

“Happy or Holy” – Rev. Jennifer Adams

February 21, 2010 – Lent 1C

This morning I have one of the hardest preaching jobs in the country. Because I have to ask you to leave the 2nd happiest place in the nation and join me and Jesus in the wilderness. Most of you know that this week, Holland ranked second in a Gallup poll on happiest places in the whole United States . And this made not only the front page of Sentinel (for several days) but ABC’s Diane Sawyer and other national reporters were all over it too. To the shock of many, (me included) we even beat Honolulu. So the only ones with more challenging jobs this morning are the poor preachers in Boulder, Colorado whose pulpits are in the number one happiest town, but whose gospel, like ours is also out in the wilderness . . . for the next 36 days.

And maybe our approach this morning could be more of a peeling back of the layers rather than a leaving of where we live. I won’t ask you to pack it up and head out, in part because we don’t need to leave here in order to touch the wilderness to which we are being called. Instead we’ll peel back the layers of both stories, the gospel and ours to see what lives beneath the surfaces. As an area we have something to celebrate but as people of God we also have a call to heed – a call to be led by the Spirit to challenging places, through temptations, into new understandings of ourselves and our God.

OK, so first let’s look at our local story. Happiness was the headline, but in Thursday’s Sentinel, the story beneath the headline included a picture of empty shelves in a local food pantry; it talked about unemployment being at 16% and quoted a non-profit leader as saying that the numbers of families needing food and other forms of assistance had doubled in the last year. While the greater Holland area is generous (2nd in the nation in that category too,) we aren’t quite meeting those expanding needs. Our local story: the headlines of happiness mentioned that the crime rate in Holland is extremely low, about half that of the national average. But another recent story revealed that we live in the most racially divided state in the country. And this week I saw only one person of an ethnic or racial minority pictured as the national cameras scanned our streets and downtown coffee shops. Our local story: The headlines said that Holland is home to 170 churches and at our best we contribute to that high level of communal generosity, but in the story beneath that surface, I have yet to talk to a Jewish person or a Muslim person or an “I’m not sure if there is a God” person who feels entirely comfortable here. And so I would say that we don’t have to dig too deeply to discover that there is actually a wilderness beneath the happiness. And that wilderness is home to many.

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor,” That’s the layer beneath the gospel story this morning. From Deuteronomy we heard, “they went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number.” Before we got to Jesus in the wilderness we were reminded that our roots are not with the people of plenty, or those who ranked high on any lists of any sorts. Instead, are roots are with those who left everything, lost everything in order to risk a new way of life with God. People for whom happiness and security were not the highest ideals. Freedom was. Peace was. Abundance for all was what they were after. Turns out that our ancestors were those who lived beneath the surface their whole lives; they dug into the wilderness as an aspect of faith and they discovered that God was out there, down there, in there too.

And I think that's the message this morning. Good news not only in the headlines but God in the underneath of our lives and our world. Which doesn't mean that unhappiness is the goal of Lent or that we shouldn't celebrate our new found national status. It just means that there is something else, something deeper that is calling to us, always. And I think, that something could be called joy or maybe even Shalom. The joy that comes out of experiencing the wilderness and knowing that God is with us there too. The Shalom/peace that comes from embracing those who suffer and acknowledging the hurting, wandering pieces of ourselves and discovering that God is in those places. The message today is that there is joy to be had in allowing God to guide us through lost places. And wholeness that comes from discovering that God will provide even when shelves are empty. There is God in the under-story welcoming the alien and the other and teaching them to live as one. The good news of the season is that is God healing and making peace in the underlayers, the wildernesses of our lives and our world.

So this week as we celebrate, remember also to dig. A wandering Aramean was our ancestor. A wandering person in Holland, Michigan is our neighbor. And we ourselves are wandering, too. Happy? Maybe. Holy? I'm almost sure of it.

Amen.