

THE GRACE OF WRATH
Sermon, February 28, 2010
Texts: Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

Sea World resumed its killer whale shows yesterday, three days after a trainer was killed by one of the whales at the Orlando, Florida, theme park. Trainer Dawn Brancheau, 40, died on Wednesday after Tilikum, a 12,000 pound Orca whale, pulled her into the water by her hair ... actually, by her ponytail, which evidently was a new hairdo for the trainer; this may or may not have played a role in the whale's behavior. It is a tragic story, wrapped in mystery, but a fundamental reminder that such animals are, by nature, wild beasts.

It reminded me of another story from nearly seven years ago, October 2003. One of the longest running, best attended, financially successful Las Vegas shows was Siegfried and Roy ... the show was a combination magic show/three-ring circus extravaganza performed by master illusionists Siegfried Fischbacher and Roy Horn. Using their trademark enormous white tigers as companions in their performances, Siegfried and Roy awed and amazed crowds with their innovative magic and their fearless use of those big cats; over 5,750 performances were given to date. Then on October 3rd, 2003, Roy's 59th birthday, something went terribly wrong. In an instant, the hard wall of reality came crashing down on these master illusionists. The 600-pound white tiger named Montecore became distracted by someone in the 1,500 member crowd and he broke his routine, straying toward the edge of the stage. A hairdo played a role here, as well ... there was a woman with a big hairdo in the front row who apparently fascinated Montecore, to the point where the white tiger just gazed at the woman and was headed toward her. When Roy saw what was happening, he placed himself between Montecore and the spectator, as there were no barriers between the audience and the show. Montecore, intent on the woman's hair, resisted by gently taking Roy's arm in his mouth; something he had done countless times without incident in previous performances. However, this put Roy off balance, and in trying to keep between Montecore and the woman, Roy tripped and fell.

At first people thought it was all part of the act, but became horrified as they witnessed what followed. Stage hands came rushing out, and in an instant, Montecore was on top of Roy, clamping his powerful jaws around Roy's neck. Siegfried ran across the stage yelling, "No, no, no!" But the tiger was resolute, and dragged his master thirty feet offstage "literally like a rag doll," as another witness recalls. Critically injured, in fact barely alive when the tiger was lured off of him, Roy Horn suffered a series of strokes brought on by tremendous blood loss; his jugular had been punctured. While being transported by ambulance the barely conscious Roy implored everyone not to hurt Montecore, that he was a good tiger, that the tragedy was not the tiger's fault. In fact, as the incident was reviewed, the conclusion reached by Siegfried was that the tiger had been actually trying to *help* Roy when he fell. The neck-dragging was described as simply the tiger's instinctual method for carrying one of its own young out of a dangerous position. But Montecore didn't know that Horn, unlike a tiger cub, did not have fur and thick skin covering his neck and that his neck was so vulnerable to injury. Others were skeptical of that speculation, but Siegfried later asserted if Montecore had wanted to hurt Horn, the tiger would have snapped his neck and shaken him back and forth.

Critics later said the illusionists were living inside an illusion of their own making, that Siegfried and Roy had worked with, trained with, lived with those huge, powerful cats for so long that these proprietors of the Mirage had bought into the mirage they had created ... that these were just extra-large domesticated animals. Montecore had been trained by Horn since he was a cub; he had performed with the act for six years. Yes, the tigers were well-trained. The tigers had never known a life outside of Siegfried and Roy's opulent, elegant Mirage oasis in Las Vegas. But marble floors, jeweled collars, and bright lights couldn't dim the instinctual drives and primal nature of these cats. They're not just extra big domestic kitty cats. They're wild animals, with thousands of years of behavior hard-wired into them. Roy was right to insist that Montecore was a good tiger. But don't forget what good tigers do ... they hunt, pounce, bite, shred, kill. And as I heard Helen Glover rather bluntly put it on talk radio this past Friday, in reference to the Sea World incident, people seem to have forgotten that Mr. Whale's first name is Killer.

I was thinking of all this when we were at the zoo yesterday for my daughter Hannah's belated 13th birthday party. What a great day to be at the zoo! It was cloudy, cold, with intermittent snow squalls ... and as a result, there were almost no other people there. The animals seemed to delight whenever they saw us coming, and many were in playful performance mode as we apparently brought a break to their boredom. An African Crowned Crane and I had a wonderful time mirroring each other's actions for about ten minutes; he mimicked (and, at times, bested) my every move. I also seemed to "connect" with an emu; I caught his eye for a full fifteen seconds or so, then took off in a five-yard sprint, and he took off on a prolonged and animated sprint all around the enclosure to the bemusement of the kangaroos and other emus in the pen ... by the way, those birds are fast! Fun as the animals

were, though, and safely behind enclosures, these are still wild animals. That emu could lay me flat with one kick of his powerful legs. Now, being a pastor, it seems every time I go to the zoo I always think of Noah's Ark ... and I remember thinking yesterday how one of the most miraculous things of that Genesis account is how God obviously suppressed the wild urges of those beasts cramped together for the duration of that Deluge voyage.

