

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 2nd SUNDAY OF LENT (A)
Genesis 12: 1-4a Psalm 33 2 Timothy 1: 8b-10 Matthew 17: 1-9
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

A friend told a group of us this story about a business man he knows. Seems the man was on one more flight to a meeting, something he does a lot. “I have so many frequent flyer miles on my airline, they should give me a share in it,” he said. He knows the routine by heart. Before he boards he gets the day’s financial newspaper and a cup of coffee, then, once on board, he stows away his carry-on luggage and settles into his seat. He fastens his safety belt, sips his coffee, reads the newspaper and reviews his notes for the meeting he is going to. The flight attendant gives the usual safety instructions, which he ignores, because he knows them by heart.

“Same old, same old,” he says, with the attitude of a seasoned traveler.

Except for one flight he took recently. He said that as they were getting close to landing, the previously chatty voice of the pilot came on over the speaker system—but now with a solemn tone. “We may have a problem, ladies and gentlemen. We are not sure the landing gear has come down. We will need to circle for a while, expel fuel and then try to land.” The flight attendants stood up and reviewed the all-too-familiar landing instructions, adding an extra part about taking an emergency-landing position, which required bending forward and wrapping one’s arms around the lower legs. The man said, “We were all ears, noting where the emergency doors were and the floor lighting leading to the exits, making sure our seat belts were securely fastened and getting the emergency posture just right.” He finished the story by saying, “I could see the fire engines lining up along the field, and I knew that following the instructions could mean the difference between life and death.” Needless to say, the landing gear did come down, all went well. But who could miss the message about the importance of listening and following the guiding voice of one who has your best interests at heart?

Words spoken to us at a crucial time could mean the difference between life and death; between having a more meaningful life or just living through the days in a superficial way without direction—a kind of death, don’t you agree?

The disciples went to an out of the way place, a mountain top, with the Lord. It is

quiet there and they can see for a great distance. There things can be put into focus for them; there they can get perspective. More than they expected, for on the mountain that day they got a momentary glimpse into how special Jesus is. A voice, a really big voice, guides them, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased, listen to him.” Like those disciples, we have come apart for a while today, with other disciples and the same voice is encouraging us, “Listen to him.” But we must listen not just the words and sentences he speaks, because a person also speaks by actions. Jesus’ words and actions will tell us about God and about ourselves; but also about forgiveness, compassion and our responsibility to spread what we have heard.

The One on the mountain who speaks to us today and directs us to Jesus, is on our side, speaking for our well-being and happiness. The voice directs us to Jesus, to listen and observe what we see and hear. But there are so many competing voices around us, trying to get us to listen to other messages and to act in other than Jesus’ ways. With so many contrary voices distracting us, some we have even given into, Lent is a good time to have our hearing checked. It is a time to unplug our ears and try listening afresh. In Lent we can make it a daily habit to ask, “What is Christ saying to me in the people and events of this day?” Lent is when we try to take his words to heart and examine our lives through his perspective, based on what we have heard and observed in the gospels.

So, for example, in the light of Jesus’ words, is what I call a “successful life,” really that? By whose standards? What I label “blessings” are they really from God’s hands or just the fruit of my hard work, without much thought to Christ? Does what I name “happiness,” have a deep and secure base in my life or is it just a transitory feeling, with very shallow roots, easily lost or ripped out of my hands? On the other hand, what some might call “failure,” may produce the deepest joy for me. Or, the death of a dream, may be the opening of a door to a whole other perspective and way of living.

Lent is “hearing-test time.” Just like the man on the plane, it is time to “listen-up.” Someone is speaking to me right now about the details of my life and I need to pay attention. That Someone has my well being at heart. After all, who wants to wake up someday at a place or stage in life and say, “How on earth did I get here?” Who wants to come to the late realization, “I have been flying around in circles like a jet on automatic pilot and I feel like I am running out of fuel!” In particular, I don’t

want to come towards the end of my life and ask, in the words of that old ballad, “Is that all there is?”

No, we all need Lent and a chance to clear our ears and check which voices hold sway over our lives. Listen to their incessant chant, “Success.....” “Competition....” “Win....” “Get....” “More....” etc. When you come right down to it, there is no satisfaction in those voices. No matter how much we try to respond to them and give them what they want to quiet them, we can’t. We feed them, they quiet for a moment and before long they are at it again, “More, more, more.” Sooner or later, we risk disillusion.

