

Sermon: May 3, 2009

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(Two relevant readings are attached at the end of this printed version.)

“Cast Away” and Everyman

I used to be a junior high school English teacher. It was a great experience in the old days before drugs and sex and violence became such a predominant theme in their culture. The children loved stories—villains and heroes, danger and conquest, challenge and victory.

At 13 and 14 years old, they often considered a hero to be someone born with outstanding ability, courage, and bravery. They were too young to realize they were heroes in the making. I know. I was watching them forge their strength and character through their experiences. Their bravery and courage were developed in spite of their fears and human failings.

They loved the stories of Michael slaying the dragon, Dorothy traveling with her companion to Oz, Galahad questing for the Holy Grail. They would have loved “Cast Away.”

The film “Cast Away”, as the title suggests, is the story of a man being unexpectedly *cast away* on a remote island and his subsequent struggle to survive. It is an intricate depiction of what happens when everyday life is abruptly changed by outside circumstance.

In the movie, the protagonist Chuck Nolan, as portrayed by Tom Hanks, is a bright but manic young manager employed by Federal Express. He judges the success of his business by the clock, by how efficiently packages can be delivered from one place to another. “We live and die by time,” he tells his employees. To Nolan, time and speed are everything; minutes and seconds matter. His world is mostly work and his goal is building a successful business.

As part of his job, he travels to various Fed Ex locations around the world to teach package handlers how to think, as he does, by the clock. His enthusiasm for speed and efficiency is obsessive, and his reality, as we observe it, is focused on minutia. The complementary side of his life is his relationship to his fiancée Kelly Frears, played by the talented Helen Hunt. Their conversations and body language reflect how deep an affection they have for each other, and what an overwhelming sense of loss they experience when his work requires that they part. Ironically, it is during the Christmas holiday when lovers most want to feel their deep connection, that Nolan boards a doomed aircraft.

Something on board the plane explodes and the aircraft crashes into the South Pacific. Nolan is its only survivor. Amid the panic and terror of the crash, he manages to climb into an inflated life raft and drifts during the next few days to a small, uninhabited island. He awakes on the beach surrounded by a landscape that is not only exotic and beautiful, but also desolate and frightening.

As we watch Nolan adjust to his extraordinary circumstance, we subtly begin to identify with him at some very deep level. The challenge before him is to survive, make it on his own, and hopefully find his way home.

As Nolan awakens to his island home, his instinct is to call out. “Hello-o-o-o. Anybody?” He shouts in hopes that another human being will respond to him. No one does.

Over the next several days he draws the word “HELP” in the sand, first with his foot, and when that washes away with the tide, with logs and branches he finds in the tropical forest. Still, no one hears his calls or sees his distress messages. No one responds to his pleas.

During his first few days on the island, Nolan explores his immediate surroundings and takes an inventory of what is available. He determines that he has been marooned without food or water or shoes; however, he does possess his battered life raft, a makeshift paddle he found in the water following the plane crash, the tattered clothes on his back, a useless water-soaked pager, and one treasured memento, the gold pocket watch given to him by Kelly shortly before his departure. Ironic that his most treasured possession on the island is a time piece.

Over the course of days, he discovers a cave which becomes a home to him, providing a retreat from the strong winds and blistering, unforgiving sun. He acquires additional resources, too, when several Fed Ex packages from the plane crash eventually wash ashore: a set of video tapes, a volleyball manufactured by the Wilson Sporting Goods Company, a pair of white ice skates, and a taffeta evening dress complete with a net underskirt. These items he ingeniously uses to enhance his life on the island and his plan to escape.

Tom Hanks is an extraordinary actor, and his performance as Chuck Nolan is as incredible as any he has given. As fascinated observers watching the screen, we are drawn more and more into his world. His disappointments become ours, as do his successes. We sympathize with him, cheer him on, and throughout the film, we can identify with his predicament. Who among us has not been on that metaphoric island, that remote, unfamiliar place, knowing instinctively that the world as we once knew it carries on somewhere outside our current experience.

In a more literal sense, too, we begin to wonder how we might fair in the same situation. Is survival in a solitary unfamiliar place even possible? Would we have the where-with-all to survive day after day without ever once hearing our own name spoken? What would it be like to relinquish a dream, and learn a new way of being in a strange land that is not of our choosing?

If I were still teaching those young thirteen and fourteen year olds, I would have told them: The “Cast Away” story has an Everyman theme. It relates a universal experience. By this time in our lives, most of us—at one time or another—have found ourselves alone—on an island of sorts—challenged to survive on our own in unfamiliar surroundings where our resources are minimal and rescue seems doubtful. We’re on that island of grief, having lost someone we dearly loved....or we’re on the island of the unemployed in a difficult economy.....or we’re on the solitary island of a serious illness or we’re on that island of a treasured dream gone terribly wrong.

