

Proper 23, Year C: 10 October 2010

Hear my teaching, O my people: incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world:

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a man who lived in the middle of a desert.
Yet, that was not quite true.
It would be better to say that he was a prisoner of the desert.
You see, somehow and sometime in the past
our friend had acquired the habit of following his shadow, and only his shadow.
It was a relentless and unbending compass
which he obeyed completely and followed without question.
Every morning when the sun came up
he began walking in the direction his shadow pointed.
As the sun traced its slow crescent across the sky
he followed the subtle bending of his shadow.
By the end of the day he had traced a rough oval
and was nearly back to where he had started in the morning.
While his course varied a little with the seasons of the year and the speed he walked,
it wasn't much, and it was never enough to allow him to leave the desert.

This had been going on for as long as he could remember.
It was familiar and comfortable, the only way he knew.
Yet he also had to admit that it often left him feeling trapped and alone.
Sometimes he wondered what it would be like to face the sun
instead of always turning his back to it and walking the other way.
And he longed to see if there might not be something more to the world than the desert,
but he never seemed to have enough resolve ever to do anything different.

Then one morning, while it was still dark,
as he was preparing to set out again, something came and spoke to him.
It was a voice. At least it was more like a voice than anything else.
It said, "JUST STOP IT." That's all, "JUST STOP IT."

JUST STOP IT?

He didn't know how he knew,
but he knew without a doubt that what was meant by this was following his shadow.
Just Stop it. Could it be that simple? What a lovely thought.
Yet it was a foreboding thought as well.
Certainly there was joy and hope in what the voice suggested,
but there was also fear and dread
because following his shadow was the only way he knew to get around—
such as it was!

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing.
Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.*

About this time the sun came up,
and with it the powerful tug of his growing shadow.
He tried to resist it but could not.
Yet all that day, even as he obediently followed his shadow,
the memory of the Voice and the experience of the morning stayed with him.
It stayed with him through the night, too.
And while he made no significant changes over the next few days,
it was enough just to have some hope.

Then one morning, just a moment before dawn,
he suddenly turned his back to the dark, western horizon
and faced the glow in the east.
It was done almost before he realized what he was doing.
The freedom to do it happened in a moment.
And he recognized in his new freedom the presence again of the Voice,
which lovingly offered him what he could not offer himself.

The rising sun in front of him was brighter and more wonderful
than he had imagined anything could ever be.
As the sun cut across the sky that first day
it was all he could do just to stand there and face the light,
turning slowly now to keep his shadow in back of him!
There was no question about going anywhere.
Yet, as the day passed, his shadow became less and less intimidating
and his new freedom more and more familiar,
even if it was just to stand still.

Finally, one morning, the Voice came again.
As with the other times, he could not fully describe what happened,
only that the Voice brought him another gift.
The gift this time was a sense of direction.

Slowly, he put one foot in front of the other,
fixed his gaze on some distant mountains, and set out.
He wasn't sure where he was going,
but at least he wasn't still going around in circles.
And he certainly didn't feel alone anymore.

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