

Lent 3B, March 15, 2009
St. Matthew's, Austin

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Early this month I went to Africa as part of a small delegation from the Diocese of Texas, led by Bishop Dena Harrison. We were laying the groundwork for a companion diocese relationship with the Diocese of Southern Malawi. We traveled for about 100 hours total going and coming, and I saw a LOT of movies on the plane!

One was *The Devil Wears Prada*. Merrill Streep plays Miranda Priestly--strikingly beautiful, intelligent--a hard working, driven professional editor of a fashion magazine in New York whose power can make or break a designer's career. She is ruthless and cynical: a heartless monster of a person. Yet all her staff, the mignons around her whom she uses and abuses, bow to her because of their own ambition. They want to move up in the fashion world and they believe that working for her—if they can survive it for a year or so—is the ticket. Into that world comes a bright, aspiring young writer, fresh from college; her success as Miranda's assistant slowly draws her in, to the point where she begins to sacrifice her friends, her beloved, her values. Then, poised for a promotion, she sees what she is becoming and walks away.

Our Old Testament lesson today is the 10 Commandments. I think that the most commonly violated is the first. Our sin as human beings, particularly in American culture, is idolatry, worshipping false gods—and it is writ large in *The Devil Wears Prada*. In the film, personal ambition is the false god. It trumps everything. It creates an environment devoid of trust and respect, where no one would dare to be vulnerable for fear of being ridiculed or professionally assassinated. It is, in short, a world without love.

The movie is a morality tale. It is also a satire. It could be funny; but not to people who have experienced that kind of ruthlessness and cruelty in their own working place, who have suffered under the priority given to appearance, to profit and worldly power at the expense of integrity, human kindness and compassion.

When I returned from Africa I mentioned to a friend in New York that the movie reminded me of the art world. She replied, "it's like every world." After we hung up I thought: no, it's not. It is not like the world I now live in—my world with you in this community of faith. Nor, needless to say, is it like the world I saw through my experience of the church in Southern Malawi.

Now I know that there are good people and institutions in the secular world just as there are corrupt people and institutions in the church—the ones who have lost their way and are following false gods. The character of each depends on the way we understand our purpose in life, our mission—if you will. Whom do you serve? Is it the self or the other; is it me and mine or is it God and the good of community?

Based on what I know of ministries and the worship in the Anglican church in Southern Malawi. I believe that the Bishop, James Tengatenga has the right focus—the worship of God and the service of all God's people. Let me list the ministries we saw in one village parish: a school for grades 1 through 8; a daily pre-school and food program for AIDS orphans; an adult literacy program; and the malaria-prevention program of the Episcopal church, Nets for Life, which distributes treated nets free of charge and trains people in their use. The priest and people do all this in a village with no electricity, no running water. And the priest also serves five "outstations"—i.e. church plants.

Sustainability is a goal in the diocese. So another parish raises goats, and they have a vegetable garden, fertilized with the goat manure, to provide the food to the needy.

Now for Sunday worship. Bishop Tengtenga, who supports the ordination of women, asked us to preach. Bishop Harrison went to the Cathedral. I went to St. John's parish in Ndiranti, a township in the large city of Blantyre. The treasurer of the church, who drove me there, described Ndiranti as the Soweto of Malawi—a large, densely crowded and deeply impoverished slum neighborhood. There I was blessed to participate in the most joyful service of my life. It lasted 4 hours and they flew by. Why four hours? We had 500 for communion and I blessed 150 children. Mostly, though, the offering lasted an hour and a half. It was the first Sunday of the month, called “paper Sunday” because people come forward to deliver their monthly pledge, dropping bills into a large colorful cloth, held at the four corners by young women. Three choirs sang through this amazingly happy ritual.

The service was all about giving: giving praise to God in heartfelt song and dance (they do not bury the “Alleluia” in Lent!). Giving thanks. Giving joyfully in the offering. In a simple brick and concrete building in one of the poorest neighborhoods in one of the poorest countries in the world, this was a celebration of bounty, of abundance. It was an experience of the kingdom of God, where everyday reality, time and space, dissolve and the fruits of the spirit are alive and present: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness... Parishioners come from far and near. As “foreign” as it might have seemed in terms of language, music, and practice, there I felt totally at home in the Spirit.

My experience—both in visiting and in worshipping in Southern Malawi—showed they are living out their mission statement: “We are a diocese committed to witnessing for Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the ministry of love, evangelism and action in the midst of a broken world.” Because they are true to that mission, they are growing. People are drawn to belong to the community, to celebrate weekly, to share in the blessing of an alternative reality—God's kingdom reality—and to act to heal the broken world around them. Their calling, like ours, is to serve God in others, loving neighbor as self.

All of those people leave church to return to their daily reality—jobs (if they are so blessed in an economy with less than 50% employment), homes, families—much as you and I do. My daily reality is this church. I am deeply blessed that **this** is my working world, the community of faith that you create and sustain. My profession is my vocation: to love and serve God, loving and serving you and supporting you in our common ministries. It is a privilege, indeed.

We cannot always choose the world in which we work, but we can—we must--choose the community of friends and of faith to whom we belong, the god whom we serve. That means choosing, carefully every day what we read, what programs we watch or listen to, what we say, whom we frequent, how we treat others. Seeing *The Devil Wears Prada* was a chilling reminder for me of the power that those choices—large and small--have to mold our character and shape our souls. Lent is the season to think about our choices, examine our lives and make the changes that will nurture a sense of God's presence at the center of our being. Switch off the tube, the trash-talk radio, the obsessive computer or video game; you know what takes you away from your best self.

Remember your blessings, dear ones, including the privilege of taking for granted: food, shelter, security, public health, reliable power, safe running water. They are not granted to billions of people in the world. At the same time, know that in those very same places, God is present—all the more powerfully, perhaps, for not being overshadowed by material abundance.

God willing, as our relationship develops with the diocese of Southern Malawi in the coming years, many of you will be blessed to go. You will go to serve—yes—and also to learn: about stewardship, sufficiency, sustainability, generosity, and the abundance of the Spirit in the midst of material poverty. You will find yourselves at home in the Spirit with your brothers and sisters under the big, beautiful skies of their native land.

One more story in closing. In my sermon I suggested that—in addition to their other Lenten disciplines—each of them take a few minutes a day to remember that they were created in the image of God, and that they were blessed in their baptism as beloved children of God. My interpreter, who was an elder in the church and former senior warden, told me that he had added a phrase to my sermon, reminding them to give special care for the poor and needy in Lent. This to a congregation of people whom we would consider very poor—some of whom live on a dollar a day. So, let me urge you, in this season of Lent, to join with our friends in Malawi and give special attention to the needs of the poor. Volunteer at the Food Bank or Caritas, join the Habitat Episcopal build team, give to The Heifer Fund. Live in God's abundance and give from God's bounty.

Rejoice, give thanks, and sing!