of us back into relationship with God. That is the story of the Cross.

God creates us for love, in love and by love to be in loving relationship with himself, one another and the created order. Our sinfulness, our willfulness, our self-absorption and pride has built a wall of separation between ourselves and the ground of our own being. Jesus, being fully God and fully human, becomes the bridge, the unifying link between heaven and earth. On the Cross Jesus takes our sin—that is, he takes upon himself the alienation, and breaches the wall, reaching through to us in our brokenness. In rising to life again Jesus opens the path to full humanity for all of us. Now ALL people are welcome into fellowship with God, with one another and with the created order.

The Cross is the symbol for the story of the redeeming work of Jesus. Dying and rising are the core of the Christian faith. We, too, die and rise again. The short, code version is this: We die to the ego-driven alienation, and we rise to the life of love. The long version goes more like this: The Cross is a symbol for surrender. It is a recognition that our superficial lives are usually driven by our egos. The ego is essentially self-centered. It is all about taking care of one's self. The ego therefore has this irrational need to be in control, and for the most part, our egos are successful at taking over and running things in our lives. But deep within is another part of us. It is spirit, drawing its inspiration and life directly from God's Holy Spirit. It knows how to love as God loves. The surrender of the Cross means learning to surrender the rule of ego, in order to learn to live as God lives, in love. Your own experience tells you just as mine does, that surrender feels like a death, but the final result is a resurrection. The Cross is the symbol of the process by which we are transformed.

So what does that mean for us today? First, it means that our brokenness is not a deal-breaker with God. When you and your spouse cannot talk about what divides you there is a real problem, but when you know that what divides you is not a deal-breaker, then there is hope of working something out. Our sin is not a deal-breaker with God. If it wasn't for the woman at the well it isn't for you. It didn't matter to Jesus that she was a

Samaritan and a woman, and that she had had a troubled married life. She got living water along with everyone else. It doesn't matter to Jesus what you may have done, might do, will do or can't do.

Secondly, we have a path of transformation laid out in front of us. The first step is surrender. On the Cross Jesus surrendered. He surrendered to the will of the Father. He surrendered his own natural human hopes and desires about life. He surrendered his own instincts of self-preservation. What you think is important in this life may very well not be. Jesus said, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Let go of your worries, your concerns and your issues. Jesus told Mary, "One thing is necessary." To get it you have to surrender.

The second step is trust. In today's Old Testament Reading the people of Israel did not trust. They grumbled and complained. They could not see the Promised Land, and so blindly assumed that this was all there was. They did not trust the process. When Jesus hung on the Cross he cried out, "Into your hands I commend my spirit." I am convinced that the death he died was not "special" in any way. He may have known in his head that resurrection was on the other side of this moment, but I can't believe his heart knew it when he prayed, "Lord, take this cup from me." He trusted the process. The process can be trusted. Surrender without fear. Acknowledge the normal butterflies in the stomach. No, you cannot see the end, but know in your heart that there is more to this than you can see.

The third step is to act. When the people of Israel grumbled God told Moses to go do something: Strike the rock. When the woman at the well became convinced that Jesus was the Messiah she also had something to do: She went and told the village about him. Even on the Cross Jesus did what the Cross was all about. Of the Pharisees who had had him crucified he said, "Father, forgive them..." To the penitent thief crucified with him he said, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." Jesus could act, and Jesus acted in harmony with what he was all about. Yes, you surrender, and you trust, and now you trust with your actions. What is it that is in your hand to do that is good and loving and wise? This do, and trust that it moves you forward.

We are a people of the Cross. Jesus said, Take up your cross and follow me. Now we, during Lent, shoulder our cross as well. We do as Jesus did. We surrender, we trust, and we act. As you cross yourself this Lent, let it be a challenge to you. Make the Cross your Axis Mundi, the center of your world.