

*A sermon given on Sunday, March 20, 2011,
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

Holding That Trembling House Down

It's last Sunday: I look ahead to the next week's readings, ready to contemplate what the scriptures will have to say. The First Reading is from Genesis.

The Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ... So Abram went, as the Lord had told him. [Gen. 12:1-4a]

On Sunday also, I turn to my bedside stand and pick up the book which has risen next to the top. In it, the first essay is entitled, "Genesis," by the Scottish writer A.L. Kennedy. She reflects on the biblical narrative of Genesis.

*This is the story we tell to each other, the way we explain ourselves and how we came to be....
With the lovely simplicity of poetry, physics, faith, here is the record of chaos being divided into forms. ⁱ*

This will be good, I think. A week to contemplate Genesis and new beginnings.

On Monday, I read the newspaper, look at the pictures on-line. I recoil at continuing scenes of destruction in Japan. Homes, vehicles, boats, cast about like toothpick structures and Matchbox cars. Passenger trains swept away; towns swept away; lives swept away. Tens of thousands dead. A half million or more made homeless. Infrastructures crippled. Our human powerlessness before the forces of nature is tragically evident.

On Tuesday, I turn from the news to read more of A.L. Kennedy's essay on Genesis, but I find a mirror there:

We can be lost, even in Paradise, and the ambivalence of the gift is there in Genesis Our present home is a place of drowning, crushing, burning, earthquakes, lava, diseases, suffocation, and unexpected blows. Measured by the scale of Genesis, conjured out of its spell, we are less than tiny and fatally at risk.... We are shown to be frail, and – no matter how we act and how long we last – we do all die.... Genesis offers no alternative creation, no other choice. ⁱⁱ

On Wednesday, I read of the deepening nuclear crisis in Japan. Reactors suffer partial meltdowns. Fuel rods overheat and catch fire. Explosions release radioactive material, unsafe levels of radioactivity detected in milk and spinach at farms 90 miles away. Japanese officials turn to increasingly desperate measures, while their U.S. counterparts give even more dire appraisals. We play with fire, and we get burned. We strive for control, but we are not in control, and our disinclination to admit the limits of our expertise makes us all the more dangerous.

On Thursday, I turn from the news to read more of A.L. Kennedy's essay on Genesis, but again I find a mirror there:

[The] human authors [of Genesis] emphasize the elements of a creation story that portray the world not just as our home ... entrusted to us, but also as something which we have a manifest destiny to dominate. ... Taking Genesis as their cue, more and more civilizations have eliminated many of the living things that some of us presume Adam took the time to name and then Noah to save. Our own description of an indulgent Maker has left us, like spoilt children,

destroying out of greed, stupidity, and simple curiosity. Today the elements with names reserved for God alone – earth, sea, trees, and so forth – are all afflicted by mankind.ⁱⁱⁱ

On Friday, I read of the deepening crisis in Libya. Militias attack. Peaceful protests are fired upon. Refugees flee. Cease-fires are declared and broken. Food, electricity, water supplies are cut off by the peoples' own government. No-fly zones are proclaimed. Coalitions are formed, warnings are issued, attacks continue.

On Saturday, I turn from the news to read more of A.L. Kennedy's essay on Genesis, but once more I find a mirror there:

The picture [Genesis] paints of humanity, of key figures in three major world religions, would be attractive only to the highly perverse. ... Of the first two children in the world, one – rather famously – kills the other. In Genesis your brother is never your keeper and your family is not the solid, sunny unit Jacob betrays his brother, Esau, and his own father; Jacob's children include Joseph, whose brothers consider killing him and then simply leave him naked in a pit. ... [Genesis depicts] a grubby, morally compromised, violent, scheming world – one that is not exactly hard to recognize.^{iv}

So now a week has passed, and Sunday rolls around again. The newspapers and the Book of Genesis have spoken to one another all week, reminding us that “as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.” Yet now the Gospel of John speaks as well. Jesus says, “You must be born from above ... born of water and Spirit.” Jesus says, “The wind blows where it chooses.” Jesus says, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

U.S. Congressman John Lewis, a noted civil rights leader from Georgia, tells of playing with his fourteen cousins in his Aunt Sevena's dirt yard, when suddenly the sky turned dark. Lightning flashed. The wind blew up. John and his cousins were terrified as his aunt shepherded them into the house. Lewis writes in his autobiography:

Her house was not the biggest place around, and it seemed even smaller with so many children squeezed inside. ... The wind was howling now, and the house started to shake. We were scared. Even Aunt Sevena was scared. And then it got worse. Now the house began to sway. The wood plank flooring beneath us began to bend. And then, a corner of the room started lifting up. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. ... The storm was actually pulling the house toward the sky. With us inside it. That was when Aunt Sevena told us to clasp hands. 'Line up and hold hands,' she said, and we did as we were told. Then she had us walk as a group toward the corner of the room that was rising. From the kitchen to the front of the house we walked, the wind screaming outside, sheets of rain beating on the tin roof. Then we walked back in the other direction, as another end of the house began to lift. And so it went, back and forth, fifteen children walking with the wind, holding that trembling house down with the weight of our small bodies.^v

“Walking with the wind.” It became a metaphor for Lewis's life. And could it be that walking with the wind is just the image with which to make sense of what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus, and to us? Do we find that, in the end, we survive both the gale forces of life and its gentler breezes, by walking with them, sometimes resisting, sometimes cooperating, but always trusting that finally God will be at their end?

By faith Abraham set forth, leaving home behind, allowing himself to be blown forward by the fierce wind of God's Spirit. Yet Abraham set out, not alone, but with his kindred. And John Lewis walked into that petrifying wind not alone, but with his aunt and 14 cousins, "back and forth, fifteen children, walking with the wind, holding that trembling house down." This, too, was an observation A.L. Kennedy drew from Genesis:

Inside or outside the garden, Eve, her husband, and her children, are never entirely solitary. The only pain absent from Genesis is that of loneliness. The whole book retains that particular mercy of Paradise ... -- the faint aftertaste of a home where we were never lonely.^{vi}

Having been born by water and the Holy Spirit, we find that we are never alone. We remain ever with God, and by God's grace, with one another. Sometimes it is that, and only that, which enables us to face the storms of life. "The wind blows where it chooses," said Jesus. And so it does. Sometimes, seemingly, for better; sometimes, seemingly, for worse. So we walk into the wind, hanging on tight to one another, by God's grace.

With God's help, I want to walk into the wind with those in Japan, frightened and homeless.

With God's help, I want to walk into the wind with those in Haiti, still rebuilding their homes, their churches, their lives.

With God's help, I want to walk into the wind with those around the world who strive for responsible stewardship of our planet and honest care of God's Creation.

With God's help, I want to walk into the wind with Nina, and with Anne, thrust prematurely into widowhood, and with all who grieve such loss.

With God's help, I want to walk into the wind with a friend who is fighting for life, or another who is waiting for death.

With God's help, I want to walk into the wind with the downtrodden and despairing of our city, our nation, our world.

Most of all, I want to walk into these places with you. Together, by God's grace, may we hold that trembling house down.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.

ⁱ A. L. Kennedy, "Genesis," in *Killing the Buddha: A Heretic's Bible*, by Peter Manseau and Jeff Sharlet (NY: Free Press/Simon & Schuster, 2004), p. 10.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

^v John Lewis and Michael D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, as excerpted by Patricia Templeton in *Synthesis*, 3/20/11, p. 3.

^{vi} Kennedy, p. 12.