

## First Sunday of Lent - Year C 2007

1. The plan was simple, even elegant. It was devised by a group of men,
  - i. Consisting of military officers, businessmen and even church leaders,
  - b. The goal? political assassination.
2. A bomb, built in a briefcase would be carried by one of the conspirators to a government meeting.
  - a. It would be left under the conference table while the assassin excused himself.
  - b. The bomb would then detonate, taking out the commander in chief and as many other government officials as possible.
3. Everything goes as planned. The bomb is built, smuggled into the conference, and explodes just as expected.
  - a. However, then the unthinkable happens. The ir commander survives. The plot is discovered and the conspirators are rounded up, imprisoned and executed.
4. This assassination was not ripped from the pages of a Tom Clancy novel, nor will it be in tomorrow's news.
  - a. It already happened; though not here; It happened in Germany during world war two. The commander was Adolf Hitler, the conspirators, members of the German army, and the church leaders included a young Protestant theologian named Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
    - i. Bonhoeffer was executed for his role in the plot to assassinate Hitler on June 10 1944 by being hung with piano wire.
    - ii. After the war, many people studied his writings, re read his sermons trying to understand this young promising theologian.
5. To many people he was a hero.
  - a. but not to all.
    - i. for even though he had died as a Lutheran pastor trying to save the world from the evil of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reich,
  - b. Many people were deeply uncomfortable with his participation in the plot to kill Hitler
    - i. for in the eyes of many the Church should have remained above such political matters, distancing itself from the Nazis to be sure, but also from the allies;
    - ii. for neutrality would guarantee it could continue it work of saving souls quietly,
      - (1) without being sullied by the affairs of this world,
      - (2) let alone implicating itself in assassination.
6. And to this day there are many who would agree.
  - a. For the involvement of the Church in the political realm provokes strong debate.
    - i. When the Church speaks out on issues such as abortion, in-vitro fertilization, capital punishment, and now of course the looming war in Iraq,
      - (1) there are many who see this not only as a violation of the separation of church and state,
        - (a) but as a violation of the very nature of the Church, which

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should remain separate from the mundane world of politics, and indeed from the world itself.

7. There is perhaps no greater argument used in favor of this than Jesus himself.
  - a. For while he challenged the leaders of his day, he challenged them to change their hearts, not their governments.
  - b. And while he spoke of God's kingdom, he was clear that while that kingdom was breaking onto this world even now, it was not here yet.
  - c. And again and again when Jesus had the chance, he would retreat from the crowds, from the people and go out into the desert, he would go there to pray and reflect and rest.
    - i. Indeed, in today's Gospel we see that the first result of his baptism, is that God's Spirit drives him into the desert.
    - ii. And there are many who wish that he and his followers had stayed there.
      - (1) distancing themselves from politics and public life.
      - (2) remaining unsullied by the affairs of the world.
8. It is a tempting suggestion.
  - a. For we live in a world where there are many temptations,
    - i. And many dangers which result when we give into those temptations.
  - b. We see those results at our places of work, on our streets, and increasingly on the screens of our TVs and in our newspapers at home.
    - i. For we see a planet filled with violence and greed, poverty and war.
    - ii. The problems seem so complex the solutions so elusive, that it is tempting to close the news paper, turn off the tv, look the other way; to retreat from the dangers of the world.
  - c. To head to the desert after Jesus and make of our lives
    - i. our faith and our church a place separate from the danger and temptations of the world where the world can never find us.
9. Except for one thing:
  - a. That is not what the desert was for Jesus, nor for Jesus' people.
10. For the people of Israel did not choose the desert; in fact it was thrust upon them for 40 years by God as the way to the promised land.
  - a. The desert was a place of **trial**, where they were again and again tempted to turn away from Moses' leadership and return to Egypt.
  - b. The desert was a place of **danger**, where they were hunger and thirsty and threatened with death again and again.
  - c. And yet through that experience the people of Israel learned that they were not alone in the desert; that God was with them there.
    - i. And thus the people of Israel were not in the desert to escape the world but to learn to be god's people in the midst of it.
11. And Jesus did not choose the desert, it was thrust upon him for 40 days by the spirit poured out upon him in baptism.
  - a. And thus we understand why for Jesus

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- i. The desert was a place of trial, where again and again he was tempted by Satan himself
  - ii. The desert was a place of danger, where he was hungry and thirsty and lived amongst wild beasts.
  - iii. And we understand why in the midst of the desert, angels ministered to him.
    - (1) For just as with his people Jesus was not alone in the desert
      - (a) God was with Jesus in the desert,
      - (b) And thus Jesus was not in the desert to escape the world, but to prepare to minister in it.
- 12. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906, and thus, it is conceivable that if he had not been killed, he would still be alive today, albeit very old.
  - a. And it is a shame he is not still alive, for he left behind him many promising works, many writings and many letters and papers from his stay in prison,
    - i. For him it was a desert, for although he was separated from the world, it was there he encountered the Nazis in all their worldly horror,
    - ii. It was also the place where his thoughts on things such as the place of the Church in the world matured rapidly.
    - iii. In his reflections on that place, he was quoted as having written:
      - b. “The Church’s task is not simply to bind the wounds of the victim beneath the wheel, but also to put a spoke in the wheel itself.”
- 13. There are few here who would dispute the Church’s task is to minister to the victims; but to be part of the very thing which produces the victim. What could he possibly mean by that?
  - a. Perhaps that for us there can be no retreat into the desert. For the desert is thrust upon us, as it was the people of Israel, we are driven to it through our baptisms, as was Jesus,
    - i. It is not a place of safety but precisely the place where we confront the dangers and trials and temptations of this world.
    - ii. We have seen that confrontation played out again and again on the world stage.
      - (1) We see every time a peace demonstration marches down a city street,
      - (2) When a papal envoy meets a president,
      - (3) or when a pope challenges a culture of death that produces weapons of mass destruction,
      - (4) With a culture of life that promotes peace for all.
  - b. Maybe what Bonhoeffer meant when he spoke then, of placing a spoke in that wheel, is that this is the only way the Church has a part in that wheel, and thus a hand in seeing where that wheel rolls.