

## Before and After

### Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year B – Ephesians 2:1-10

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, March 14, 2015*

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

What with one thing or another, I've spent a bit more time here lately watching late-night television than usual, a bit more than is probably good for me, probably more than is good for *anybody*. But in the mindlessness of wee-hour TV, I discovered, or *re-discovered* a particular genre of small-screen fare that I had tried assiduously to forget. To be fair, that same fare is available during the day, but the middle of the night seems to be the *particular* province of the prolific and apparently profitable "before and after" ad. You know the ones I'm talking about, the ads where, with the help of less-than-helpful lighting, and usually accentuated by tragic or fretful expressions, some pitiful creature offers testimonial of the miserable condition they were in before they came in contact with whatever it is that is being promoted.

There's the one for some sort of facelift in a jar, in which we are treated to a side view of some poor woman of wrinkled eye and sagging jowl, which is then contrasted with a more youthful illustration, *presumably* of the same woman, looking much younger, and much, *much* happier, now that she has bought this particular rotating brush or *crème-de-serum*. And how 'bout the one where a pretty, but unathletic woman develops buns of iron that would be at home on a Brazilian beach, or a 98-pound weakling of a man receives abs of steel as well defined as a Hershey bar (that my mind goes to a Hershey bar might be part of my *personal* problem) all by a 30-, or 60-, or 90-day program of stepping up to some machine, or sweating to the oldies, or pumping this, that or the other thing, for just *minutes* a day. And then there's my personal favorite, the Hair Club for Guys or whatever, whose commercials parade one pathetic picture after another of follicularly challenged men, all of whom are younger and *most* of whom are less follicularly challenged than yours truly, whose lives – and in particular, whose *heads* – have been greatly upgraded, as evidenced by footage of their lush manes dripping with Caribbean surf or being blown about by the countryside breezes in their top-down sports car, all because they took part in a course of scientifically customized dermal enhancement that could be mine... uh, I mean, could be the *viewer's*, for some undisclosed fortune – financing available, of course.

In this morning's reading, Paul paints another before and after picture, and the before snapshot is every *bit* as unflattering as any late night TV ad. He reminds the Ephesians of the condition of all humanity, the unattractive picture of a world strained and stained by the disabling effects of sin. *All* of us were bound, he says, enslaved by and to that torn and twisted world. We were enslaved by the "ruler of the power of the air," the power of evil that holds *sway* in our world. Furthermore, we were enslaved, he says, by the longings, the *cravings* of our temporal and material existence, the "passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses." We were enslaved by the pride that holds our self as better than our neighbor. We were enslaved by the greed that calls us and *drives* us to pile possession upon possession. We were enslaved by the lust that substitutes the false for the genuine. In short, Paul says, by action *and* habit of mind, heart and spirit, we had become, we had made of ourselves "children of wrath," so tied up, so entangled, so imprisoned by and with this world, that we were practically *dead*. No, through our rebellion, and by our once *and* constant sin, Paul says outright, we were *absolutely* dead, cut off from the very *source* of life and light by our *own* turning away.

The picture is very different indeed, however, for those of us who are in Christ. You see, stripped of death and decay, the true nature of humanity is revealed, *our* true nature is revealed, the essence of our being for which we first saw Eden's light is revealed. In the light of Christ's resurrection, the spark of love which has *ever* been our birthright is fanned again to full flame, and we are raised *with* Christ and

made alive with *him*, Paul says, and seated with Christ in heavenly places, there forever to reflect and proclaim his glory. While we are still surrounded by decay and death, we do not know, we cannot understand, the immensity of the change that is already ours in and through Christ, but the difference is staggering. We do not know, we cannot understand what glory waits to be revealed, but I'm quite sure the *after* picture is grander far than abs of steel and a head full of hair.

Unlike the world of late-night commercialism, though, the difference between *our* before and after pictures is not the result of some mysterious balm, some secret formula put together from oils and collagens and melon juices. The change is not about us strapping in, or working out, or pumping up. It is not about weaves, or comb-overs, or transplants.

If we could make the difference by doing just one more task, by acquiring just one more thing, by being righteous for just one more day, one more hour, one more *second*, we might have room to talk about how powerful, or how wise, or how good we are. As it is, the Apostle reminds us, the difference between before and after is not about *anything* any one of us does. The difference is not about anything any one of us does *not* do. The difference between dying in a world out of touch, out of *relationship* with the maker and sustainer of all that is, and living in the light of his love, is, as I told you last week, the grace of God alone. Grace. Our salvation, our forgiveness, our purity, our righteousness, our belonging to and through and in Christ, it's all a *gift*. "For by grace you have been saved through faith," Paul says, in one of the earliest verses of Scripture I ever learned, "and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that *no* one may boast."

We have no *right* to boast about how we received God's goodness, and we have no *need* to boast of such unmerited goodness. We have only to celebrate the marvelous mercy that loved us from the moment his breath became ours, that loved us even when we turned away in the counterfeit conceit of self-love, that loved us even when we were absolutely *unlovable*. We have only to celebrate the mercy and grace that in Christ loved us even when we were dead, and raised us up, to love him and one another... forever *after*.