We have this mountain gospel story. How can we respond to it? Should we go off to the Rockies, sit there and wait for a vision? Go to a desert on a “vision quest” and don’t come back till we get one? That would be nice, but not really possible. Maybe someday. But in the meanwhile, we can bring the mountain here, to where we are now in our lives. In fact, at this liturgical celebration, we are on that mountain now. We are trying to be attentive to hungers we feel in our hearts, the incompleteness we sense in our lives. With those realities before us, we stop our busy lives and come apart here to hear what God wants to say to us, to receive the daily bread that will nourish us. We do that each time we gather as a community in church, but especially these lenten days when we want to follow the Voice that draws us to Jesus and invites us to listen to him. We know that Voice has our best interests at heart.

If we wanted to be even more intentional, we could put some moments aside each day for deliberate listening. Just say the ancient prayer, “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.” And then try to be quiet. We might spend a few moments a day in prayerful reading of the scriptures, for example next week’s readings ----are they listed in the church bulletin? Are there special classes offered at the church during Lent?--- that would be another listening post. The possibilities are numerous, if we imagine Lent as a mountain-top time during which God has something good to say to us.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Waznak, Robert. An Introduction to the Homily. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998.

A very good beginner’s book. Gives a brief history of Catholic preaching and then

focuses on the “contextual homily” as distinguished from the doctrinal sermon and moral exhortation. Reflects on the metaphors used to describe the preacher and ends with responses to the most frequently asked questions the author has encountered concerning the homily.

QUOTABLE

What is Lent’s fasting? Let’s use our common sense and our imaginations. What if we ate only food that was good for us? What if we ate in rhythms that allow us, most of us are so far from hunger, to know bodily hunger? What if we ate simply and adequately for the basic foods and seasonal foods only? (After all, is it necessary for apples to travel thousands of miles so you can have fresh apples any time of year?) If we are to know the joy of giving thanks over the simplest good, we need to renew our senses of taste and beauty and our sense too, of justice. Baptized people mean to come here to the table every Sunday hungry: hungry to be with one another, hungry to hear, the word of God, hungry for the great thanksgiving, and hungry for the holy Communion.
----from “Celebration,” February, 2005, page 57.

JUSTICE NOTES

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

Probably the most difficult problem today concerns the relationship between political communities that are economically advanced and those in the process of development. Whereas the standard of living is high in the former, the latter are subject to extreme poverty. The solidarity which binds all people together as members of a common family makes it impossible for wealthy nations to look with indifference upon the hunger, misery and poverty of other nations whose citizens are unable to enjoy even elementary human rights. The nations of the world are becoming more and more dependent on one another and it will not be possible to preserve a lasting peace so long as glaring economic and social imbalances persist.

—“Mater et Magistra, #157, Pope John XXIII, 1961

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see you next week,’ when you never know if they’re going to call and say, ‘He’s up

next—it's time for his execution.””

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Carlette Parker #0311386 (On death row since 4/1/99)

Nathaniel Fair #0125241 (5/18/99)

Eric Call #0542384 (5/22/99)

----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

TWO READERS' RESPONSES

[To last week's reflections]

Some wondering. For me the baseball season choice strikes out. We seem to be retreating to a sense of Lent which existed before we had the RCIA. We seem to be back at our own individual preparation through suffering instead of seeing Lent as a time to reflect along with and witnessing for those seeking to become Christian at Easter. Isn't the primary focus supposed to be travelling with the Elect and helping them see where they are going in this last forty-some days?

Jesus entered a time of prayer imaging the Exodus and was tempted only when he was finally hungry and worn out. How are we to start hungry?

Deacon Leo T. Bistak, D. Min., Director of Office of Global Concerns and Lead Agent for Evangelization @ <http://www.toledodiocese-spl.org>

I have a notion I want to share with you on your reflections on Ash Wednesday and mortality in general. Scripture tells us that God breathed the breath of life into Adam and he became a living soul. I like to think of the reverse function. When we

die it is God inhaling our souls back to be within him once again. This, for me, is a very comforting thought.

I wonder if you have heard this before?

Warm Regards, Paul Rader

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A.”** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the “Year A–CD” button on the right and follow the instructions.
2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)
3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes “First Impressions” and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)
4. “Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org
5. “First Impressions” is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like “First Impressions” sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation:

<http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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