

Reflections, April 2009

Thursday, June 25, 2009

"From dying suddenly and unprepared, good Lord, deliver us."

Nine people died suddenly in Monday's Metrorail collision. Were they prepared? Are any of us ever prepared?

Two of the nine were Major Gen. David F. Wherley Jr. and his wife, Ann. He'd flown combat missions and, as commander of the DC National Guard, gave the order to scramble jets over the capital on September 11, 2001. He had heart surgery recently. They were returning from spending an afternoon visiting wounded service members at Walter Reed, something they did frequently. They had spent a lot of time in the valley of death's shadow. They were better prepared for death, even of a sudden and violent kind, than most of us.

Even so, neither the general nor his wife nor any of us is ever really prepared. However it comes, whatever time we have spent in its shadow, death takes us by surprise. For this reason people believe in God. Not just for death, but for many of life's changes, losses, disappointments, and failures, we're not ready. We need somebody who is. May the greater Wisdom that embraces us stand always on the ramparts and keep watch on our behalf.

Thursday, June 18, 2009

"Man is the creature who prays." Having realized that other species share, at least in some measure, our capacity for language and reason, Dr. Charles Price, my seminary professor of theology, settled on this as a statement of what makes us unique.

Lately I've wondered if Dr. Price missed something. The other day, Rev. Nancy James showed me a photo of several moose lined up at the edge of an Alaska forest, facing the rising sun. It looked like a posture of prayer to me.

Eucharistic Prayer D says that we are "giving voice to all creation" when we pray. Maybe prayer doesn't so much make us unique as allow us to give words to the unspoken impulses of every living creature—not to mention to other human beings who don't, or won't, or can't pray. This last thought comforts me. I pray often, but sometimes I'm just saying the words. I try to remember, in these moments, that someone else, in another place or even another time, gives expression to some impulse of the heart that I don't, or won't, or can't get in touch with.

We pray not only for, but through, each other. And, somehow, we speak for those moose in Alaska too.

Thursday, June 11, 2009

When I moved to Chicago in 1976, I didn't know what I was in for. I'd never lived in a place so big, so noisy, so dirty. And, I'd never seen so many black people. I was—no point in not admitting it—a little afraid. 55th and Blackstone was a long way from Kenyon College.

One night I went with a friend to the Checkerboard Lounge, a blues club in the heart of the South Side. We were the only white people there. The staff treated us like visiting royalty. Their hospitality reminded me of a night a couple of years earlier at Kenyon, when a bunch of college students (me among them) booed "Haystacks Balboa," an all-white band inspired by Led Zeppelin that opened for blues giant Howlin' Wolf. When Wolf came on stage he graciously thanked the opening band for their energetic performance, and asked us to give them a warm round of applause. His courtesy toward them impressed, and shamed, many of us.

In the mid-90s I took a group of young people from my church to the Du Sable Museum of African American History in Chicago. The featured exhibit displayed photos of blues masters. Among them were four white musicians: Greg Allman, John Mayall, Paul Butterfield and Bonnie Raitt. Tears came to my eyes, unbidden, and one kid asked me why I was crying. I was, of course, thinking of the Checkerboard Lounge and of Howlin' Wolf.

Koko Taylor, another titan of Chicago blues, died last week. Her passing reminded me of the power of this quintessentially American music. Rooted in the African American experience, it has crossed virtually every social, cultural and economic boundary. It certainly helped a naive young white boy feel less afraid in a big, tough city.

Thursday, June 4, 2009

Once we get into something, how do we get out of it? In contemporary parlance: what's our exit strategy?

This question vexes our leaders, and us, across a wide range of issues. We're wondering how and when, and even if, the federal government will divest itself of its huge interest in Iraq, in Afghanistan and, more recently, in automobile manufacturing.

Exit strategies loom large in more personal matters, too. From time to time we have to let go—of habits and routines that have become integral parts of our lives; even of people and relationships, or at least particular stages of relationships. These "exits" are wrenching, and it's hard to know when the

time has come for them to happen. Having a strategy—or at least some idea of what to look for, and what to expect—can help.

God's exit strategy was crucifixion. All exits require sacrifice, calling us to recognize our own limits. We cannot, ever, make things just exactly what we want them to be before we let go of them: not Iraq or Afghanistan, not General Motors, not our children, not the relationships and communities which define our lives. We give it our best, we ask God to help us recognize when it's time to take our leave, we prepare ourselves for the grief we'll feel and, chastened, we embrace the next challenge.

Thursday, May 21, 2009

Before going to seminary I worked for a "college without walls" in Chicago, placing adults with cognitive disabilities in subsidized training jobs. Many of these turned into long-term, non-subsidized employment. I felt proud of what our program accomplished.

My boss, not so much. Mark was pretty jaded, and he often reminded me that our students took jobs that otherwise would have gone to people who needed them just as much, if not more.

Since their wedding, I've been working with Ministry Center staff and others to find supportive housing for Nhiahni and Dante, the homeless couple married here earlier this month. Several leads have turned out to be blind alleys, but one looks promising. Nothing for sure, but I'm guardedly optimistic.

At the same time, I'm thinking of what my cynical boss Mark would say: "There's not that much to be proud of here. Dante and Nhiahni got the attention of the media and the Mayor's office. Other people, some more worthy or more needy, didn't, and as a result your friends will probably get housed before they do. Not fair."

All blessings are mixed. Doing good, we might do some harm too, setting back the cause of fairness even as we secure a benefit for someone we love. In Isaiah's words, "Even our righteous deeds are like dirty rags." This doesn't mean we shouldn't help two people who have become very dear to Grace Church. But we should certainly offer up to God even those actions that make us feel proud and happy, to be judged, completed, and redeemed.

Thursday, May 6, 2009

Our cat, Sam, is up in years and "vocalizes" a lot ("vocalize" is the veterinarian's term; I call it "yowling"). Sometimes it's because he's hungry. More often, he's looking for a soft, warm, comfy place to settle in. It's always the same place, but he has to look for it anew every day. He stops yowling when he finds it.

He reminds me of Father Gallup, my roommate on a trip to Central America 20 years ago. Every day he vocalized, groaning about the heat and his aches and pains (we walked a lot). He looked forward to finding his settling-in place—in this case, a soft, cool, comfy bed. He said, “Thank you, Jesus,” with deep feeling every time he stretched out his tall frame on it.

Every day, like Sam and Father Gallup, we look for a place to settle in. It might be a chair we sit in, a role we play, a routine we follow, or people we trust. Usually, we find it easily. It’s the same place we found the day before. Other times, though, we vocalize a lot first, because like Sam in his dotage we’re confused, or like Father Gallup, we’re not sure we’ll get there and we’re out of sorts till we do.

We get up and go about our business each day because we believe we’ll find a place to settle in. Often we can’t see it ahead of time, and sometimes we’re not sure it’s there. God tells us that it is, without ever promising that it will always be easy to find.