

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia on Sunday February 17th 2008 by the
Reverend Alan Neale
“What is the What”
Moving Through Grief - Anger**

In 1969 Elizabeth Kubler Ross published her book “On Death and Dying” – in that book she defined what is now considered the classic model of five stages of grief... denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. It was, it has been, it is a model accepted and observed widely... believe it or not when the comic hero Captain Marvel dies, there is then a series of five comics dealing with denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance! And in Groundhog Day (which people seem to either hate or love... I love it but ask my wife how she feels about it!) the director tells us that the main character, Phil Connors, goes through the five stages as he learns how to deal with living the same calendar day repeatedly!

Now this pattern has no particular order nor length nor intensity but I have observed (in me and in others) that it operates in the significant loss when a beloved person dies or when the childhood picture of God is broken but also in the loss of job or money or dream!

It is not unknown in church life when changes begin and new growth occurs that people with perceived status have to accept a change or even loss in that status... denial is all too quickly, and all too often, followed by anger... sometimes most inappropriately!

It is, therefore, not surprising that the reader observes these five stages in the book *What is the What*, the text chosen for this year’s One Book, One Philadelphia Project and the text chosen for us to reflect upon this Lent. The book *What is the What* is a grand novel based on the real life experiences of Valentino Achek Deng, written in collaboration with Dave Eggers. It tells the wretched, inhuman story of the Lost Boys of Sudan beaten down, often dying, because of war, cruelty and human greed.

Deng suffers profound loss so many times – the death of family and friends (many times which he actually observes), the death of security and places of refuge and sanctuary and the death of dreams, of expectations... the devastation of hope (perhaps one of the most debilitating losses we endure?!).

As he makes his way to Ethiopia (enduring, alive beyond all odds) he says, “We would have chairs in Ethiopia. I would sit on a chair... listen to the radio. Milk and eggs – there would be plenty of these foods. There would be clean water... such cool water! I would have a new family in Ethiopia, with a father and mother who would bring me close and call me son”. But what happens... none of the above and in its place a succession of refugee camps: one for nearly three years, a second for almost a year and the last, Kakuma, for an entire decade!

At first read I felt concern that there was no anger in Deng at all but then I saw it, heard it, felt it in his voice.

“I ran past villages that had been and were no more, ran past buses that were burned from the inside out, hands and faces pressed to the glass. Damn you all. Damn the living, damn the dead.”

“The pressure upon us, the promises we cannot keep with ourselves – these things are making monsters of too many of us... and the one person who I felt could help me... an exemplary Sudanese woman called Tabitha Duany Aker is gone.”

“I do not want to think of myself as important enough that God would choose me for extraordinary punishment, but then, again, the circumference of calamity that surrounds me is impossible to ignore” – “why me?” is often the cry, the refrain, of the one angry with loss!

And, final quotation, “God is in my life but I do not depend upon Him. My God is not a reliable God”. There are many who are angry, profoundly angry, angry to the point of sickness, angry to the consumption of life’s precious resources... angry that their God has left them, is unreliable. Angry enough to make Morgan Freeman’s character in Feast of Love say, “God is dead or he despises us”. By the way Greg Kinnear responds to Mr. Freeman’s words with these, “God doesn't hate us ... if he did he wouldn't have made us so brave.”

Friends, there seems to be a law, a principle, in our nature which tells us repeatedly, eloquently, persuasively, often insidiously... “this is how life should be... this is how I should be... this is how you should be”. This law is not kind, considerate, mindful of weakness and human frailty... this law is demanding, tough, severe, strict. This law sets before us ideals which when we need let them go cause us anger – profound anger. It is this law, Paul tells us in Romans 4, that brings wrath. This law, deep in our very being, continually presents us with images of what we should be, what the perfect relationship should be, what our life should be... and then throws in our face the cold water of reality and leaves us... sometimes in despair, often (to use one of my new words for the week) “raddled” – leaves us in a state of confusion and lacking composure.

But the good news, the word of the Gospel, is the news of promise... not of law. The Good News enables us freedom from the past, freedom from the pain of loss and then freedom for new life, new hope, new possibilities with God!

Imagine the turmoil in the mind of Nicodemus as he comes to Jesus. This Pharisee, this leader of Jews comes to Jesus, John tells us, “by night” and how every evocative those two words are of Nicodemus and his confused, perhaps fearful state. This man is about to let go of strongly held beliefs about God, about man, and about the relationship between the two. Perhaps there is even a whiff of anger as Nicodemus pummels Jesus with questions, some bordering on passive aggressive (but religious people often are passive aggressive!)... “can anyone enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”... “How can these things be?”.

But in the presence of Jesus... with honesty and with openness, Nicodemus is empowered to let go and to find new and powerful life... to hear these words of liberation and freedom, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son so that whosoever believes in Him should not perish... but have everlasting life. For God send not his Son into the world to condemn the world but that through him the world might be saved”.

I finish with words written by Bill Wilson (co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous) - "Burn the idea into the consciousness of every man that he can get well regardless of anyone. The only condition is that he trust in God and clean house". We can get well... we can let go... we can be free of anger regardless of anyone, regardless of loss and bereavement and grief..... but are we ready “to trust in God and... clean house”?