

Sermon at St. Alban's Episcopal Church  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent Year A  
The Rev. Timothy A. Boggs

Please pray with me for a moment. Gracious God, we know you are the one who restores, renews, refreshes, resurrects. Who calls out and unbinds. We know you do this in our time, in our place, with our bodies and our dreams. Let us live into to this truth, watching for your call, accepting your renewal. Amen

The Mala Mala game reserve of South Africa is more than fifty square miles with lakes and river and bush and hills and rocky outcroppings, and an amazing array of God's glorious creatures. It borders, without interruption or fence, on the seventy-six thousand square miles of the Kruger National Park, more than twice the size of Maine.

One of the largest reserves anywhere, Mala Mala means Kudu in the Itsonga language. Kudu is a type of antelope in abundance there, as they have been for a million years. They run 50 miles an hour. And today they and creatures of all sorts enjoy the freedom and safety of the land and clean air and waters of Mala Mala...but it was not always so.

The game reserve was established in the early 1900's for the hunting of big game by mostly Englishmen. The people, the land and the animals were all put at risk by this practice. The Tsonga people, at home for centuries on the shores of the Sand River were forcibly bound and dragged miles away to make their homes in a dusty settlement camp. The land was carved with roads to help the hunters in their search for prey, the animals were shot and skinned and taken to London and New York as trophies.

And then over time something changed...and then a reclamation began. A renewal, a change... In the late 1960's hunting was banned on Mala Mala and lands near the borders of the National Park ...roads were closed, a renewal mindset began to develop, new possibilities were imagined, a different sort of guest began to visit, and in the wild, new generations of animals were born in the now safer natural setting of their species. They flourished without fear of the hunter, as they had for millennium. Mala Mala was the first of the colonial era lodges to make the transition from shooting, to viewing and photographing and experiencing the animals. And then with the end of Apartheid the Tsonga people, following tough negotiations, were given back their land and their place in the verdant hills and on the flowing river began to be restored. The owners of the lodge became tenants of the Tsonga people and slowly step by step, the employment on, and care and stewardship of the unrivaled ecological diversity and life on Mala Mala has become their home again.

Each year progress continues in this unfinished renewal. Restoration, recovery, reclaiming, a return from an exile, a death reversed...embodied in the raising up of a people bound and gagged and dragged away. It's been a struggle but there is joy in this story and in their voices. There is good work and homes again for them to nurture. Hope flickers alive in their lives.

And now with generations of Mala Mala animals knowing they need not fear the hunter...they too are somehow back at home, under those dynamic skies, restored, undisturbed, thriving, some species bountiful even, as global ecosystems face historic challenges.

We went to see them and for several days watched and listened and smelled and admired these animals which have had this remarkable home for literally millions of years. Yes the big creatures, elephants and rhino and lions and my favorite giraffe, grace the bushveld, but also birds and butterflies and beetles and crocodiles. And cheetah cubs, rolling in the grass.

We were quiet and patient and watched, guided by a sensitive naturalist, we were in awe of life being lived anew in a very old wilderness. Renewed, awakened, unbound, full of hope. Our tracker, a Tsonga man named Bens, embodied a reverence and a passion of the life around him that was infectious. I felt like I was witnessing a way of being and seeing in the world...a world we know is in need of deep renewal. A reclaiming of life threatened. Sacred Life whose dignity and hope had been bound and shot at and diminished. And yet was redeemed for itself, not for us. But we were invited to not merely enjoy and observe but to touch and smell and understand, to recognize the sacred truth that...when at our best, our most human and alive...that we are part of... can be in harmony with, can have a second and third chance to breathe in the generative love of God who has given us this time on this planet, a time to be whole.

Nadine Gordimer, a South African writer whom I read on my sabbatical wrote about this saying, "There was one evening another of those sacred sunsets beginning — the kind we've been having for months now. Buildings and telephone poles were punched black against a watercolour sky into which fresh colour kept washing and spreading, higher and higher. Every evening the colours go up and up to a hectic lilac, and from that, at last, comes the night. People carry their drinks outside not so much to look at the life-giving light, as to be in it. It's everywhere, surrounding faces and hair as it does the trees, freeing us to live anew."

