

***FIRST IMPRESSIONS*** 2<sup>nd</sup> SUNDAY OF LENT (B)

Gen. 22: 1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18 Psalm 116 Rom. 8: 31b-34 Mark 9: 2-10

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

There are times in our lives when we have a mountain-top experience and we can easily use Peter's words to describe it. "Lord it is good that we are here." These moments are be very special: at our own wedding, or the wedding of someone we love; a new job that fulfills a dream; getting into the college of our first choice; retirement after years of hard work and saving.

AND there are everyday experiences when we can also say, "Lord is good that we are here": watching our child take his/her first steps; holidays with the whole family around the table and everyone getting along; having coffee with our best friend; good seats at the opening of the baseball season; watching a grandchild perform at a kindergarten play, making the highschool soccer team. These are moments when we feel we are on a mountain top and we can say with Peter, "It is good that we are here." And we thank God for these times.

But our lives aren't always as comfortable as Peter describes. We have experiences when we can't say, "It is good that we are here." In fact, there are times when we don't want to be "here"– and would rather be anywhere else: not sick; not without a job; not struggling with relationships; not failing at school; not in the process of a divorce; not undergoing chemotherapy; not in the wrong job. After Mass this past Sunday, a woman asked me to pray for her sister who just found out she has brain cancer. She said to me, "It is a nightmare!" (Won't you join me and pray for that woman's ailing sister too?) These are hardly mountain-top experiences - during these times we could hardly say, "It is good that we are here." We would prefer to say, "I want out!"

For the ancient peoples, and even in some places today, mountains are special meeting places with God. "To go up a mountain" was a term used for those seeking a special relationship with God. That is what happened with Peter, James and John when they went up the mountain with Jesus. They had a new insight into who he was and they heard the voice that directed them to listen to Jesus – to listen to him, not just on the mountain top, but for the rest of their lives. Listen to what he said

about God's love for us; listen to him when we need reassurance that we are forgiven; listen to him for how to treat others, even those we call enemies; listen to him for his concern for the poor and the outsiders.

What would listening to Jesus mean at this moment of our lives? It's Lent - and many of us have chosen to give up some favorite things – candy, movies, alcohol, special treats – these are good practices. They keep us conscious of God and help us maintain our priorities. The voice on the mountain said, "Listen to him." Which this Lent might mean not only giving up something – but also taking the money we save - \$10, 30, 40 and giving it to a soup kitchen, an outreach program, a homeless shelter, the parish food pantry, a community organization that helps children or the unemployed, etc. This too is a way of following the voice on the mountaintop and listening to Jesus.

People say that time is money – so we could take our valuable time and use it to visit someone who is ailing, alone, grieving or struggling. We could use our time to make phone calls we have been putting off. Lenten activities like these, we hope, will last beyond Lent. It is just good advice to listen to Jesus, no matter what time of year; but with our hectic schedules and the competing and distracting voices in our world drawing our attention elsewhere, it is sometimes hard to hear him, to know he is with us and to know what we are to do.

We, like the disciples, periodically need to go to a listening place, our own private "mountain top." That could be a lenten discipline for us – to find some quiet time to listen to Jesus through his Word. We could do that by ourselves, by setting aside a few minutes each day to read and meditate on the scriptures. If our parish is offering a lenten scripture series we might want to attend and, with other disciples, "listen to Jesus." We don't have to travel very far to find a mountain top to listen to Jesus.

The Abraham and Isaac story is fearsome, isn't it? We are told that "God put Abraham to the test." In Genesis, Abraham and Sarah endure ten trials or tests. But today's is the most severe: God orders Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a holocaust, a sacrifice to God. In Judaism this story is known as "Akedah," "the binding" and is a central narrative in Jewish theology, spirituality and liturgy.

God calls Abraham by name. He responds, "Here I am." That is a repetitious

exchange throughout the Bible: God calls a person by name for a specific task and they respond, “Here I am” – then they wait for God to speak. The person’s response suggests readiness, receptivity and a willingness to follow instructions. But what a request God makes of Abraham after calling him by name! When a friend calls our name and asks a favor do we suspect such a demanding request will be put upon us, as God puts on Abraham?

To make matters worse – as if to underline the cost of the sacrifice being asked of him – God emphasizes Abraham’s relationship with his son, “Take your son, your only one, whom you love....” This story is getting tense! Imagine how a modern congregation will hear it in the light of crimes in our society and church against children.

You can’t help but wonder how Abraham, who protested God’s intention to destroy the innocent with the guilty in Sodom (Gen. 18: 22-33), would ever begin to respond to this horrendous request to sacrifice his son, “your only son, whom you love.” The location of the “height,” Moriah, God will point out to Abraham is unknown. We can see where the story is leading us: later in Chronicles the Temple mount in Jerusalem is called “Moriah.” God will be worshiped and sacrifice will be offered in Jerusalem, at Moriah. Of course, still later, the innocent and much-loved child, Christ, will be crucified in Jerusalem.

Abraham and Sarah have placed all their hopes on the child, who was a sign of God’s promise that they would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens and the grains of sand on the beach. People in the congregation, upon hearing this story, will be confused and even repulsed by the story and wonder how one can relate in a personal way to this God?

Not a very comfortable or tame God is it? This is the God who invites us into a relationship and strengthens us to respond with faith and trust to what is asked of us. It is very hard to live with questions and to let God be God. Abraham’s God is not easily contained or tamed by our attempts to reduce God to a more manageable size. The Genesis text today is uncompromising. What we get is Abraham – who is unwavering and unquestioning as he sets out to do what God told him. He doesn’t ask how God will fulfill a covenant, while taking away the very child who was the sign and future fulfillment of that covenant. One of the questions put to the community in this story: Is God trustworthy when there is not concrete evidence to

prove it and when any sign of reassurance we thought we had is taken away?

