



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 2, 2017
The Rev. Sharon K. Gracen

Beloved, mysterious, permeable, and unbroken are the poetic words that have brought us to this last Sunday of Lent. They all have the feel of things that one might carry on a journey through the desert of the soul. For me they have been lovely companions, sources of delight as they were woven together with other equally lovely words. They have also been a refuge from the craziness of the world. I read them each so many times that they wove a cocoon around me, insulating me a bit from the anxiety and uncertainty of our times.

But the end of Lent means Palm Sunday and Holy Week, particularly Good Friday, that horrible and necessary bridge to Easter. The challenging days ahead call us out of the desert. We cannot, with any sense of integrity, hide from the world if we are committed to making it better. So W.B. Yeats poem *The Second Coming* wouldn't leave me alone this week. It is filled with dire images and a sense of impending discomfort. An article in the *Paris Review* refers to it as "our most thoroughly pillaged poem." You will recognize phrases and words that have made their way into our collective imagery bank. Yeats was an Irish poet, and a Nationalist, deeply involved in his country's affairs. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He wrote this poem in 1919, shortly after the end of WWI. The world had seen the worst of that which humanity is capable in that war to end all wars. Yeats was deeply mystical and given to a fascination with the occult and he seemed to be aware of the beast that still lurked in the heart of humankind. The war had ended but nothing had been won. He was deeply troubled by the prospects for the future. I hear those same worries today.



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Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

It's a little out there but on this Sunday, we are treated to images of fields of bones rattling to life and a dead man called out of his tomb. Despite Christianity's preferred self-image as a religion of love, it is filled with images of death. Even our baptismal service, usually a celebration of babies and children, is shot through with death. We come face to face with the violent death of the one we follow in the weeks to come and if we are honest, we will at least wonder where we would find ourselves in that story. We have the blessing to know that the death that he died is not the end of the story. What we don't always know is how to let die the rough beast, the things that lie in us that keep us from the full and beautiful expression of who we are meant to be. How do we let die all that is not in the image of God? Only by such death, is room made for the birth of the new and the not yet.

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

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Another poet has an answer for us. Rainer Maria Rilke was an Austrian poet born in 1875. His work has found an ecstatic following in this century. His mystical lens offers us a view of things beyond the ordinary, of that which dwells within things and moments. This poem, *The Observer*, is a bit of an antidote to Yeats' *Second Coming*. Rilke's quiet joy serves up a challenging yet hopeful concept of surrender as the way to be free of that which holds us back.

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I can tell a storm by the way the trees
are whipping, compared to when quiet,
against my trembling windows, and
I hear from afar things whispering
I couldn't bear hearing without a friend
or love without a sister close by.
There moves the storm, the transforming one,
and runs through the woods and through the age,
changing it all to look ageless and young:
the landscape appears like the verse of a psalm,
so earnest, eternal, and strong.
How small is what we contend with and fight;
how great what contends with us;
if only we mirrored the moves of the things
and acquiesced to the force of the storm,
we, too, could be ageless and strong.
For what we can conquer is only the small,
and winning itself turns us into dwarfs;
but the everlasting and truly important
will never be conquered by us.
It is the angel who made himself known
to the wrestlers of the Old Testament:
for whenever he saw his opponents propose
to test their iron-clad muscle strength,
he touched them like strings of an instrument
and played their low-sounding chords.
Whoever submits to this angel,
whoever refuses to fight the fight,
comes out walking straight and great and upright,
and the hand once rigid and hard
shapes around as a gently curved guard.
No longer is winning a tempting bait.
One's progress is to be conquered, instead,
by the ever mightier one.
(Translated by Annemarie Kidder.)

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We are invited to surrender to Jesus' story and to his abiding presence. I wish that it were as easy as it sounds. I hope that this poetry filled Lent has given you companionable thoughts for this season of spiritual discernment. May we walk together through the next few weeks, sharing all that this holy time has to offer and arrive at Easter strengthened and renewed.

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