

THE SEASON OF MORE OR LESS

A SERMON PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S PARISH OCTOBER 9, 2005

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For context: Texts appointed for Pentecost XXI-A, Proper 23:

First Lesson: Isaiah 25:1-9

O LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt. Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you. For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm, the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled. On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Second Lesson: Philippians 4:4-13

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

The Gospel: Matthew 22:1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' "

Prologue: A Story

Have you ever noticed how many different sorts of people you find on a commercial airline flight? There are those who appear very well to do; and others who look like they hardly had two dimes to put together to buy a ticket. But the one

thing everyone shares in common is they won't get a seat without such an "invitation;" and, while anyone's invited who can afford a ticket, you have to go through extraordinary security measures to get yourself strapped in beside who-knows-who in that tin can thousands of feet up in the sky.

Yesterday I listened to a program on NPR, in which a reporter had interviewed one of the passengers on that Jet Blue flight a couple weeks ago. You know, the one that had departed Burbank for New York, but discovered soon after take-off that the nose landing gear had not retracted. Instead it was twisted ninety degrees, and it was uncertain how the plane could make a safe landing again. For three hours the crippled aircraft circled LAX, to burn off fuel and determine the best course of action before attempting an emergency landing.

Meanwhile there was plenty of time for this potential disaster-in-the-making to make all the network television news channels, with live close-up film footage of the troubled aircraft. Would the plane be able to land safely, or end up a fireball on the tarmac? That was the question on everyone's mind; especially the passengers on board whom -- because it was Jet Blue -- all had the chance to watch their crippled aircraft on the TV screens provided each seated guest.

As we all know now, the plane landed safely, without incident. Still, it was an extraordinary event, which gave one pause, especially those who had the privilege of spending three hours considering their own imminent personal possibilities. So this reporter had interviewed one fellow who related this story of his experience:

He shared how he and his girlfriend had had a major fight, and he'd left on bad terms. Now he was having regrets, and thinking how he'd like to make amends, in the event he never saw her again. So he pulled out his cell phone -- one of those high-techie ones with a built-in video camera -- and turned it on himself. He later admitted he wasn't sure how he expected his recorded last will and testament to survive if he didn't, but that didn't matter at the time.

Looking into the camera's eye he made the unnecessary introduction, "Hi Babe, this is Michael." Then he went on to tell her he was sorry for the things he'd said, asked her forgiveness, told her he loved her, and that she could have all his stuff ...

Then later, after safely on the ground and reflecting on the ordeal, his family had the chance to view the recording and rib him about his magnanimous generosity -- leaving his beloved his '91 Toyota and all his credit card debts! On board that particular Jet Blue flight, it seems Michael was one of the passengers who had more "less," and less "more."

It got me thinking about this season, more or less, and about Paul's words to us this morning,

"... for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, or having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

The Season of More or Less

The nights are cool now, the afternoons mild, but a chill in the morning air, a crispness; and already the leaves are turning and curling with color, to drop and crunch beneath our feet. It feels like autumn, my favorite season.

There's a subtle sense of diminishing return about this season. Each passing day offers up less light as the sun slinks lower in its path across the southern sky; and I have to try to remember to adjust the mechanical time clocks at the church for the outside lighting. In another month people will leave for work in the dark, and return home again at the end of the day with long strings of headlights on the cars along the jammed freeways.

Commuters accept it with resignation, I suppose. For others, there's a creeping sense of "less-ness." But still it's more than what we know will come, when the branches are bare, like so many frozen fingers; and the phrase "dead of winter" feels like it.

These days of diminishing return make me think of folks who once had more, and now have less. Or who once were more – in some ways – than they are now. Either through age, or infirmity, or prosperity; by some degree of measurement and whatever value attached to that. The "less-ness" could be as simple as less hair on my head, or virility, or just plain old endurance in my bones for a hard day's work. For others it might be more a matter of hastened incapacity or loss, when it comes less gradually or all at once. How do you deal with less; when you have more "less," and less "more?"

These days of diminishing return make me think of folks who once had more, and now have less. Or who once were more – in some ways – than they are now. ... How do you deal with less; when you have more "less," and less "more?"

