

“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:

I am in San Antonio at a family-run Mexican restaurant. As I wait for my tacos, rice and beans I look around at the life around me. There are preschoolers playing games at a table; parents with toddlers in one arm while eating with a free hand; older children eying a television; a woman passing the table next to me stops to make a fuss and play with an infant; a young woman adds money to a jukebox already playing loud Tex-mex dance music. It's a poor part of town, there's a laundromat next door, a tire repair shop across the street and battered pickup trucks parked in the lot out front.

While I wait for my food, I sneak a look at this Sunday's gospel and the story of the Transfiguration. I wonder how you put that extraordinary mountaintop experience together with this life around me? Can we look at this life through the eyes of today's story? If we can't, what good is it for us?

The Transfiguration is linked to Peter's confession and Jesus' prediction of the passion that precede it. So we have a suggestion that this mountaintop is not removed from real life after all. But even within the story there are details that help me feel connected to it—as my tacos arrive! I am glad there were the witnesses there and this wasn't a special and privileged other-world experience reserved just for Jesus. Peter, James and John, his brother, are there. Aren't these the special three whom Jesus invited to be with him in the garden when he went through his agony? It's a subtle touch, but I think Matthew wants to make the link for us between Jesus' exalted state and his suffering. That link to the garden helps put this mountaintop story's feet on the ground, melded to the life that surrounds me in this restaurant.

I know these people taking a Saturday lunch break can't afford expensive restaurants; they probably can't take a break from the children—so they bring the whole family for the treat. Up a side street are very poor homes, old cars and beat-up pickups parked in front of cement block houses with sand for front lawns. Their working lives barely cover expenses. Religion--- if it only meant the Savior

whose face was all aglow on the mountain, and whose clothes were “white as light”--- wouldn’t speak to them. Nor would religion have much to offer if it were just about a person in the garden suffering abandonment by his trusted disciples; his fear of God’s will for him; the brutality of those arresting him. There’s plenty of struggle and suffering around our own lives and the lives of the people in this section of town; we don’t just need to identify with someone in the same boat we’re in—one more person in our situation. There’s no liberation in that.

But, the One Matthew is helping us see today— is intimate with Moses (whose face also shone on another mountain) and Elijah (who sums up the very best of the prophetic voices), and whose true identity is confirmed by the voice, “This is my beloved Son.” Yet, Matthew is showing us that this is also the One who shared pain and death with us. Now put those two realities together in Jesus, the transfigured and the passion—now we have One whose life is very close to ours, very close to the reality of this Mexican *tacqueria*. Here is One we can identify with; who assures us all that this “stuff” of daily human life is charged and transformed by his presence with us; who helps us see the importance of what seems ordinary. As the poet says and this Transfiguration story underlines, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.” This world, here and now, ordinary and transfigured because of Christ. The tacos arrive and I dive in. I look up at those eating theirs. I have a hard time seeing why this meal is any less sacred than the one we share at church on Sunday. Is that what the Transfiguration teaches me?

The 2nd. Sunday of Lent in all three liturgical cycles features Abraham and Sarah’s story. Today’s reading is a focal one in Genesis and in the faith history of the Jewish people. It starts with God’s command, “Go forth.” It started with the Jews; but the passage speaks to all who have had to pack up and go--- left one way of living for another. Some have gone because the change promises a better future--immigrants, couples planning marriage, students going off to college, people leaving school to begin work/careers. But others hear the command, “go forth” from something that happens to them in life or because something that doesn’t seem to hold the promise it once did. We experience: divorce, death, or the aging of a parent that calls for shifts and unplanned for accommodations in our lives. Our own aging causes such a change in us that we no longer feel like the persons we once were. Our job requires an uprooting and a move to a distant city; or we lose a job, suffer a handicap, etc. All require a journey from one state of

being to another. We know what we are leaving; we do not know how it will go and where it will end. Who will we be when it is all over? Will God be with us? Can we let go of what we have known and find new meaning and significance for our lives; even new life? Such major shifts are a death; is there life for us beyond this grave?

