

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 2nd. 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:

When a gospel writer says, as Mark does today, that Jesus took his disciples “apart by themselves,” we know some special revelation is about to happen (cf. 4:34, 9:2,13:3 for further examples of special revelatory or teaching moments in Mark). It’s hard to know exactly what happened that day for Peter, James and John. It is also difficult to determine where this story fits in the gospel narrative. Some commentators would place it after the resurrection. They claim Mark shifted it to an earlier place in his gospel to help his readers see the deeper meaning of the subsequent things Jesus says and does in his ministry. The transfiguration story also helps the reader see Jesus’ suffering and death in the light of the resurrection; for Jesus makes this link as they descend the mountain and return to their busy work among the people.

We note the appearance of Elijah and Moses. But why weren’t other famous biblical figures placed in the story; why them? What about Abraham and Sarah, the great ancestors in faith, wouldn’t this have been an appropriate scene for them? What about David the great king? Was it because David was a warrior king and Jesus’ role in this gospel is as the suffering servant of God? Instead, we have Elijah and Moses at this important moment. The Jews looked for Elijah to come back as the messiah. Elijah was also a prophet, so the reading stirs up both messianic expectations and Jesus’ role as servant and prophet. Moses led the people out of slavery; Jesus will certainly do that. But as important as Elijah and Moses were, the reader can’t miss the fact that they both fade away in this story---leaving only Jesus in their place, “...they no longer saw anyone but Jesus alone with them.” Where shall the believer look now for prophetic utterances and deliverance from the slavery of sin? To Jesus, who now stands highlighted---transfigured.

Another messianic hint lies in Peter’s wanting to build “three tents” to commemorate the moment. I have childhood memories in Brooklyn of Jewish neighbors constructing wooden huts on their porches or in their backyards to celebrate Sukkoth, the Feast of Booths. This feast gave thanks for the harvest. We pick up the harvest hint and want to celebrate the fullness we have at this eucharist, where Christ is our harvest and where the “fruit fo the earth” (the eucharistic

bread) and “fruit of the vine” (the eucharistic wine) become our harvest celebration. Here we recognize the fulness of what God has done for us in Jesus.

The tents also remind us of the desert trek the Israelites made when God chose to deliver them from slavery and lead them on their long hazardous journey to freedom. Remember too that on this journey, as difficult as it was, God revealed God’s self to them. Though they struggled in faith, they often failed—yet God stuck by them and communicated with them through Moses. We pause at this eucharist and, for this moment at least, construct an “inner” booth or tent to God. Here we commemorate God’s fidelity to us. We look back over the difficult desert times and give thanks to the God who walked with us and supported us when we drooped. What a harvest feast our God is for our eucharist community today! God holds nothing back from us at our banquet table and we certainly will need what God gives us today because we will leave this mountain and return to lives dedicated to live as Jesus did ----as God’s servants and witnesses. There will be no permanent residence or edifice for Jesus or the disciples on this high spot, away from the pressing and needy crowds and the contentious scribes and Pharisees below in the “real world.” Peter seems to want to institutionalize what happened on the mountain. We too can solidify and stultify our faith by erecting buildings and shrines, when our attentions need to be elsewhere. I know a parish that reduced its budget for the poor so that a side eucharistic chapel could be remodeled. What’s wrong with this picture?

Once again, as we often read in Mark, Jesus wants the disciple not to talk about the spectacular event that just occurred. They don’t yet have the full picture; for the glorious and spectacular will not be what Jesus chooses. Instead, he will suffer and die. When they experience the resurrection, then the disciples will see the full picture and meaning of Jesus’ presence among them. I share an experience which I am sure many of us have had at one time or another. I have returned to Brooklyn to be with my family as my 96-year-old father is dying. He has always had a zest for life, a celebration of the daily joys of family, food and the people around him. He delivered mail for 35 years and has been robust and energetic. Now he is immobile, in a hospital bed at home, struggling to breath oxygen, sleeping most of the day. He is fading. I look at him and am comforted by this transfiguration story. I trust this account that promises a resurrection after the struggles of this life. Now my father, in his frail state, seems transfigured in a reverse way from the vibrant man I remember. But, as we anointed him yesterday, we expressed our faith that he will soon be transfigured one more time, as Jesus was, and this new

and glorious state will be permanent. One day we will share that with him and one another. That is what I believe this story says to me and my family this day.