You have to admire the boldness of the author who put this story in the narrative and the biblical editors who placed Genesis, with this story intact, at the beginning of the Bible. Very early believers are asked if we want to worship a God of mystery; a God who is outside any little box we might want to put God into. Previously Abraham had failed at crucial moments to trust God. Still, God did not give up on him. Now Abraham can't fudge – will he trust God despite the catastrophic demand being placed on him?

The biblical narrative shows that since creation human beings had moved further and further from God. In the Abraham-Isaac narrative we see that God is forging a new relationship, a covenant, with humans and Abraham is the model for us all. We discover in the biblical tale that God is passionate and loving and will not leave us on our own; no matter how many times we have failed, no matter what impossible tests we face now or in the future.

The biblical commentators offer us some help in understanding the Abraham-Isaac story. They suggest it is a repudiation of the Canaanite practice of human sacrifice. The God of the Israelites will not require such acts of worship or proof of dedication. That lesson certainly comes across vividly in the “binding of Isaac.” The story also touches into the persecution the Chosen People endured throughout history. Like Abraham, despite what was asked of them, they would cast themselves into the hands of their God.

## **FAITH BOOK**

*Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. “Faith Book” is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.*

### **From today's Gospel reading:**

Jesus took Peter, James and John  
and led them up a high mountain  
apart by themselves

### **Reflection:**

Like the disciples, we periodically need to go to a “listening place,” our own private

“mountain top.” This Lent, why not set aside a few minutes each day to read and meditate on the scriptures? If our parish is offering a lenten scripture series we might want to attend and, with other disciples, “listen to Jesus.” We don’t have to travel very far to find a “mountain top” to listen to the Good News Jesus has for us.

### **So we ask ourselves:**

Is there so much noise and rush in my life that I have no time for prayer and reflection?

Have I ever had a “mountain top” experience when I felt God was close and spoke a word to me? What effect did that experience have on my life?

### **JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD**

Pope John Paul II sent the following pledge to world leaders in February 2002. Lent may be a good time for us to think about our own part in peace-making. The “Assisi Pledge for Peace” offers a good examination of conscience for ourselves and a lens through which to watch the evening news.

#### **Assisi Pledge for Peace**

- 1) We commit ourselves to proclaiming our firm conviction that violence and terrorism are incompatible with the authentic spirit of religion and to doing everything possible to eliminate the root causes of terrorism.**
- 2) We commit ourselves to educating people to mutual respect and esteem, in order to help bring about a peaceful coexistence between people of different ethnic groups, cultures, and religions.**
- 3) We commit ourselves to fostering the culture of dialogue so that there be an increased understanding and mutual trust between individuals and among peoples.**
- 4) We commit ourselves to defending the right of everyone to live a decent life in accordance with their own cultural identity and to form freely a family of their own.**
- 5) We commit ourselves to frank and patient dialogue, refusing to consider our differences as an insurmountable barrier, but an opportunity for greater understanding.**

**6) We commit ourselves to forgiving one another for past and present prejudices, and to supporting one another in a common effort to overcome selfishness, arrogance, hatred and violence, and to learn that peace without justice is no true peace.**

**7) We commit ourselves to taking the side of the poor and the helpless, to speaking out for those who have no voice, and to working effectively to change these situations.**

**8) We commit ourselves to taking up the cry of those who refuse to be resigned to violence and evil, and to make every effort to offer the people of our time real hope for justice and peace.**

**9) We commit ourselves to encouraging all efforts to promote friendship between peoples, for we are convinced that, in the absence of solidarity and understanding between people, technological progress exposes the world to a growing risk of destruction and death.**

**10) We commit ourselves to urging leaders of nations to make every effort to create and consolidate a world of solidarity and peace based on justice.**

**<http://www.stcharlespdx.org/user/Assisi%20Pledge%20for%20Peace-3.doc>**

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

### **QUOTABLE**

If we simply repeat the formulas of the past, our words may have the character of doctrine and dogma but they will not have the character of good news. We may be preaching perfectly orthodox doctrine but it is not the gospel for us today. We must take the idea of good news seriously. If our message does not take the form of good news, it is simply not the Christian gospel.”

----Albert Nolan, O.P. in, GOD IN SOUTH AFRICA.

### **POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES**

*Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten 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:

Norfolk Best        #0030124    (On death row since 6/7/93)  
James Campbell    #0063592    (7/8/93)  
Daniel Garner       #0141374    (9/3/93)

---Cental Prison    1300 Western Blvd.    Raleigh, N.C.    27606

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

1.     Two new CDs Available:

**“First Impressions Preaching Reflections: Liturgical Year B.”** Begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of 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, with **Year B** updated.

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” CD link on the left.

2.     **“Homilias Dominicales”** —These Spanish reflections on the Sunday and daily scriptures are written by Dominican sisters and friars. If you or a friend would like to receive these reflections drop a note to fr. John Boll, O.P. at [Jboll@opsouth.org](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) Or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto:jboll@preacherexchange.org)

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, daily homilies and other material pertinent to preaching.

4. “First Impressions” is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Dominican Friars of Raleigh, N.C. If you would like “First Impressions” sent weekly to a friend, send a note to fr. John Boll,

OP 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 payable to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://preacherexchange.com/donations.htm>

Thanks you and blessings on your preaching,

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