

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia  
Sunday March 4th 2007  
by the Reverend Alan Neale  
“Kissing the Lizard – Accepting our Shadows”**

The title for our 2007 Lenten sermon series is “Waiting for Alleluias in Lent” based upon the book “Waiting for Snow in Havana” – the book chosen as the text for the 2007 One Book, One Philadelphia program. The book is also that Meg and I chose to accompany us on our Lenten journey as we allow Holy Scripture to enter into dialogue not only with our own lives but also the live of Carlos Eire, who at the age of 11 deserts his native Cuba with brother but not with parents... along with some 14,000 other children.

Of Carlos Eire’s Cuba it cannot be said *hic sunt dracones* (here be dragons) but it can surely be said “here be lizards”... for here lizards abound! One is even pictured on the front of the book, one title considered for the book was “Kiss the Lizard, Jesus” (considered too offensive by the publisher) and Professor Eire himself suggested to me that “Kissing the Lizard” would be a good title, a good theme, for one of our Lenten sermons!

In the novel we are told that lizards abound in Cuba and the young boy Carlos hates them with a passion; perhaps an aversion inherited from his grandmother. Young Carlos prays that one day he will be able to love these creatures of God. How does one make peace with enemies, even more, how does one love them. Professor Eire writes, “My dream of dreams is to kiss the lizard fondly, and let go forever”. To kiss what one loathes, to kiss fondly even ones enemies surely this is to accept and embrace our shadows?

Before ever our great ancestor Abraham was able to receive the promise and presence of a great nation, so many it could not be numbered, before ever that was to happen he had first to accept his barren and sorry state... old, childless, with the prospect of a slave to be his only heir... “the lizard had to be kissed”.

Before ever our great ancestor Abraham receives the covenant from God, he first must endure what the writer of Genesis describes as “a deep and terrifying darkness descending upon him”... “the lizard had to be kissed”.

Friends, there appears to be no other way... our journey to Holy Week must be made in the days of a holy and disciplined Lent... our journey to Easter Day must be made through the abyss of Good Friday and the ennui of Holy Saturday... and our journey to maturity and growth must be made as we accept the shadow and "kiss the lizard".

The very land that Carlos Eire loved, and loves still... the land where he dreams one day "to be in Havana, free to apply Brylcreem to my hair and dance the night away at a thousand and one nightclubs"... this land he sees from the air is shaped... like a lizard. He longs for the day when peace will be made with his enemies and again he will watch "a tangerine sunrise that never ends, forever hovering over a swirling cloud of parrot fish in the turquoise sea". But to accept the beauty, to proclaim his love of Cuba does not blind him to the island's shadow... so, to quote President Reagan, there "you go again"... the lizard must be kissed.

Is not this the same conflict of heart, the same battle of emotions that Jesus experiences as he looks on his beloved Jerusalem? Jerusalem the city of God, the divinely appointed arena of cosmic acts of salvation... this Jerusalem is the one over whom Jesus weeps and plaintively cries, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. I desire to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood... but you were not willing".

But you were not willing... but we are not willing! Not willing to embrace, nor have embraced, that of which we are ashamed... our flaws, our weaknesses, yes let's say it... our sins.

And here is established the path of denial... of engaging in that most ludicrous of activities... lying to ourselves!

For a while denial, according to Carlos, becomes his survival mechanism of choice. While the world is changing, classmates are disappearing, bombs are falling and supplies are rationed, he believes he can stay unchanged. He writes, "sooner or later, denial can even deny itself". But soon after his arrival in Florida, Carlos breaks down... he starts to sob and cannot stop... and here he realizes the limited power of denial.

The Psalmist knows the Lord is his salvation but the Lord is also his light... and that light, dear friends, will ever shine on that which we fear, on war and conflict within, on enemies external and internal and on that which does us harm... but it shines not that we might be ashamed and embarrassed, cowering and reticent with heads bowed down... no it shines that we might be set free, receive mercy and see the face of God!

Today we welcome to this church representatives of the national group Sojourners. It is part of the mission of this group to encourage Christians to participate in political debate and action. When Christians look critically at their countries in which they live, in which God has placed them, as they should... they should do so out of love, not distaste. When we consider the awful and wretched plight of many in our city, we do so not because we wish to point fingers or apportion blame but because we want to hope for, work for change. We need to recover and support a loving, rational prophetic voice. We must not allow the so-called Biblical voice to be hi-jacked by fundamentalists and conservatives... we know the Bible too!

When Christians look critically at their church... they should do so not out of fear and anxiety but rather a passionate desire to live for God, speak for God, love for God. The present tensions in the worldwide Anglican communion (of which the Episcopal Church is a part) illustrate for me the inability of some to recognize what it truly is to be an Anglican, an Episcopalian... someone committed to embrace the whole of God's creativity... to welcome that which is strange or alien or inexperienced... to declare there is no part of God's creation that cannot be embraced, cannot be kissed... for so God embraces and kisses us.

Forgive me now, I hope this is not too intrusive but the preparation for this sermon has caused some personal revelation for on my spiritual journey. I have come to see that resentments I have held in the past (and, forgive me, even now) that these resentments are often directed towards people may often represent my shadow side which I would rather not embrace, and definitely, very definitely, not kiss! In fact I am moving towards (though I am not quite there)... I am moving towards seeing such individuals as God's gift to me, God's gentle (or not so gentle nudge) to acknowledge and embrace previously hidden and unacceptable facets of who I am!

It was such a blessing to me, by the wonders of internet, to rediscover words spoken by Ashley in the film Junebug, “God loves you just the way you are. But he loves you too much to let you stay that way!”.

Our Lenten collect begins with these resoundingly beautiful, profoundly theological and stirringly pastoral words (though expressed in a quintessentially English way of saying the negative to express the positive)... “Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing that you have made...” ah, there it is, there you have it... all creation embraced and accepted, and every lizard (no matter how lizardly) and every lizard kissed. AMEN.

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