

This morning I want to introduce you to a small book: Rules for Old Men Waiting, a first novel of Peter Pouncey, an Oxford educated classicist, sometime Dean of Columbia University and President Emeritus of Amherst College. Mr. Pouncey's story revolves around a retired history professor named MacIver, who after a long and distinguished career as an academic, has retired with his wife to their summer home on the Cape. A veteran of WWI, MacIver's life has definitively tipped toward his last days. His wife has died, the home they love deteriorates as his health ebbs, and he recognizes that the end of his own life is imminent. Reflecting on his life, he notes especially time as a soldier in the First World War about which he has rarely, either to his wife and colleagues, ever spoken. In preparation for the future about which he is unclear, MacIver takes to his desk and in long hand, begins to write *rules* for the living out of his days. As he does so, he is filled with vivid memories of that terrible, devastating war that obliterated the lives, hopes and dreams of so many young men, women and families.

He writes, *'On the few occasions when you come to yourself, and are not seeing visions or dreaming dreams, you are forced to realize that you are clenched tight as a fist. The rage seems to be threefold—at the incompleteness of things, that however hard you take stock, nothing tallies to a total; and at the fact you are no longer your own person thinking your own thoughts, but increasingly the prey of random images that assault you; and at the fact, most important, that you were robbed long before the end of people you loved, and powers you had, and always pointlessly. The work you should do should respond to all these furies: Tell a story to its end'*."

As he continues his journal MacIver later writes, *'We just, contentedly for the most part, lay words on things, and let them lie.'*"

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I am reminded of something the noted writer, Frederick Buechner, once said regarding faith and theology. He said all theology is autobiography. What he means is that what we know of God—what and who we believe is God is—is in large measure a telling of who we are, and what we know ourselves to be. Is God strong, valiant and courageous—or shy, hidden and unknown? Who are we? Are we shy or strong, valiant or fearful, bold in the world or hidden from view? Can we be all these things at the same time? And if we are this way, who do we believe God to be?

In an introduction to one of his books entitled, Now and Then, Buechner says, *'If God speaks to us...then I think God speaks to us largely through what happens to us...because the word that God speaks to us is always an incarnate word—a word spelled out to us not alphabetically, in syllables, but enigmatically, in events, (in all their complexity and variety), through the harmonies and disharmonies and counterpoint of all that happens—Sacred Journey) even in the books we read and the movies we see...but if we keep our hearts and minds open as well as our ears, if we listen with patience and hope...God is indeed speaking to us, and...however little we may understand of it, God's word to each of us is both recoverable and precious beyond telling.'*

Christ & Holy Trinity's Friday morning Bible study class has just ended for its summer break. This wonderful group of curious inquirers and seekers has been meeting Friday mornings for 19 years. Some of you may be thinking—by now, some of them must have learned a thing or two—and we have. And yet if you interviewed any of them, I suspect they would say that they have learned a very great

deal of God and themselves and who Jesus is. And they would honestly tell you that they have forgotten as much as they have learned. And yet, something about them is different—something inside them and around them has changed. In fact we all have changed—every one of us.

Every year we grapple with the deep words and the even deeper meanings of this Book we call holy—the *Good Book*. We listen to these words and our own lives with patience and with hope because we know that the words of God are *both recoverable and precious beyond telling*. Some years we have attempted to uncover broader themes of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, but most years we focus on one particular book of the Bible, whether from the Jewish scriptures or the New Testament.

This year we have been reading—actually re-reading the first book of the Bible—Genesis. Seven years ago we studied Genesis and we returned to it again because so much of our knowing is so easily forgotten. We loose so much in the course of time. The vividness and vitality of the Bible is so easily replaced with recent news, overshadowed by our everyday. And so we must return again and again to these stories that we glean anew their ancient yet always relevant meaning for our time.

What is truly fascinating is that the scriptures do not change in the course of six or seven years, or six hundred or even a thousand years. Rather, it is we ourselves, the readers who in becoming story tellers, who change. Sometimes we change subtly day by day, but more often dramatically and even drastically in year to year. And so whenever we read scripture—whatever we read—is, in fact, new—a story we have never heard before. For in every new day we are changed and changing, and thus our reading and interpretation of scripture changes with us.

Whenever we think we have heard it all, or that we conclusively know the meaning of scripture—Buechner's admonition that reading and interpreting a parable or story from scripture is actually reading our own story, suggests that scripture changes as we change through our loves, losses, hopes, dreams and musings about the future.

MacIver rages at the *incompleteness of things*, that *nothing at the end tallies to a total*, that *he was robbed of the persons he loved and the powers he had—pointlessly*. So does Saul, the anointed yet forsaken King of Israel lament the death of his favored son Jonathan in battle with the Philistines. So does David, and newly anointed King, lament the death of the man he most fears—Saul, and his son, Jonathan, whom David loves even more than a brother. *Things*, even for God's anointed, *don't seem to tally in the end, and persons we love we lose, seemingly so pointlessly*. What can we do, we people of faith when faith seems too hard to come by?

What we can do as MacIver discovered is to **tell the story to the end**—to tell our stories *not by laying words on things*, but to tell our stories with as much honesty and hope, as much reality as we can muster that we speak of the deep down essence of things, to tell of our rage and hurt, as well as our joy and delight and in the telling to realize that God lives and comes alive in the telling of these stories because God is the very incarnate word of our lives. **In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God**—the truth so real we often cannot fathom the enigmatic mystery of it all—and yet so precious, it is beyond all telling.