

**First Impressions**    2<sup>nd</sup> 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:

One would think that on the second Sunday of Lent we would find our scriptures heavy with tales of sin, condemnation, repentance and other “appropriate” themes of Lent. At least that might be our initial expectation. But the scriptures today place emphasis elsewhere and give us perspectives on Lent that can form and deepen our experience of the season. In other words, in Lent the scriptures extend to us what they always do: an offer of grace. That is what we look for in today’s readings. Without grace, Lent is a drudgery, a brooding season of frustrations, as we try to change old and ingrained ways on our own efforts.

Our Genesis reading takes us back to the beginnings of our faith. In fact, the three major religious traditions, Judaism, Islam and Christianity, look to Abraham as our “father” in faith. This first reading is very short and, as is usual for our first readings on Sunday, is chosen to go with the gospel for the day. But where is the link? It may have to do with the importance of hearing and then being docile to the Word of God.

Abram (that’s his name at this moment in his story) is asked by God to sacrifice, to leave, with his wife Sarai, their land and their family and set off to a place yet unknown to them. They had to respond to God’s command and then continue to listen to God’s Word for further instruction on what God wanted of them. That is what it meant for them to be God’s servants: to hear the Word of God and then to respond to it. That is also what it means for us to be disciples of Jesus, to do what the voice from the cloud says to us today: to listen to him, hear his word and then to respond to what we hear.

Matthew’s gospel was written for a community that had, in large parts, its roots in Judaism. Therefore, Matthew is showing that Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promise to the Jews. In this gospel Jesus tells his disciples that he has come “to fulfill the Law.” Matthew depicts Jesus as the new Moses who establishes, through his life, death and resurrection, a new covenant with us—Jews and Gentiles alike. Thus, we find many allusions in this gospel to prophecies and characters in the Hebrew scriptures. And today’s Transfiguration story is no exception. It might help our hearing if we first showed some of the links between the two testaments in order to learn and respond to what Matthew is revealing to us

about Jesus.

Since Matthew is showing Jesus as the new Moses, he frames his account with clear references to the Moses tradition. (You might read Exodus 24 and 34 for some background.) Notice what Exodus and Matthew's Transfiguration have in common: they take place on a mountain; Jesus and Moses' face shine; a select group of onlookers is present; there is a bright cloud, and a voice speaks from the cloud. To make the link clearer---- Moses, the lawgiver and Elijah, the prophet, are present in Matthew's account.

What the voice said at Jesus' baptism ("This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased...") is repeated on the mountain, "This is my beloved Son. My favor rests on him." But at the Transfiguration we also hear, "...listen to him." Another link to Moses, since he predicted that God would raise up a prophet like Moses, "him shall you hear" (Dt. 18:15). We are well into Matthew's narrative and are reminded at this midway point how unique Jesus is. His identity as favored Son is affirmed again with the admonition to his disciples and us, "listen to him." What does he have to say to us that he hasn't already said in the gospel? Or, what does he have to repeat and clarify? The disciples and we have to hear Jesus' disturbing emphasis on his suffering.

The Transfiguration account is surrounded by two predictions of the passion—one comes immediately prior (16:24-28); the second is later in the same chapter as the Transfiguration (17:22-23). The disciples on the mountain certainly understood the glorious part of Jesus' identity. There he was, shining bright, with Moses and Elijah and a voice from heaven affirming him—it doesn't get much better than that! What they missed and we often do too, is the meaning of a later event in Matthew when Jesus goes up to another "high place"—his cross. There were onlookers at that "high place" too. But the presence of God wasn't obvious to Jesus as he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" At the crucifixion, Elijah and Moses are replaced by the two thieves and Jesus' garments are not "white as light," but are stripped off him in preparation for his death. At the crucifixion there is not the same evidence of God's glory as there was on the mountain. Instead, there is the mockery of the onlookers and the soldiers crown Jesus with thorns and shout, "All hail, king of the Jews!" Was this what the voice on the mountain was telling the disciples to listen to—that we must heed what we hear from Jesus and follow the same path he chose, the way of the cross?

The disciples did get the part about glory while they were on the mountain with Jesus. What they didn't get was the message about discipleship Jesus had for them

as they came down from the mountain and continued their journey to Jerusalem. On the way down the mountain Jesus told the disciples, “Do not tell the vision to anyone until the son of Man had been raised from the dead.” He had more to teach them, and they had to listen to him—just as the voice directed.

We can ask ourselves in Lent: Do we listen to Jesus? Do we understand what discipleship asks of us? Are we willing to include in following Jesus both realities: the glory of the Transfiguration and the glory of the cross? Like the disciples, we are attracted by what we see of Jesus on the mountain and resistant to what he says about the cross. Going up the mountain to get a glimpse of glory is one thing; going up on the cross is quite another!

