

**Sermon Preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia on Sunday February 24th by the  
Reverend Alan Neale  
“What is the What” – Bargaining**

In August 2004 a band called “Kamikaze Hearts” (described as ‘upstate porch rock’) produced an album entitled “Foxhole Prayers” – the title is a phrase which most of us immediately recognize. It identifies, it describes, that plea bargaining that takes place with God in a situation of dire distress, of catastrophic calamity. By the way there are said, by some, to be two such foxhole prayers... one, God if you get me out of this I will change my life... and two, phew! don’t worry God I seem to have made it all by myself! Though not everyone succumbs to foxhole prayers – in 1977 as the actress Joan Crawford was dying, her maid began to pray... Ms. Crawford uttered these final words, “Damn it... don’t you dare ask God for help!”.

The ‘foxhole prayer’ is a good example of bargaining with God and bargaining is the third stage of the classic five stages of grief and loss... denial, anger, bargaining, depression and then, please God, acceptance. It is the stage when the bereaved attempts to exercise control and impose some order in what is often a fearfully uncontrollable and wildly chaotic state.

During Lent, we are discovering how these stages of grief, loss, bereavement are observed in the text of the 2008 One Book, One Philadelphia Project ‘What is the What’ – a grand novel, written by Dave Eggers, based on the real life experiences of Valentino Achek Deng, one of the thousands of ‘The Lost Boys of Sudan’.

Deng writes “to struggle is to strengthen my faith, my hope and my belief in humanity” and in that endless struggle Deng knows what it is to bargain with and for his life. He realizes that to end the conversation, no matter how terse or bitter or desperate, to end the conversation is to surrender life itself. “By the next afternoon we had seen eight more dead boys along the path... when a boy was going to die, he would first stop talking. His throat would be too dry and to speak required too much energy... eventually a dying boy would find a tree... sit against it... and fall asleep... the life in him would fall away and his flesh would return to the earth”. For us to end the conversation with God, even though it be wheedling and whining... to end that conversation can be death indeed. Sometimes the young refugees would make bad bargains and lose even the few possessions they carried but bargained they did and so lived for another day!

In times of real or imagined loss it is natural, human, almost inevitable to bargain whether the loss involves death, divorce, disappointment or any of the myriad drugs of choice.

At the beginning of the book Deng’s father recounts the primal myth which describes God offering man (of the Dinka tribe) a choice... at a time of profound loss (the loss of safety, security) God invites man to bargain with him “You can either have these cattle, as my gift to you, or you can have the ‘What’”. Deng’s father waits for the necessary response... “But.. what is the what?”. Deng’s father continues, “So the man asks God, ‘What is the What?’ and God said to the man, “I cannot tell you. Still, you have to choose”... “the man and woman see the cattle right there in front of them and they choose the cattle”.

Later in the book, experiencing the loss of organization and regulation in his country, Deng considers that the “What” could well be order and security... the bargaining continues.

Friends, it seems that when we experience chaos, disorder... when we flirt with the possibility that perhaps (all things considered, just possibly) we are not in control of our lives... when all this starkly confronts us then we begin to bargain, to argue with God. And yet if we are not willing to cede control, surrender, there will be for us continual struggle, strife and bargaining. It is no wonder then that 12 Step Programs begin with “We admitted we were powerless., and our lives had become unmanageable” – here is the rich and fertile soil for growth and maturity!

The Hebrews were no strangers to bargaining with God... we saw in today's first lesson from Exodus 17... things are not going as they planned... yes, they have been released from a tyrannical government but this desert menu, this wilderness fare, is rather unpalatable. Just eavesdrop for a few minutes to the "town meeting" – People: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt?"... Moses: "Why do you quarrel with me and test the Lord?". There is some hard bargaining about to take place!

The Exodus passage reminds us that it is not unusual for control to be exercised very inappropriately even within the people of God! Thirty years of parish ministry have taught me that when people are experiencing lack of control in their personal, professional, domestic lives... they will seek to regain control, often inappropriately, in the relatively safe environment of church. And this should not surprise us... God help the priest, the Vestry person, the parishioner who is not aware of this! Now, please God, the phase will only be temporary but present it often will be!

And then, in John 4, in that phenomenally beautiful and psychologically crafted conversation between the Samaritan woman and Jesus at the well, we see intense bargaining as the woman has to cope with the loss of her isolation and her secret. The woman is surprised that Jesus, a Jew, a man, would speak to her, a Samaritan, a woman but in requesting a drink Jesus allows her with honour and integrity to engage with him. And when Jesus says, "Go call your husband"... she comes clean and admits "I have no husband" and thereby owns to much, much more.

Consider in your life where there is experience of, exposure to chaos and lack of control... in that situation (probably for most of us in those situations!) isn't there a temptation, a default setting in our very being, to bargain, to plea, to argue, to cajole? For by so doing we comfort ourselves with the fantastic illusion, with mental *Léger de main*, psychic prestidigitation that I am, we are, in control!

God with mercy and kindness, with goodness and wisdom, is patient with our plaintive, sometimes strident, bargaining... but in all of this He has for us a great and glorious purpose. Ultimately Valentino Deng sees the What as something so profound, so eternal... he writes, "I told them that the mistakes of the Dinka before us were errors of timidity, of choosing what was before us over what might be"... hear, mark, digest those words... "what might be".

In all of our bargaining with life, with God, this is the glorious purpose... that we would be emboldened, encouraged, strengthened to ask for, pray for, look for, work for... what might be! Listen to these words of St. Paul... "we know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Romans 5). "In alert expectancy such as this, we are never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we cannot round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!" – The Message Translation!

We are invited to round up the containers of our lives marked "home" or "business" or "relationship" and open them as much as we dare for God generously to pour into them His love and His presence!

In the economy of God, in the hands of God, this is the goal to which all our bargaining, our arguing moves... inevitably! Can you not believe this? No matter what the loss, no matter what the bereavement, no matter how great (today) the grief... our words, our relationship with God, will lead to our health, welfare and freedom.

For ultimately God does not bargain with us... He simply lavishes upon us His love... "God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us". When we will stop bargaining and simply and sincerely surrender?

And so to him who is able to keep us from falling and to present us faultless before throne of God... to him be all glory, majesty, power and dominion... now and for ever. AMEN.

