

# 400th Anniversary Celebration at Jamestown, Virginia

June 25, 2007 [Episcopal News Service]

Sermon by the Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori  
Presiding Bishop and Primate, The Episcopal Church  
Jamestown 400th  
24 June 2007  
1 Peter 5:5b-11; Luke 15:1-10

We're here today to celebrate a remarkable history. This is one of the central starting points from which the gospel spread across this land we call the United States. While the Episcopal Church got its start here, the gospel was already at work south of here, in the Spanish settlement at St. Augustine, when English settlers first came to Jamestown. But this is the place where English and protestant worship took root, and it has shaped the experience of this nation in ways we do and do not yet fully understand.

We are presently engrossed in a national search for the meaning of this place, a search that ebbs and flows, and is only tangentially connected to numerical anniversaries. The last episode of national soul-searching related to Jamestown coincided with the Viet Nam war. That is no coincidence. What does it mean to be a Christian in this nation? What stories and values do we claim from the history of this place? What do we remember about this beginning, and how does it continue to shape our lives today?

It is that very tension between knowing the history and not fully knowing the meaning of that history that seems most urgent. Lest we turn too much toward assuming that we understand the fullness of what has gone on here, the letter of Peter urges us toward humility, toward resisting the leap to judgment. And the gospel follows suit, reminding us that God seems to be most interested in those who are lost, rather than those who are proudly confident of their place.

That theme of humble searching for the lost pervades our reflection here today. The remarkable line in Peter's letter is probably most familiar to those who say Compline regularly: "keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour." Who will be devoured? Who or what is the devouring lion?

The word that's translated "the devil" can also mean one who is given to malicious gossip, one who spreads evil tales. We might just as well translate it, 'Watch out, don't let your pride make you captive to that urge to spread evil words about your neighbors.' There are a whole lot of evil tales wrapped up in the history of this place – and a lot of

tales of good as well. It is those latter tales of good news that we're out to claim, remember, and tell again and again. The rub is that sometimes it's hard to tell the difference.

The history of this place is a challenging narrative, with abundant prowling. Who or what will be devoured in our telling of it, who will be set up for gossip and evil tales?

Some of the story is lurid, like the cannibalism to which some resorted in a time of famine – like the man in the Starving Time who killed his pregnant wife, threw her fetus in the river, cut her up and salted her for food. It quite outdoes the biblical story of Lot's wife. It is also the story of a desperate man, quite likely out of his mind. Set alongside that story the awareness that the gospel in this place eventually became the impetus to feeding the starving and caring for the ill.

Some of the story's meaning is much debated, like the character of those who first came here on the Godspeed, Susan Constant, and Discovery. John Smith himself has variously been understood as liar, manipulator, canny politician, and likely savior of the colony in desperate times. Charged with plotting mutiny on the voyage here, he was shackled and sentenced to death at first landfall. Delivered not once but twice from diabolic tales and their judgment, when the mission's sealed orders were opened he was discovered to be one of the colony's pre-destined leaders. Elected governor a year later, he brought a semblance of order to the chaos in this place, and ended any attempt to establish another aristocracy. He went back to England in 1612, after being burned – not just by the acid of tale-tellers, but by a bag of powder that exploded in his lap. He never managed to go back to exploring, being relegated to giving advice to others and writing his memoirs. Commentators, both his contemporaries and much later, often judged him a writer of fantastic fiction designed only to augment his own reputation. Yet recent scholarship has shown many of the fabulous details in his tales to be entirely accurate. Yes, he had a healthy ego, but he was also an intrepid leader and entrepreneur. What to learn or value? Was he a tarnished saint or an utterly self-serving varlet? There is certainly something recognizable in his story that parallels God's use of the younger brother, the one whom others judge "scoundrel," and the person with evidently mixed motives.

Humility – or even the willingness to halt the leap to judgment before the tales turn malicious, or before their final working-out is fully known – humility would seem to be an essential part of this story. The Jamestown colony was a central part of England's striving after empire, established in part to rebuff the Spanish, already well-established farther south. That striving continues to shape our national story. How much of it is that ancient struggle over religion and empire?

Competing versions of the gospel, and Elizabeth's Settlement version of the faith, as well as the quest for economic profit, were motivating forces here. Yet the good news managed to be spoken and done, even in the midst of diabolic tales.

The story of the first Christian convert, Matoaka, is rife with such ambiguous complexity. She is better known by her childish name Pocahantas, daughter of the head of the

Powhatan Confederacy of Algonquin Nations, a governmental system perhaps more democratic and civilized than the one the settlers had known. Matoaka was taken hostage to slow the warring between native peoples and the English invaders. Her baptism and marriage to John Rolfe put a temporary stop to the incessant skirmishes. A scholar of Native history calls her "medicine woman, spy, entrepreneur, and diplomat." Dead at 20 or 21 at the end of a visit to England with her husband and child, she is also called the first member of the Anglican Communion.

That lion prowling around would seem to have each of us in his eye – each one who looks to make hasty judgment about the value or effectiveness or godly possibility of another. What did the Rev. Mr. Robert Hunt preach about during the few months he labored in this colony a-borning? He is remembered for working peace among his fellow travelers, during the voyage and after they landed, and for gathering them all for prayer in the new settlement. It is the first communion service he held on these shores which we remember today. We also celebrate and give thanks for his apparent willingness to keep seeking those lost in anger, to keep searching for God's presence in the face of all possible manner of evil tales and evil deeds, until his own life fell forfeit to disease.

The evil tales sometimes are truly evil. This place reeks with the origins of the slave trade in this land, begun here in 1619 to facilitate the tobacco trade. That history is not yet fully redeemed, even though the church which sanctioned slavery was later instrumental in its dismantling. The work is not yet over, and that work is certainly before us in the fifth century of our presence here. Yet Episcopalians in Virginia, together with Anglicans in Ghana and in Liverpool, have begun to build a triangle of hope to counter the old and evil tales of a triangle of shame and horror – slaves bought for the price of goods brought from England to Ghana, and later sold on these shores. Reconciliation is emerging from the evils of a terrible past.

Our task is to take up that gospel search for hope, and the promise of new life among what others believe lost, whether evil tales or human beings. This next century will continue to call us in all humility to redeem the evil tales and deeds of the past, with the very tools of the gospel that have been so misused. The biblical belief that slavery was a Christian act, and the understanding that kidnapping was an appropriate prelude to baptism, and the sense that the descendants of another empire have no place here – all those tales died hard. That lion still prowls around, searching to devour our tender will to see stranger as friend, to see lost as potentially found.

The humility to re-examine our certainties will begin the prophetic re-telling of those tales. None is complete villain, none completely immune to error. None of these tales is completely ended as long as we continue to tell them and search for the new life that may yet emerge. Our humility to keep telling and looking – and even prowling around – will bring new and better news. It bears resemblance to the work of the archaeologist who unearthed the foundations of the fort in this settlement just a few years ago, even though the certainty of experts insisted those foundations had long since been drowned in the river.

Our task is neither to ignore the evil tales, nor to see them in isolation. Our task is to humbly search for the seeds of the good news planted in this place 400 years ago, seeds not yet all grown to maturity, seeds of which some are bearing abundant fruit. Our task is to insist that the lost can yet be found, that new life can yet grow out of stories others deem wholly evil.

Thanks be to God for the gifts he has given in this place. Thanks be to God even for the lion, whose prowling keeps us on the move, searching, searching, searching.

What story will you tell?

Copyright © 2006 The  
Episcopal Church

**The Presiding Bishop** 815 Second Avenue New York, NY 10017 | (212)  
716-6276 • (800) 334-7626