Some of the shifts, "deaths," we will be naming in our preaching might really be a call from God. Some, the result of changes caused by other agents. For example, I would not attribute cancer to God. But I do see either type of change filled with the potential to experience God's presence in new ways--each step of the way, all the way to the end. Some "going forths" have been our own choices for new life; others have been thrust upon us. Underneath this tale of Abraham and Sarah is the common story we all participate in. All stories have the same characteristic, they contain some kind of change and conflict along the way to new life. This is the hope this story of Abraham stirs up. The promise isn't that things will be easy; what makes the end hopeful is that God promises to "Go Forth" as well.

The preacher can play with images that the reading evokes. The story is about a migrant, desert, tent-dwelling people. The tent image may be a good one for it reminds us of the expression, "Pulling up stakes." This image feels painful: stakes have been pounded into the ground, they hold the tent taut and keep it from collapsing. Now we have to pull out the stakes, with effort, and the dwelling collapses and is no more in this place. Where will we next "put down stakes?" For how long? Who will be there for us? I think too of the expression, "No matter where you go, there you are." Play with that one too--we go with ourselves, what do we take with us? Have we nurtured the spirit within us so that it can survive in trust in the next place?

Of course, the Israelites are telling the story from the end. They are looking back at the footprints in the sand and noticing God's footprints along side theirs. But that wasn't how it felt when they were first going through it, the feeling may not be good, God may feel absent--- but the Genesis tale reminds us that all the evidence isn't in yet, and that is where our hope lies.

QUOTABLE:

"Whatever its form, the function of the Eucharistic homily is to enable people to

lift up their hearts, to praise and thank the Lord for his presence in their lives. It will do this more effectively if the language it uses is specific, graphic, and imaginative. The more we can turn to the picture language of the poet and the storyteller, the more we will be able to preach in a way that invites people to respond from the heart as well as from the mind.

—National Conference of Catholic Bishops, ““Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly,” (1982).

JUSTICE NOTES:

During Lent we will be posting six segments on the “Basic Themes of Catholic Social Teaching.” These may be helpful for your preaching or you may want to put them in your parish newsletter each week.)

NUMBER 2: THE CALL TO FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND PARTICIPATION.

Theme: “The human person is not only sacred, but social. We realize our dignity and rights in relationship with others, in community...the family has major contributions to make in addressing questions of social justice. It is where we learn and act on our values.... We also have the right and responsibility to participate in and contribute to the broader communities in society....A central test of political, legal and economic institutions is what they do to people, what they do for people and how people participate in them.”

—U.S. Catholic Bishops, A CENTURY OF SOCIAL TEACHING.

READER’S RESPONSE:

Just a few ideas on the Genesis stuff. We usually say that the truth here is that a good and loving God made a beautiful universe and made humans to enjoy it. There is no original sin, that came with Augustine. To quote Pat Sanchez: "Made in the image and likeness of God, human beings are therefore intrinsically good, not sinful when they are born. Sin occurs when human free will chooses its own will over God's. Once the first human beings freely chose to sin, the evil of sin began to spread, not physically or genetically but socially and environmentally, such that all people were thereafter born into a sin-stricken world, and in that environment of sin and evil, were free to choose the lesser path and thereby became sinners themselves." As the story stands women are secondary and from men, the snake causes sin (external to humans), the devil seduces Eve since she is weaker, Eve seduces

Adam, therefore women are temptresses and dangerous, when they had both sinned they realize they are naked, sex is shameful. We have to get a better story!

-----John A. Rich. MM

Principles:

“The dignity of the human person involves the right to take an active part in public affairs and to contribute one’s part to the common good of the citizens. As...Pius XII pointed out: ‘The human individual, far from being an object, a merely passive element in the social order, is in fact,...its subject, its foundation and its end.’”

----PACEM IN TERRIS (26)

“Participation constitutes a right which is to be applied in the economic, social and political affairs.”

—JUSTITIA IN MUNDO

“It belongs to the laity, without waiting passively for orders and directives, to take the initiative freely and to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws and structures of their communities.”

—POPULORUM PROGRESSIO (81)

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,

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