Like Peter, we don’t want to leave the former place, and we do want to avoid the cross. Yet, as Jesus’ disciples, if we “listen to him,” we learn that the cross is an integral part of the package. We can’t pick and choose the parts of discipleship that come before on the mountain top and leave behind that part that follows the descent when Jesus says things like: “Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest and whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all (20: 26-27). In fact, if the disciples were really listening to Jesus, they would have heard him say, even before they climbed the mountain with him, “Is you wish to come after me, you must deny your very self, take up your cross and begin to follow in my footsteps (16: 24).

We identify any situation that brings pain and loss to our lives as our “cross.” When we endure suffering we are consoled that Jesus is present to help us bear and accept our cross in union with him. We surrender ourselves into his hands, the one who loves us and saves us from despair. Jesus, the crucified, is the sure sign to us that God has first-hand experience of human pain and loss and will never abandon us. As we bear our cross of suffering we are united in Christ to God and what was said over him God says over us, “This is my beloved child.”

But the cross Jesus offers his disciples in the gospels is a different kind of cross because, while we don’t have a choice to accept or reject sickness and pain, we do have a choice when it comes to the cross he offers us in the gospel. Note how he puts it, “**IF** yo wish to come after me....” He gives us an option, to accept suffering and even death for him. As Timothy describes it today, “Bear your share of hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God.” Jesus accepted his share of suffering “for the gospel,” and invites us to follow him and do the same. But we are not on our own, as Timothy reminds us, we have “the strength that comes from God.”

Jesus asks us to take up his cross: to live in loving relationships with others, even when opposed and taken advantage of; to respond in love to enemies; to serve and embrace, as our sisters and brothers, the poor and outcasts; to practice peacemaking in a world of violence, etc. In other words, to give our lives as Jesus gave his, for the sake of new life. Jesus was transfigured on the mountain, and his disciples saw his glory. Through his death and resurrection, he transfigured the cross by revealing it as the means to new life for those who would take it up to follow him.

There is one small and tender moment in today's gospel that should give hope to us this Lent; we who are trying to pick up our cross to follow Jesus. When the disciples heard the voice from the cloud they, "fell prostrate and were very much afraid." Then, Matthew tells us, "Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Rise and do not be afraid.'" This is a detail only Matthew tells. In the gospel Jesus' words and touch have been healing, empowering and life-giving. The Transfiguration depicts the disciples, weak humans like us, falling prostrate and afraid before the divine revelation about Christ. But Jesus' touch and encouraging words give us all the courage, desire and ability to renew our commitment to follow him this Lent. Jesus tells us this Lent, "Rise up and do not be afraid."

## JUSTICE NOTES

**"The Lord said..." "Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you." "(Genesis 12:1)**

The experience of being "Pilgrim People" has been a profound and frequent symbol of God's action in the lives of God's people, throughout all of Scripture. We may even have experienced "*being sent*" as a time of grace in our own lives. "Pilgrim people" is also a political reality as we experience the issues of the many migrant people of today.

North Carolina is an agricultural state. It is home to many thousands of migrant workers. Many of these brothers and sisters have "gone forth", driven from their homes and families by economic crisis and political unrest. As consumers, we benefit from the work of these men and women, although we seldom know their names, their stories, or the desperate conditions in which they are forced to live and work. Migrant workers, especially if they are undocumented, often face hostility, misunderstanding and outright abuse.

***"No one person in the [agricultural] process—grower, worker, packer, shipper, retailer or consumer—is greater than the other in the eyes of God," (Pope John Paul in Monterey California, September 17, 1987)***

Our US Catholic Bishops have told us what must be included in comprehensive immigration reform:

1. A fair and workable opportunity for undocumented migrants in the country to earn legal status and eventually have the right to become citizens;
2. A worker program that will allow future migrant workers to cross our borders safely and legally, with worker protections once they are employed, and with the option for future citizenship;
3. Family reunification policies that reduce the backlogs and waiting times for family-based immigration;
4. The restoration of due process protections for immigrants, that have threatened basic human rights;
5. International policies that will address the injustices and repression that are the root causes of migration from poor and developing countries.

**What I can do:**

- Keep in mind what our Catholic Bishops have said about comprehensive immigration reform as you consider candidates during this election year.
- When you purchase fresh fruits and vegetables keep in your mind and heart and prayer the workers whose labor provides us with this bounty.
- Study the words of our US Catholic Bishops in their statement: *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope* at:  
<http://www.usccb.org/mrs/stranger.shtml>
- Prayerfully consider how God has invited you in your own life to be a “ Pilgrim Person.”

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

## **POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES**

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." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

William L. Barnes #0020590 (On death row since 3/10/94)

Jeffrey Kandies #0021506 (4/20/94)

Vincent M. Wooten #0453231 (4/29/94)

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

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### 1. Two new CDs Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS"**

**"Liturgical year A,"** which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

**"Liturgical years, A, B and C,"** reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process.

Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: [www.preacherexchange.com](http://www.preacherexchange.com) and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

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 webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

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](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto: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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