Some of us have perhaps experienced this aloneness in the midst of a busy life with people all around us. We find ourselves out of step, out of sorts, maybe even out of energy to live life the way we’ve been living it for so long. We find ourselves there because some Power or Circumstance greater than ourselves has presented us with an unexpected reality we had not planned for. As Nolan says, “I learned I had power over nothing.”

The plane has landed, Emily Kingsley says in our first reading, but somewhere other than where we were headed.

“Welcome to Holland!” Life informs us, . . . when all along our destination had been Italy. Our task, it appears, is to relinquish life as we know it, and take up a new way of being.

One of the most poignant moments in Nolan's lonely existence is—after all his hard work and after all he has learned and after all he has survived—he begins to give up hope. It is a moment when we recognize that he is in the depths of despair and we watch him contemplate taking his own life. I don't know about your experience, but I'll admit I've walked with that kind of despair a time or two in my life. The feeling was profound, overwhelming, and extremely personal; I could share it with no one. I've learned it's not an uncommon reaction to the depths of human experience.

But we watch him walk through the despair, wondering what that aloneness is like for him.....the thought, perhaps, that he would never again see a human being, that he would never be loved, that life without a shared experience is not worth living. The irony is that although everything he knows has been stripped from him, and life, to him, does not seem worth living, his attempt to take his own life fails. He throws up his arms in frustration and says, "I can't even kill myself!"

It is a remarkable thing to inwardly experience the workings of the human spirit. It offers HOPE when we think we have all but given up, MEMORY when we believe we have been at once disconnected from the universe, and FAITH when all else seems to have failed us. So it is with Chuck Nolan. So it is with us. He has HOPE that he will be rescued, MEMORY through which he is able to sustain meaning, and FAITH that a way home will be found.

One of his most imaginative resources is "Wilson", the volleyball he so aptly personifies and whom we begin to befriend in somewhat the same way he befriends Nolan. In talking with Wilson, Nolan is able to clarify his thoughts, develop companionship, and embrace a kind of intimacy that is otherwise missing on the lonely island. With Wilson, Nolan can outwardly express himself—he can make conscious his thoughts and feelings. With Wilson around he can laugh, argue, imagine, hope, plan, express anger.

During Nolan's journey home, when Wilson falls from the raft and floats away, we feel the abandonment every bit as much as Nolan does. Without the friend who has been there to see him through, how will he make it? Wilson, after all, has been his connection to HOPE and kept him from going quietly insane in the dark and in the loneliness.

Despite the times of excruciating despair, Nolan displays a kind of primal Faith in possibility. The life raft he so ingeniously designs and builds is testimony to that. It represents his faith that, with the help of the forces of wind and wave, he will successfully escape his solitary island life. Crudely constructed and perilously held together with bits and pieces of whatever he can find or construct, Nolan trusts that he has built something that will work in conjunction with the powers of the universe to sail him home. He knows the Power outside himself is strong; all he needs to do is align himself with that power in order to be set free. His faith is unrelenting in his determination to survive.

And what sustains him throughout his four-and-a-half year island ordeal, is Memory, Kelly's picture inside the pocket watch he so deeply treasures. In looking at her face every morning and evening he relives the sweetness present in his life before: before loneliness and insecurity, before fear and despair. His memory of her calms him and renews his spirit. Through her he knows he is loved. Because of her, life is worth fighting for.

Nolan's heroic journey home is nothing short of miraculous. The scenes of his journey home on the raft are memorable. But, as we would expect, the reality he finds upon his return is different from the one he left four and a half years earlier. It has changed and he has changed.

The conveniences of life he no longer takes for granted. He marvels at the availability of food, matches that instantly make fire, ice cubes that can cool a beverage, and a comfortable bed composed of mattress and pillow.

His priorities, too, have undergone considerable transformation; much of the minutia that earlier filled his days no longer has relevance for him. No longer is his primary focus on work; rather he directs his time and attention to finding Kelly, the individual whose love sustained him throughout his ordeal.

. His time “alone” has left its indelible mark.

The Nolan who returns home to Memphis is a different person from the one who boarded the plane. The experiences with which Life has marked him have deepened his sense of Being and his sense of Possibility. He has learned—like Everyman—that by its very nature, Life demands that we learn how to adapt and find meaning in the seeming randomness of the universe, the minor scrapes and major traumas of day-to-day life. He learns that nothing—absolutely NOTHING—is sure. Not the direction, not the signposts, not our companions, not our path. Nothing is sure.

