

**Sermon Preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity
Rittenhouse Square
February 25, 2007 (The First Sunday in Lent)
by the Reverend Meg Buerkel
"But What Future?"**

"But what future?" This question is asked in the 16th chapter of Carlos Eire's book, *Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy*. Today we embark on our Lenten walk towards the Cross that looms in our future – the Cross that, from this angle, seems to block the view of the Resurrection beyond, and we also may ask the question: "But what future?"

During this season of Lent, our sermons will be shaped from the Revised Common Lectionary in dialogue not only with our lives, but also with the chosen text for 'One Book, One Philadelphia,' *Waiting for Snow in Havana* by Carlos Eire.

This book is the memoir of the boyhood of Carlos Eire, who at the age of 11 fled his native Cuba for the United States. The contrast of his life as a boy in Cuba with his life as an 'immigrant' here is remarkable. The book is about transformation. The essence of all transformation entails a departure from the way things are to a new state of being. Some of the transformations Carlos describes (and the ones we experience) are instantaneous, while others are lengthy; some follow moments of joy while others are born through enduring suffering; some are of our doing, while others are forced upon us.

In the book, Carlos writes specifically about the transformation of his race from 'white' to 'spic' after one plane ride. In-between the lines, we read of the transformation of his view of God – from a cross-carrying Jesus who haunts childhood dreams to an adult who teaches history and religious studies and writes a memoir (admittedly his first book "without footnotes") which is embedded with a deep and profound faith. We sense the transformation from trustful innocence to silent sophistication following an encounter with a 'pervert.' And we learn about the transformation of a country from a beautiful turquoise-ringed paradise to an impoverished and ruined island.

These transformations all shape Carlos as a human being in relationship with the world and with God. The transformations we experience are no less formative experiences.

The title of this sermon, “But what future?” is asked by Carlos in the midst of a chapter about clouds – the clouds that he sees in the shape of his home country, Cuba. He spots these clouds in the strangest of places, the first being at a Pedro Pan children’s refugee camp in Florida shortly after his arrival. These clouds that he calls ‘omens of his future’ seem to chase him through his life, appearing “out of nowhere... So sublime, so ethereal, so far from reach, so clever and unfathomable, so supercharged with the power to enchant and annihilate...at the same time.”

Transformation, like those clouds, can be both enchanting and annihilating. As we move from here to there – part of our old self dies, and we are reborn. Sometimes it’s a good change, and sometimes it’s fraught with painful struggle.

Today’s gospel lesson, wherein Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit to the wilderness where he fasts and prays and is tempted occurs immediately following his baptism by John. The imagery of baptism is death and resurrection – we are submerged in the water of death and are raised to new life as children of God. For Jesus, this new life begins in the desert – and it is not easy. Yet, here he solidifies his relationship with God through fasting and prayer; here he is engaged by Satan in a scriptural jousting match; and, as there is not much recorded in the Bible of his adult life prior to this desert experience, here, we can say, is his transformative experience in which he claims his title as Son of God – and is empowered to act upon it.

In retreating in and to the desert, Jesus follows many of the greats, for it is in the desert that Moses, Elijah, David, and John the Baptist are faced with the transformation of their existence and of their relationship with God. Even today’s Old Testament reading alludes to the wilderness experience of the Israelites – “a wandering Aramean was my ancestor... and the LORD brought us out of Egypt” – the Exodus and the time spent wandering in the desert were and are the transformative experience of the Israelites.

Can we not say that we too have desert experiences? These moments of transitioning between one life and the next – the times following the momentous – or even the mundane – changes in our lives. Times when we, too, are in the midst of transformation.

I have no problem imagining Jesus asking God in this desert wilderness, “But what future?” What is next? Will I make it? Will I be hurt? Will I accomplish your will? I have no problem imagining this, because those are the very questions I ask when faced with change. Those desert questions: What future? Will I survive? Will it hurt? Will it be good?

Many in the Episcopal Church have been asking these questions this week, especially following the news from Tanzania. How do the actions of the Primates of the Anglican Communion affect us? How do we reconcile this with our commitment to justice and equity and acceptance in the church? Will we survive? Will it hurt? Will it work? We don’t know... in a way the church itself is entering a desert experience – somehow, someone will be transformed in some way. “But what future?” What is our future? We are in the desert, and we don’t know.

Perhaps this is why Carlos Eire describes those clouds, these transformational experiences, as both ‘enchanted and annihilating.’ In the middle of the desert, we can see both horizons – of ‘happily-ever-after’ and of failure, death, destruction. Hugh Pypers calls the desert experience ‘the true battleground of the soul’ – and describes it as both ‘destructive and transformational’ and ‘life-threatening and liberating.’ It is in this place in-between that we can feel abandoned by God, while at the same time it is often in the desert that we find God.

Faith is about transformation – in Lent, we journey towards the Cross – knowing what is beyond... but it’s not the same in our day-to-day lives. We embark on all sorts of journeys – knowing that there will be wilderness, crosses, and suffering ahead... We hope and pray that the joy-filled times will last, but when they come to a close – we, too, ask, “But what future?”

The question, “But what future?” can be answered with our Christian hope, arising from our experience that beyond the Cross lies Resurrection; beyond the wilderness, companionship; beyond the

desert, joy; beyond suffering, peace; that beyond death – the mini-deaths that we die daily and the death that we all face eventually – that beyond death lies new life. And that new life is in God, through God, and with God. Amen.

Carlos Eire (Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy)

Hugh Pyper (Oxford Companion to Christian Thought)

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