

**Sermon Preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
on Sunday February 10th 2008 by the Reverend Alan Neale**

“What is the What”

Moving Through Grief – Denial

Since Lent 2005 the Church of the Holy Trinity has participated in the program “One Book, One Philadelphia”. The program was started in 2002 and is a joint project of the Mayor’s Office and the Free Library of Philadelphia. The mission of the program, which is entering its sixth year, is to promote reading, literacy, library usage, and community-building throughout the Greater Philadelphia region.

Since 2005 sermons in Lent have found inspiration in two texts – Holy Scripture as always but also the text chosen by the One Book, One Philadelphia project.

We engage in this program to show to give us opportunity to think biblically and theologically about what is in the minds of those in the wider community of Philadelphia; we engage in this program to build as many bridges as possible so that the presence and immediacy of God may be conveyed to as many as possible.

In 2005 we “visited” Vietnam (“The Things They Carried” by Tim O’Brien); in 2006 Philadelphia (“Franklin” by James Srodes) and, last year, Cuba (“Waiting for Snow in Havana” by Carlos Eire).

This year Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya and Atlanta for the text this year is “What is the What” by Dave Eggers.

The book tells the harrowing story of a Sudanese refugee Valentino Achak Deng, one of the “Lost Boys” of southern Sudan – one tens of thousands of children who fled the Sudanese civil war of the 1980s. After Arab militias attacked their villages, they walked hundreds of miles on a terrifying journey toward safety. Many children died from starvation, disease and additional attacks. Those who survived made it to refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya. One of these children was Deng. When his village was burned, he could not find his parents. He was about six years old when he began the trek to Kenya! Deng is now 25 and is a student at Allegheny College in Pennsylvania.

Deng suffers the profound loss of family, homeland, security, dreams and almost himself. This Lent we will accompany Deng as he moves through his several experiences of bereavement, as he moves through stages of grief and loss – this week, Denial.

There is little doubt that the horrors of Deng’s experience moved him often to a place of denial, a defense mechanism in which a person is faced with a fact that is too painful to accept and rejects it instead, insisting that it is not true despite what may be overwhelming evidence. Who can fault a six or seven year old for finding any means to deal with such atrocious realities. At one point in the book Deng watches as two of his companions are eaten by a lion at night... no one does anything except to try not to hear the boy being eaten – now that’s denial!

But as Deng grows older he becomes concerned to tell his story so that it may not be conveniently denied, avoided or even rationalized away! He says, “Written words are rare in small villages like mine, it is my right and obligation to send my stories into the world even if silently, even if utterly powerless” and again “The civil war became, to the world at large, too confusing to decipher, a mess of tribal conflicts with no clear heroes and villains”. At the end of the book Deng addresses the reader directly, “All the while I will know that you are there. How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist”. Deng... almost as impossible but the power of denial is strong, very strong indeed!

Denial! You surely know that there are some who deny the historicity of the Holocaust! In December 2006 the President of Iran organized and hosted a conference in Tehran. Its purpose? To examine whether the Holocaust took place, it was “an opportunity to discuss the World War II genocide in an atmosphere free of Western taboos”. Such is the persuasive power, seductive strength of denial.

Perhaps it was denial, in part, that made the reading of What is the What so difficult for me?! What I considered a fault in literary style was perhaps more concerned with my discomfort at such unpalatable and challenging reality?!

It has been said, “Man can go a day without food, without water, without sex... but he cannot go one day without rationalization”... with denial.

Friends, it’s even there on endless insurance claims... “I started to slow down but the traffic was more stationary that I thought”... “Coming home I drove into the wrong house and collided with a tree I don’t have” and “the telephone pole was approaching. I was attempting to swerve out of the way when I struck the front end”. Denial is everywhere and can be most convenient!

As we begin our Lenten journey, the Scriptures urge us to be done with denial, the refusal to accept unpleasant reality about ourselves, especially about those aspects of ourselves most likely known to us and to no-one else!

Adam, Eve will not accept that there are limitations to their knowledge, to their freedom (oh I find it so frustrating when I hear people say “we have free-will” really? But that’s for another sermon, another time). They clearly deny that it is wise, essential to listen to the One who has made them. And suddenly they find themselves caught up in, trapped by, shaped by denial. We see the dance of denial as it passes from Adam to Eve and to the snake! And in Genesis 3, verse seven they deny even their humanity as they sew fig leaves together... who would have thought that the mythic pioneers of our humanity would in this cosmic setting suddenly find the need... to become seamsters and seamstresses... denial often leads its practitioners into unexpected paths!

And St. Paul, of course, (Romans 5) almost has it as his mission to make us face reality and avoid denial... sin pervasively and perniciously affects us all... it really is part of our common humanity. It is that which leads us from God and leads to destruction and harm... so that before ever we physically die we may die a thousand spiritual and emotional deaths! I mentioned on Ash Wednesday that a friend told me recently, “Well, we can all find our beginnings in Adam and Eve... and they pulled the plug on us a long, long time ago”.

Listen to what happened to the Psalmist as he tried to deny reality (Psalm 32)... “While I held my tongue, my bones withered away, because of my groaning all day long... my moisture was dried up as in the heat of summer... then I acknowledged my sin to you” and at that point the Psalmist knew safety, liberation and happiness!

Though it seems to me that Jesus was often devilishly tempted to practice denial... yet he never did for he knew the power of these words “it is written” (power, as it happened, that Valentino Deng also believed in!). Friends, when faced with denial of unpleasant, painful truths there is always the greater truths of what God has written... it is written that He will feed and satisfy us, it is written that he will protect us and keep us safe, and it is written that He will lead us. And it is written that “the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, will abound for many”.

It is written... and these words are true, these words are faithful, these words can be trusted for they are not only written on the pages of a book (Holy though it is), they are also written on the heart of God... and these words He will never deny.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