Life with a capital “L” does not ask our plans or our permission about anything before presenting us with a side trip to Holland. It simply takes us there and then suggests we buy guidebooks and find our Wilson. It asks us to learn a new language and new customs even as we construct our life raft for the return trip. On a very deep level, it asks us to be heroic.

In addition, it asks “What can you learn about yourself here?” and “How will living here change you?”

In subtle and not so subtle ways, it asks us to step into the hero’s journey with all of its uncertainty and unexpected side trips. It asks us to hunker down, embrace the changes that Life offers us, and, as Robert Fulghum says, take our changes with us wherever we go.

Next time Life redirects our steps, let us be reminded that Holland has windmills, Holland has tulips, Holland even has Rembrandts.

Amen. Blessed be.

First Reading

The first READING IS BY Emily Pearl Kingsley. It is taken from the book entitled “The Courage to Laugh” by the best-selling author Allen Klein.

“I am often asked to describe the experience of raising a child with a disability. It’s like this.....

When you’re going to have a baby, it’s like planning a fabulous vacation trip to Italy. After months of anticipation, the big day finally arrives. The plane lands and the flight attendant announces, “Welcome to Holland.”

“Holland!” you say, “What do you mean Holland? I signed up for Italy. I’m supposed to be in Italy. All my life I’ve dreamed of going to Italy.”

But there's been a change in the flight plan. The plane has landed in Holland and you must stay. The important thing is that they haven't taken you to some horrible, disgusting place.

It's just a different place. So, you must go out and buy new guidebooks. You must learn a whole new language. And you will meet a whole new group of people you would never have met.

It's just a different place. It's slower-paced than Italy. But after you've been there for a while and you catch your breath, you look around and you begin to notice that Holland has windmills, Holland has tulips, and Holland even has Rembrandts.

But everyone you know is busy coming and going from Italy, and they're all bragging about what a wonderful time they had there. And for the rest of your life, you will say, "Yes, that's where I was supposed to go. That's what I had planned." And the pain and disappointment will never go away, because the loss of that dream is a very significant loss.

But if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn't get to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very unique, and the very lovely things about Holland.

WE HAVE BEEN GREATLY BLESSED. LET US GIVE GENEROUSLY THAT OTHERS MIGHT BE BLESSED BY THE WORK OF THIS COMMUNITY.

THE MORNING OFFERING WILL NOW BE GIVEN AND RECEIVED.

Second Reading

The second reading is by Unitarian Universalist minister Robert Fulghum. It is excerpts from his bestseller: "From Beginning to End".

One Friday evening, (returning from the library in a reflective mood), I stopped off at the Albertson's grocery store on my way home. Watermelon on my mind. Big watermelon. Take it home and eat the whole thing out in the yard. There is something else I was supposed to get, but could not recall, so I started walking up and down the aisles of the grocery store in much the same spirit as I had stalked the library shelves.

I picked up the first object in front of me—a can of tuna fish—and thought about its contents, the can itself, and the label, and all the incredible learning and working and the machinery and the processes and the fishing boats and fishermen and factory ships and trains and trucks that brought it here from so far away.

Then there's the line of thought away from here in the direction yet to come—where would it all go?—where would it end up?—the can, the label, the fish, and the person who ate the fish, and on and on and on?

This is not how I usually spend my time in a grocery store. For a moment the rational monitor in my mind was warning: Uh-oh, you are losing your marbles.

Walking up the aisle, my eye was caught by the bold black-and-white headlines of an advertising placard, which said: WELL, YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONE!—and in smaller print it had something to say about the quest for a decent canned spaghetti sauce.

The headline fit my existential state. Yes, I thought to myself, I'm not the only one. Not the only one who ever got a flash of the big picture. Not the only one who understands how utterly amazing it all is. There is lots of testimony in those books up there in the library. This is exactly what all those books are about.

Holding on to my sanity and the watermelon and the can of tuna fish with equal care, I stopped at the checkout counter and paid with a twenty-dollar bill. I noticed a handwritten note on the little cup where coins appear at the end of a transaction.

The note said: "Please accept your change—take it with you." Here was yet another unexpected message. Yes, I thought to myself, I accept my change—and the changes yet to come. And I will take my change with me, wherever I go.

Turning to leave, I was confronted with still another sign. The automatic doors were broken. The sign said: PLEASE NOTE—THE ONLY WAY *OUT* IS *IN*.

As always, it is how one perceives the door that determines the coming and going. There are two journeys one must make to have balance—*OUT* there and *IN* here. One depends upon the other.

Every exit is an entrance. The door swings both ways. The only way out is always in. To move on in the world as it is, one must turn to resources within.