We enter now together a new season...a season when we are invited again to accept an invitation to live restored, forgiven, anew. In some ways our holy weeks begin with today's story from John, written of course long after Jesus resurrection, by a believer in God's hope for renewal.

At its inception this story looks like just another all-too-human lament of "what might have been, if only." Mary and Martha are convinced that if only Jesus had brought his healing powers earlier their brother would not have died. The story points to what God can do with such moments. He turns them on their heads. He shocks us and surprises us with something new...pointing to both what can happen now and the possibility of what can be. In The Gospel of John, the iconic Raising of Lazarus story is a hinge between the signs of God's presence the world and the promise of God's glorious action in history. For me, the story of the Raising of Lazarus illustrates in the clearest possible terms that the life in God we are offered is indeed a full life, a life reclaimed, a life where our pain is touched by love, where lost potential is re-found, where hope endures. And we see in this story that this begins now, in the present tense. They are their most human of characters, incarnate. Even Jesus wept.

This is not a story of the after-life; it is a story of a complete life. It is a story that does not deny the pain and hard corners of living, the error and sin and loss, the things that might have been, but lights up the ongoing, generative creation that God makes for the present and tomorrow.

What is our posture in light of stories of places and peoples, creation renewed, recovered? I think our task, our opportunity, if we can imagine it as God's image-bearing, God-loving, Spirit-filled people trying to follow Christ and shape our world, is to announce again and again restoration and hope to a world that has discovered its fallenness, to announce healing to a world that has discovered its brokenness, to proclaim love and trust and unbinding to a world that is bound by so much exploitation, fear and suspicion...The gospel of Jesus points us and indeed urges us to be at the leading edge of the whole culture, articulating God's hope in story and music and art and philosophy and education and poetry and politics and theology and even-- heaven help us—in church.

Leading the way...with joy and humor and gentleness and good judgment and true wisdom and yes even some courage in the face of the binding up ,life-taking forces in ourselves and in the world, that diminish, despise and separate. In this posture, I believe if we face the question, "if not now, then when?" And if we are grasped by this vision we may also hear the question, "if not us, then who?" This is a story for us today. First person, present tense.

We went to another place of sacred ground in South Africa, the Robben Island Prison, where Nelson Mandela was held for eighteen of the twenty-four years of his incarceration for his refusal to accept less than the full humanity, dignity and freedom of all the people of his country. It too is a place of human failing...and place that realized the sacredness of true unbinding and hope that God must want for God's people. Our guide there was Charles, one of his prison mates. He too as a young man had taken risks for freedom and was imprisoned for decades from the age of 18. He told us that candidly his own renewal is incomplete but that he has moved to a place of hope.

To stand in Nelson's small cell and to be able to nearly touch the walls with my out-stretched arms and read his paltry ration card and to walk through the hot stone yard

where he slaved...and to know that when he was inaugurated President of South Africa and stood before a million people on the central square of Cape Town and spoke to the world, his personal guests included a dozen of his prison guards who sat in the front row...to learn this is to learn a lesson in the power of renewal, restoration and yes indeed resurrection.

Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu said of Mandela,

"He somehow understood that we are made to be co-creators of the new. We are made for goodness. We are made for love. We are made for friendliness. We are made for togetherness. We are made for all of the beautiful things that you and I know. We are made to tell the world that there are no outsiders. All are welcome: We all belong to this family, this human family, God's family of creation.

We were made to enjoy this family's music, to enjoy beautiful sunsets, to enjoy looking at the billows of the sea and to be thrilled with a rose that is bedecked with dew...

Human beings are actually created for the transcendent, for the sublime, for the beautiful, for the truthful... and all of us are given the task of trying to re-make this world for life complete with these beautiful things."

Oh, this good work of being resurrection-people is far from complete, in South Africa, in Mala Mala, in our hearts and homeland, but our world is abundant in courage and beauty and grace May we never fail to imagine it and step forward, in vitality unbound to live it.