And then, while all this seems to be taking its natural, inevitable course – and, even my waxing philosophically about all this, which almost seems a little self-indulgent -- something big, something catastrophic drops like a hammer; and while it may miss you or me by a mile, it reminds us that there is something bigger at stake; which we sometimes try to deflect by reminding ourselves to keep things in some *relative* perspective one might call the "well-it-could-be-worse" syndrome.

Like a hurricane that washes away someone else's life, or livelihood, and every piece of possession they ever called their own; so that their "less-ness" is total and complete.

Or a violent, ongoing military conflict on the other side of the world that quietly brings home the dead and maimed in twos and threes for years; but more than that, with it also comes a growing sense of *diminishing return*.

Or the earth heaves and shakes, and in a few seconds yesterday morning in the mountainous regions near Islamabad, an estimated 18,000 souls are crushed to death, and other preliminary reports indicate 45,000 wounded. Where yesterday there were entire villages, now there is only rubble.

And, after my favorite season of the year comes another we don't just call winter anymore, but "flu season," with the

growing alarm it's not just for the birds anymore. More or less, it's all a bit overwhelming. And it dampens my enthusiasm for my love of this season.

I wonder if the ancient prophet ruminated about such things, when Isaiah wrote:

"You have made the city a heap of ruins ..."
but "provided a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm," or "when the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm ..." and "the song of the ruthless was stilled."

Then,

"On another mountain, the Lord of hosts will make for all people a rich feast. ... on this mountain the Lord will destroy the shroud that is cast over all peoples. And swallow up death forever, taking away all tears from your faces ..."

I wonder if it was just such a feast Jesus may have had in mind when he told the quirky little gospel story about the manic king who ends up inviting anybody and everybody to such a grand affair, then tosses out the poor slob who comes ill-prepared for the occasion.

I've always believed the point of the story is not about an appropriate dress code, but the *diminished cognizance* of the guest whom the host initially calls "friend." Not just his surprise that he too could be invited; but his failure to grasp the significance of the occasion. The king says to the beggar-guest, "Friend, how did you get in here without being appropriately dressed for the occasion?" That is, didn't he know what the occasion was? "But he was speechless," Matthew says. That's the problem.

It's not just about the fact that everyone is invited and included; but that everyone – from every circumstance of "more or less" – must recognize and realize that the sumptuous banquet is a feast that we would call the banquet of the Lord, and our salvation. And Paul would say we must not only recognize this, but also rejoice in it, lest we find ourselves tossed out to our own ultimate and complete diminishment.

Rejoice in the Lord *always*; again I will say it, rejoice. ... for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, or having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

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This is the season of “more” and “less.” This is a season when I am reminded of folks amongst us who *find more in less*. They find more faith, or hope, or trust, or forgiveness, or reconciliation, or redemptive love; and they do so with less, even with what they might call the deeper blessings that come with the experience of adversity.

Some folks would say – with everything happening all around us – it certainly seems to be a season of diminishing returns.

Yet others – those whom I regard merely as people of faith, and fellow beggars at the table of the Lord – find strength in their diminishment, and something more. Whether they are in a place one might regard as having “less” than “more,” Paul’s well-known secret we have learned and proclaim as gospel, is in recognizing our place at this table and rejoicing in this occasion.

Amen. *jb+j*



A Postlude: In Memorium

And then, while all this seems to be taking its natural, inevitable course ... something big, something catastrophic drops like a hammer; and while it may miss you or me by a mile, it reminds us that there is something bigger at stake; which we sometimes try to deflect by reminding ourselves to keep things in some relative perspective one might call the “well it could be worse” syndrome.

A preacher’s words can sometimes come back to haunt them. Because I have a habit of illustrating my words with so much of my own life which I share with you, a personal note:

Two weeks ago, at the annual Blessing of the Animals, I shared all the dog stories of my life, ending with the one who sat in the sanctuary beside me throughout the entire service; the one who loved *me!*

The day after preaching this sermon about a season of more or less, Annie the dog was struck and killed instantly by a speeding truck in front of our house. Relative to global disasters, one might say it was only a dog; unless, of course, you’re a dog lover.

For Germaine and myself, this is a season of less, and loss; and we are grieving the loss of a remarkable creature which brought such lively joy into our life. *jb*



Chuck DeLeuw’s photo of the preacher and his dog, arriving for worship on St. Francis Day, Oct. 2, 2005