How will the transfiguration play itself out in Jesus' life? He will not look different, nor will his clothes be "dazzling white." His transfiguration will continue to happen in his acts of ministry to them; people will be transfigured before him. Sinners will transfigure and turn back to God; the poor and outcast will transfigure into royal guests at Jesus' table; the powerless will be transfigured by God's power; women will be transfigured and counted as equals; those who sought riches and power at any price, will be transfigured into his detached and gentle followers; and the sick will become healthy; the mute eloquent in God's praises and the blind will see Jesus resurrected and in a new light.

Will we disciples be transfigured today as well? Will our focus shift from notions of a cozy and removed religion to a more open and inclusive one? Will we see our church more like "tent dwellers" on a journey together, than edifice builders? Will we co-travelers remain flexible and adaptable to the needs we see around us and respond with Jesus' self-sacrificing spirit? ("What would Jesus do?" Are teenagers still wearing those initialed wristbands, "WWJD?") We pray at this eucharist today that the Transfiguration would rub off on us. We want more of God's presence to shine through us so that people will come to know God's goodness and love for them through our daily service in Jesus' name. We hope that through us, those who feel outside or alienated, will be transfigured also and come to know the God we have come to know through Jesus.

Now Jesus is resurrected, and we have heard the full story. His transfiguration was no momentary flash-in-the-pan; no "fool's gold." His presence in our lives doesn't always shine through nor is it obvious. But his life has taught us that if we look more closely we will see him in his many disguises in the poor and those who are part of our daily lives. What a surprise! He is also present and transfigured before us as we hear his word; forgive and embrace one another in peace and then receive his sacramental presence in the eucharist. Like the disciples, we have been led "apart" by ourselves with him to this liturgical celebration. Now we return to where we will also find him, in his clever disguises in our daily lives.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Heille, Gregory, OP (ed.) THEOLOGY OF PREACHING: ESSAYS ON VISION AND MISSION IN THE PULPIT. (London: Melisende, 2001)

Nine experienced preachers, Catholic and Protestant, at the Doctor of Ministry in Preaching program at Aquinas Institute of Theology, reflect on their theological perspectives and articulate personal mission statements about preaching.

QUOTABLE

Without grace, without the communication of God to the creature, the word would be empty; without the word, grace would not be present to us as spiritual and free persons in a conscious way...the word is the bodiliness of [God's] grace.

-----Karl Rahner, in "Priest and Poet"

ENVIRONMENTAL 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.)

In light of the statement by U.S. Catholic Bishops (June 15, 2001) on global warming and their call to "exercise stewardship," in our use of natural resources---- during these next weeks I will be sharing with you recommendations for how we can help the environment. Some are simple, some will require a long-term commitment. (I found these on the bulletin board of a retreat house; sorry, I do not know the original source.) We preachers need to recall the goodness of creation for our hearers and challenge them, and ourselves, to tend to what God has placed in our hands.

- Support government policies that promote energy efficiency and renewable energy.
- Contribute to international hunger relief efforts and programs to improve agriculture in developing countries.
- Buy organic produce to support sustainable agriculture in the United States.
- Educate others on the links between agriculture and the environment.
- Encourage increased U.S. government support for sustainable agriculture.
- Ask candidates for public office what they are prepared to do to pursue environmental justice.

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." Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Perrie Simpson #0371096 (On death row since 2/1/93)

- General Miller #0281791 (2/1/93)
- Nathan Bowie #0039561 (2/5/93)
- William Bowie #0039569 (2/5/93)

Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

"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, [Click Here](#).

If you would like to support this ministry, [Click Here](#) to make a secure tax-deductible online donation.

Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP

FrJude@JudeOP.org