

*A sermon given on Sunday, February 21, 2010  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

### ***The Bad Bits, Too***

An article in *Sojourners* magazine reported on a pre-school teacher who received an unusual appeal from one set of parents. They requested no Big Bad Wolf for their daughter, Kara, thank you very much. The parents wanted “Little Red Riding Hood” read without the wolf, so as not to scare their little girl. But, the teacher asks, “Have you ever tried to do that? Without the wolf, there is no story at all. Only a little girl visiting grandma.” It’s pretty hard to figure, really. You don’t want to leave out the good bits of the story – the heroism of the woodsman, the rescue of the vulnerable child. But the story is not the full story without the bad bits, too.

My parents both grew up during the Great Depression. One in a small New England town, one in small Midwestern towns. When I was growing up we often heard stories of life in those difficult years. I do not believe that my parents wanted us to pity them for their childhood hardships. But certainly there was the expectation that we would have a modicum of gratitude for the relative security of our own childhood surroundings. Of course they wanted to tell the good bits of the story – the quieter, simpler days of life in small town America of yesteryear. But we also needed to hear about the spam and the blacked out windows. The story is not the full story without the bad bits, too.

Aksel Lund Svindal of Norway won the Olympic gold medal Friday night in the men’s super-G downhill skiing event. Just two years ago Svindal took a horrifying spill on a similar downhill run, flying airborne, landing flat on his back, skittering through a fence, breaking bones in his back and face, and (as the papers delicately put it) rearranging his intestines. To watch the video is to cringe, and to hear his widowed father tell of flying anxiously to his son’s side is to weep. On Friday night Svindal’s smooth victory for the gold was impressive. But the back story made it something more. The story is not the full story without the bad bits, too.

Moses tells the people, in today’s First Lesson, that when they arrive finally at the end of their long wilderness journey, they will have a job of remembering to do. From the first harvest of their new land they should offer their first fruits in thanksgiving to God. And they should recollect the story, saying: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down to Egypt, where the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us; but we cried to the Lord, and he brought us out of our oppression.” Now, to rejoice at their good fortune and give thanks for the safe end to a 40-year journey was cause for celebration. But they must not forget the harsh slavery from which they had been delivered, not to mention the golden calf, and all the times that their faith wobbled. The story is not the full story without the bad bits, too.

Jesus had been baptized by his cousin at the Jordan River, strengthened and blessed by the gift of the Holy Spirit, and declared by God to be a “beloved Son.” Very cool stuff. Soon he would be out and about turning water into wine, healing the blind, and attracting crowds by the thousands. Also very cool. But those things would not happen before he would find his strength and faith put to the test. Ego, ambition, and fear were temptations made tantalizingly real to him. Because Jesus knows the great story of his people, he is able to resist the devil by rebuffing him with pieces of that story: “One does not live by bread alone ... Worship the Lord and serve only him ... It is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” It’s great for us to remember

the miracles and the dazzling mountaintop moments of Christ's revelation. But the man Jesus also had to wrestle with demons. The story is not the full story without the bad bits, too.

The season of Lent is upon us. It is, once again, a season commended to us as a time for self-examination, repentance, and re-dedication. Because we are God's beloved children, created in the divine image of God, there should be much in our self-examination at which to delight, much for which to give thanks. As a time to reset the compass of our lives, Lent invites us to take measure of our life, to reflect on who we have become; how we are living and relating; how the values and priorities we would espouse are reflected (or not) in the spoken and unspoken story which we tell with our actions. We take stock of our blessings and triumphs, and how we manifest gratitude. We consider also our trials and suffering, and how we muster strength for them. We take stock of our virtues, and how we can build them up. We consider also our failures, and how we remedy them. Lent reminds us that our story is not the full story without acknowledging the bad bits, too.

Last year, as one way to take stock of our lives, we reflected on the Seven Deadly Sins: anger, envy, greed, gluttony, lust, sloth and pride. I invited you to contemplate these, not so much as 'naughty behaviors' but as ways that we separate ourselves from God – the outward manifestations of a skewed disposition of the heart. That, after all, is what constitutes sin – the separation of ourselves from God. The Seven Deadly Sins were one way to search our souls and know ourselves better. The Great Litany which we prayed at the outset of today's service includes other such measures of separation from God and one another. I wonder whether, instead of letting them float by, barely noticed, in that rather lengthy prayer, you and I might not use them in our own personal reflections as fault lines for which to search in the landscape of our own life. "Good Lord, deliver us," we prayed. From what? From blindness of heart. From pride, vainglory, and hypocrisy. From envy, hatred, and malice. From all want of charity. From all inordinate and sinful affections. From hardness of heart. I don't know about you, but that probably gives me enough to reflect upon for at least forty days!

It may well be that, for many of us, the evil and temptation in our lives will not be heinous, blatant, or notorious sins, but rather more subtle manifestations. Things nestled in among the comfortable and familiar parts of our lives. You might even say, *wolfish* things that look on first glance pretty much like granny. But the story is not the story without the wolf.

In worship, apostleship, and learning opportunities throughout these forty days, as described for you in our Lenten brochure, occasions are here for the seizing, to know yourself and your world just a little better, and in so doing, to draw just a little closer to the heart of God. As on Ash Wednesday, so now once again:  
I invite you, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word. [BCP, p. 265]