A few summers ago, on the final day of Vacation Bible School, we took the VBS volunteer helpers to see the film **Evan Almighty**, which was sort of a modern-day re-telling of Noah's Ark. The movie was something of a sequel to, but far cleaner and more family-friendly than, the movie **Bruce Almighty**. In **Evan Almighty** God, played by Morgan Freeman, makes the assertion that people often miss the point of the story of Noah's Ark. People think it's a story about God's wrath, when it really is a "love story." Freeman/God also makes the statement: "Whatever I do, I do it out of love", which is an ongoing theme in this film. That got me to thinking: Is there any story about God that isn't a love story? Some may think the claim of the original Noah flood account being a love story underplays the problem of sin and the reality of God's wrath. But while **Evan Almighty** may over-simplify the account of the original Flood, I wholeheartedly agree with the premise that even what appears to us to be God's harshest discipline is wholly animated by His love.

One of the first things we are taught in Sunday school is that God Is Love. And yes, we've also learned God is holy. The two are not necessarily contradictory, but some don't realize that. There are too many people who picture this holy God as sort of a cross between an angry Father Time and an accusing, finger-pointing Uncle Sam; so many people view God as fundamentally angry. Like the big cats and 12,000 pound whales who may appear tame, but are fundamentally wild, so God, Who may appear loving, Who may appear tame and gentle ... He is dangerously and fundamentally angry. "Watch out, God cannot be domesticated. Watch out for His wrath! It'll kill you! God hates sin, and He isn't going to tolerate it! God is love, sure, BUT God hates sin."

How does one hold those two realities of God's love and God's wrath in tension? Well, think of God's wrath as God's love in action ... it is His emphatic "No!" to anything that leads to our destruction. That's a perspective which should resonate with any parent ... if your little child stepped into oncoming traffic, you're going to scream NO and yank that child out of harm's way. The child may perceive your reaction to be harsh, demanding, frightening and unloving. But that little child doesn't have your perspective. He/she can't see those things coming down the road which can do them great harm. What the child perceives as harsh and unloving is, in reality, an expression of your fiercest and purest love! And that's how it is with God.

God's wrath is not a counterpoint to his love, but an expression of it. God hates sin not so much because it offends His sensibilities, but because He hates the way it distorts our lives and hurts us. It's not "God is love, BUT God hates sin." It's "God is love, SO God hates sin." He is not out to hurt you. He is not fundamentally angry, or vindictive, or harsh. He is fundamentally loving. He IS love. We are loved with a holy love that cries "No!" again and again to the things that will destroy us. Pardon the pun, but this is the Grace of Wrath. His wrath is His grace in action. Now I know there are some pretty hard bits in Scripture. It is difficult to frame the destruction of the flood, or the saga of Sodom and Gomorrah, or the cruel death by crucifixion, as a love story. But if we truly believe God not only loves, but IS love, we will understand there is no action He can take that is not animated by love. Including the action we commemorate during the season of Lent, the journey to the cross. The journey that was taken by the One who is Love Incarnate; it was a journey of love.

Jesus was under no illusions. In today's gospel He is journeying closer to Jerusalem, and He knows, closer to His death. He knew from an historical perspective that Jerusalem was, at heart, a killer. He knew, even if his disciples didn't, the nature of this city, especially towards prophets: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you ... " You know, we talk of "giving up" something for Lent ... giving up meat, or sweets, or television. Well, "Just give up!" was the Pharisee's advice to Jesus. "Herod is after you. He has you marked, just as he had your cousin John the Baptist marked. Get out of town, quick. Give up your mission here."

When warned of the threat of Herod, Jesus declares with an unswerving resolve that "today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way". He dismisses the threat of Herod; Jesus won't give up. Yes, he knows Herod is, at heart, a beast; he's a murderous, conniving and predatory fox. But Jesus has His own schedule, His divine agenda, His mission to fulfill, and the time-frame has already been divinely determined.

But in a way Jesus embraces their warning, by asserting He WILL give up. Yes, He will give Himself up. He will travel to Jerusalem and meet head on the traumatic tradition of that city, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. Jesus will give up everything, His very life. Jesus will indeed "give it up" in order that we might "get it all." Because He is on a mission of love, He is the incarnation of the One Who IS love, and it is His fundamental nature to love. Whatever God does, He does it out of love.

He does it because He loves you.