

# **The Second Sunday of Lent**

## **Dedication of New Building**

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.  
The Community Church of Sebastopol  
February 24, 2013

**Luke 13: 31-35**

Some of you may know the old Hindu fable about a motherless tiger cub that was adopted by goats and brought up by them to speak their language, emulate their ways, eat their food and in general to believe that he was a goat himself. One day a king tiger came along, and when all the goats quickly scattered in fear, the young tiger was left alone to confront him, afraid and yet, somehow not afraid. The king tiger asked him what he meant by this unseemly masquerade, but all the young tiger could do in response was to bleat nervously and continue nibbling on the grass. So the tiger carried him to a pool where he forced him to look at their two reflections side by side and draw his own conclusions.

When this failed, he offered him his first piece of raw meat. At first the young tiger recoiled from the unfamiliar taste of it. But as he ate more and began to feel it warming his blood, the truth gradually became clear to him. Lashing his tail and digging his claws into the ground, the young beast finally raised his head high and the jungle trembled at the sound of his exultant roar.

There are many profound differences among the world's major religions, but they do seem to agree on one general but very basic point: that human beings as they usually exist in this world are not what we were created to be. Frederick Buechner says it like this: "The goat is not really a goat at all. He is really a tiger – except that he does not know that he is, with the result that for the time being, he is, in a sense, really not a tiger. Or, to use other language, we were created in the image of God, but something has gone awry. Like a mirror with a crack down the middle, we give back an image that is badly distorted. The story of Adam and Eve is the story of all of us. Like them, we have lost Paradise, and yet we carry Paradise around inside of us in the form of a longing for, almost a memory of, a blessedness that is no more, or the dream of a blessedness that may someday be again...Or, to return to the language of the fable, if the tiger who thinks he is a goat could really be a goat, then he would not have this problem. But, fortunately or unfortunately, there is still enough of the tiger in us to make us discontented with our goathood. We eat grass, but it never really fills us. We bleat well enough, but deep down there is the suspicion that we were really made for roaring."

"At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." (Interesting, we think of Jesus' many conflicts with Pharisees, and yet here a group of them come to warn him. It would seem that not all the religious leaders were opposed to Jesus) "He said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me...listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work...I must be on my way...' Some of Jesus' supporters seem to think that this would be a good time for him to get out of Dodge, cut your losses and run. The king is after you. But Jesus refuses, calling Herod a fox – not exactly a compliment – and insisting he still had work to do and a path he must follow all the way to Jerusalem. (historical note – this Herod would be Herod Antipas, one of the surviving sons of Herod the Great. It was Antipas who ordered the execution of Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, and clearly, Jesus has no respect for him.) In the face of a royal death threat, Jesus is defiant. We don't see much of a goat in Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, in the words of T.S. Eliot, "In the juvenescence of the year comes Christ, the Tiger." Not the soulful-eyed, sugar sweet, gentle Jesus, meek and mild. But rather this explosion of a man, this explosion of Life into life itself. Last week we sang the old Gospel hymn:

I have decided to follow Jesus – 3 times  
No turning back, no turning back.

Reflecting on that hymn, Jennifer Ginn writes, "When my friends and I sang this song at church camp, we sang serenely, often teary-eyed, seated on the ground with the cross, illumined by candlelight, in front of us. In those emotional moments, I imagined myself standing firm in the Lord. In those moments I was determined to set my face toward him. But my single-mindedness never lasted. I stopped so often along the way of following that I lost my way. Occasional flashbacks to those times and to the words of that song turned my attention to Jesus, but I have moved in fits and starts through adolescence and adulthood

– sometimes toward, and often away from, that singleness of purpose.” Sometimes it is way too easy to turn back.

But Jesus is one who will not turn back. He has that singleness of purpose. He will not be deterred, he will not be intimidated, he will not be talked out of the path he knows he must take. This is something he must do, and he will do it. Ah, the word, “must” – not a particularly popular word in this part of the world. I wonder what your reaction would be if I sent you a letter this week saying that as members and friends of this church, from this moment on you must attend worship every Sunday and you must give ten percent of your income – before taxes – to the church. I suspect I would soon find myself planning an early retirement, at least receiving gentle suggestions that I might seek out a good therapist. We really are not very fond of the word, “must.” We are people who like to keep our options open. We don’t like to box ourselves in with obligations or burdens. We protect our alternatives, keep them alive and well. We are all about self-expression, self-assertion, self-fulfillment. And certainly there is no room for “must” when it comes to religion. Want to keep all those Sunday alternatives on the table. Which is why the Jesus of this text, the Lenten Jesus, can be so challenging for us.

It is so easy to drift along on the surface of life and get along by going along. It is so much easier to adjust to the world, to make its standards my standards, its wisdom my wisdom, its goals and expectations my goal and expectations...to be a contented goat living in a world of goats. But then, just when we think we have made peace with our goathood we look up and there he is. Says Buechner, “We look at him. We glance up from our grazing for a moment and there he stands and suddenly we see what a tiger looks like, what a human being really looks like. And then perhaps we say, ‘Woe is me. This is a man I am not. This is the life I do not live, cannot live.’” We are called to follow, but how can we possibly follow? Perhaps this is why I have heard it said that the way of a Christian is the way of despair. Jesus, the tiger, has set the bar too high. We can’t be him!

“Jesus, some of us have been thinking about having a picnic in the Garden of Gethsemane. We understand it’s nice there. What do you think? Care to join us?” And he says, “I have not come to do as I please. I have come to do the will of him who sent me.” We see in him this terrible quality of a full life that we simply cannot achieve.

But before descending into despair, I am reminded of the words from another spiritual: “There’s plenty good room, plenty good room, plenty good room, in my Father’s kingdom.” Could it be that Jesus sets the bar so high because he sees more in us than we see in ourselves? It just might be that Jesus is making plenty good room, that even now his spirit is among us creating a new community, a new humanity. We are not left on our own, left to shuffle along in our goathood. What he asks when he says, “Follow me,” he also has the power to give – the power to turn goats into tigers, to give life to the half alive. Says Episcopalian Bishop, Michael Curry, “The infinite reach and eternal embrace of God’s reign are at the core of Jesus’ message...As the good news of Jesus is declared and the Holy Spirit of God is poured forth, a new human community emerges from the great diversity and variety of humanity.”

He comes to us, and to those of us who sense within ourselves a nature we have never quite realized, an identity we have never found, a life that we have never quite begun to live, he provides a name. He tells us who we truly are – God’s beloved children, sisters and brothers to one another. He comes and opens before us a new way. He comes, and such is his power that even through the likes of us – we tigers in training – yes, even through us, others may be led to follow too.