

Without a Tail

Proper 21, Year B - Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson September 30, 2012

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my heart and set it on fire with your love. Amen.

Wow! What a Gospel text! This morning's lesson is one of those pieces of Scripture that caused deep groans when it was pulled out of the hat in seminary preaching class.

In the history of the Church, there have been some pretty tragic cases of people taking this passage all too literally. It's a good thing for the Church that that has been rare, or Peter might have cut out his tongue after our lesson two weeks ago, a couple of the disciples might have had an ego-ectomy after last week's "who's the greatest" episode, and by his own admission, Paul would have ended up missing all sorts of parts and pieces. Far more common than physical literalism, though, is how this passage has been used or *abused* on the spiritual level.

My own experience of this passage goes back to the annual revival meeting at Calvary Missionary Church in Phoenix, Arizona when I was eleven. For the benefit of those of you without a working knowledge of the revival meeting phenomenon, let me shed some light. Once a year at Calvary Missionary Church, notice was sent out, signs were posted throughout the neighborhood and handbills carried from door to door, and Wednesday night prayer meetings for months were dedicated to down-on-your-knees prayer that hearts would be opened, that sinners would be brought to repentance, and that souls would be saved during the week-long event. Our own pastor was never the speaker for these services, no sir. Each year a new speaker was brought in for this important occasion. A man from outside our own little community. A man of upstanding qualities and steadfast character. A man with the title, "Evangelist."

Well, came revival week of my eleventh year, that would have been 1968, I guess, and the speaker was announced. To be honest, I don't remember the man's name. I *do* remember that the church was particularly excited about the prospect of having this man with us. I remember that he was a big man with a shiny bald head and *enormous* hands. And I remember his sermon on Friday night of that week, his sermon that began with the reading of this morning's Gospel: "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off." "If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off!" "If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out!"

For more than an hour, in language meant to shock the *adults* in the congregation, the great man held forth on the horrors of that place where the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched. It was, he said, a place so dismal, an eternity so profoundly horrific, that it was even worth the severing of one's own appendage, described by him in graphic and vivid detail, I assure you. I did *not* want to go to the place that the "evangelist" had described and I would have done whatever it took to avoid it. As the altar call began, my white-knuckled death grip on the chair in front of me lasted through only one verse of "Softly and Tenderly, Jesus is Calling" and I went forward to the front of the church, tears in my eyes, a cry on the edge of my lips, and despair in my heart. I knelt at the altar rail with our pastor, my dad and the great man himself praying over me, and I was saved – again.

That man's sermon was powerful, to be sure. I think that I have the technical skills and the sheer lung power to carry it off. But I will not be preaching such a sermon on this text, today or any *other* day. Because another thing happened during my eleventh year.

Over the last few months I have shared a great many things with you about my upbringing. I have told many of you that my Dad was sometimes a preacher, but *also* a school teacher. His most frequent and favorite calling, in fact, his passion from the time we moved to Arizona when I was six until his death some years later, was as a junior high school science teacher.

This had a lot of benefits to the younger members of the Martindale clan. For one thing, Dad often brought home for our use, microscopes and black lights and other amazing tools of the scientific method. But over the years, we also had as household pets an *enormous* assortment of critters. We had tiny black widow spiders and *great* big tarantulas. We had mice and gerbels and rats. We had frogs and salamanders and newts and turtles and snakes. And we had lizards of every imaginable size, shape and color.

A few weeks after the big revival of my eleventh summer, our critter-in-residence was a sleek, shiny lizard – named Hal. He was about eight inches long from the tip of his pointy head to the tip of his pointy tail, and he was kind of an iridescent blue-green, with a goodly number of black stripes along his back and sides. Hal had been tapped to be one of the stars of Dad’s unit on desert wildlife for the approaching term, but in the mean time, he took up residence in the terrarium on our carport. As usual, when Dad brought Hal home, he allowed each of us to handle him as he told us all about the new critter. As usual, when he put the little guy into the terrarium, Dad warned us not to handle him too much. As usual, that admonition only worked for . . . oh, about a tenth of a second. That evening after supper, while everyone else was watching TV, I went out to the carport, raised the cover of the terrarium and carefully lifted Hal into my hands. He sat quietly and licked the air with his little darting lizard tongue as I gently felt the cool hardness of his scaly form. I stroked his pointy head and his long, sleek back. Then in mid-stroke, in a single, fluid, blurred motion, Hal darted up my arm, down my leg, across the carport, and out of sight over the edge of the patio.

Deamlike, I moved through the kitchen and into the living room where the family was gathered. With tears in my eyes, a cry on the edge of my lips, and despair in my heart, I approached my father, Hal’s four-inch blue-green iridescent tail still whipping back and forth in my white-knuckled death grip.

Dad found another star for his lesson, of course. And I was forgiven . . . of course. But I learned something new about what Jesus said to his disciples in this morning’s lesson, something that I *hadn’t* heard at the revival. You see, Hal didn’t sever himself from his tail because he was afraid of the terrarium. He wasn’t running from the terrarium. He wasn’t running from me. He wasn’t running *from* anything. He was running *to* the open sky. He was running *to* the cool green grass. He was running *to* the sand and the rocks of home. He *gladly* shed that beautiful four-inch blue-green iridescent tail, to gain the chance to live the free life for which he was created.

It’s a small distinction, this shift in preposition – from “from” to “to.” But I suspect it was an important distinction to Hal the lizard. It’s an important distinction to *me* – it was at eleven, and it *is* at fifty-five. And it is an important distinction to how each of us lives our lives as Christians. The Reverend Whatever-his-name-was might have gotten a clue from the title that was written under his name on all those signs and handbills. You see, “evangelist” means the one who tells the *good* news. And *here* is the Good News: We do not flee from the horror of eternal punishment, we *fly to* the greatest of promises.

The reason to sever ourselves from the offensive elements of our lives, dear friends, is not to avoid the punishment of death and hell. The reason to get rid of the stumbling blocks in our relationship to God is to release us to live in the glory of God’s goodness and grace. The reason we lay aside our earthly idols, our larcenous desire for just a bit more, our petty hatreds, the reason we cut off from ourselves the things and the actions and the occasions that draw us into sin and away from Christ, the reason we leave behind the useless appendages of our sin, is so that we can be embraced by the freedom and the power of Christ’s overwhelming love for us.

The Good News is that we do not serve a God who is looking for every chance to trip us up. We do not serve a God who is looking for every chance to trap us in our sin and guilt. We do not serve a God who is looking for every chance to condemn us to everlasting torment. We serve a God who loves us with such an all-consuming passion that he was willing to give up *everything* to repair the tear *we* had made between us. The Good News is that we are called into the fulness of that love and into the freedom from doubt and despair and death that that love promises. The Good News is that God loves you, and God loves you, and God loves you, and God loves . . . even me. It’s a promise, Jesus says, for which *nothing* should stand in our way, not a hand, not a foot, not an eye . . . not even a tail.

