

“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:

The first reading this weekend connects with the Gospel's message of Jesus's impending suffering and crucifixion. It extols the faith of Abraham who would trust God and the promise of a future, despite the command to sacrifice his son. (By the way, where is Sarah in this venture?) The commentaries suggest that this account was meant to counter the pagan rituals of sacrificing the first-born son to appease the gods. So, the Abraham and Isaac story may have been meant to change a prevailing custom and evoke the God of the Jews, who does not want this sacrifice and is shown to be a less demanding and cruel God. But I would be careful how I preached this one, parents will still hear a horrible, primitive tale that grates against their feelings as parents and against contemporary sensitivities.

One approach to the first reading. The preacher might use examples of parents who have been principled and gave witness to their children by their acts of courage, generosity or compassion for those who suffer. Their children caught their dedication and followed their example despite the loss of what the culture says is important--cash, cars and the good life. And so, in a way, the parents “sacrificed” their children, taught them ways that might mean the offspring's taking on sacrifices; going against the tide of their contemporaries' opinions; giving up lucrative careers to be of service to others, etc. I meet such dedicated people in every parish I preach, starting with the lay parish staff, the parochial school teachers (who could earn more teaching elsewhere), and the volunteers who sacrifice time that might have been spent furthering a career. In addition, there are those who take lower paying jobs in order to be of service to the needy. Others, like lawyers and doctors, teachers and nurses, give freely to the needy or take vacation time to work in third world countries. Somewhere they learned about sacrificing themselves to follow a voice they hear within; many tell stories of parents who, in effect, took them up a mountain to share a vision with them about God and sacrifice.

The gospel is one of those “big” gospel stories. We are on a mountain; that's where the biblical people meet their God and have their revelations and visions. On the mountain they learn who their God is and how this God is distinct from

others. (Abraham in on a mountain too, he learns about God there.) On today's gospel mountain, we meet Moses, the giver of the Law. Does Moses and Jesus' conversing suggest that Jesus and his Way are the fulfillment of the Law's demands? Will service to others and death to self, exemplified by Jesus, be the Law's real meaning? Elijah is also talking with Jesus. He fought against false gods with a fierce jealousy for God. Will true worship and sacrifice to God be revealed in how Jesus serves God through the events that are coming soon in Jerusalem?

What's next for the disciples? The descent into tragedy, failure and the frustrating of their plans. After all, they wanted to sit next to Jesus in power. They were as success-oriented as we are. They are a hearty, rough-hewn group. The men have braved the seas as fishers; the women were child bearers and no strangers to hard physical labors. But their natural strengths would not be enough to survive what is next in their lives. What do we have to face next? We have seen friends and family tested severely, beyond what their physical endurance could bear. How did they/we survive---- but on strength from another place, from the One Mark has already labeled as "the more Powerful One?"

We want our children to learn their religion well; we want them to have the answers to the religious questions we and others ask them. Sure, enough Moses, the giver of the Ten Commandments, is here on the mountain. That satisfies some people's notion of religion and "knowing one's faith": know the rules and obey them. But more needs to be revealed and the Voice tells us, "listen to him"--- Jesus. We will listen by paying attention to his words, but more, we will listen to his example as he gives himself for others. Listen to him, he will tell us, "Take up your cross and follow me." The primary emphasis here is not just on commandments, but on following, one step at a time, after the One who has gone before us and enables us to follow. We have a new law in our hearts, not so neatly spelled out--- it has to do with following Jesus. On our part at this liturgy, we admit our need to learn and our willingness to listen.

And we wonder with the disciples, what does this "rising from the dead" mean? Does it give us hope as we attempt to follow and lose everything along the way? Is our cross-bearing given us meaning and hope as we keep the Resurrection before our eyes?

Let's work with the notion of "transfigured." When is a person transfigured?

When some quality comes to the surface; when hidden potential comes to light. The disciples are shown more than the surface of Jesus, more than the carpenter. Jesus' real identity shines through and he invites us to do the same this Lent. We have been taught to cover up, adapt ourselves, our behaviors and expectations, to suit the thinking of our surrounding world. We fit in, stifle our true identity. What is beneath the surface? Do we really desire to be kind and accepting to others, generous and humorous, more our true selves? Divinity hides beneath the surface, we were baptized into union with Jesus and that has enabled us to perceive and act differently--if only we wouldn't cover up that life within us.

We don't have to live our lives according to the expectations of others, we don't have to submerge our true selves. This story is filled with light, except for the disciples who doze in shadows, who have missed the true presence of the One in their midst. The Gospel encourages us today, no matter what we have been told about ourselves, to see the spark of divinity in us, to imagine the possibilities, to open ourselves to others and the possibility of helping to create a better world.

We also need a special way of seeing, a special light, to see beneath the surface of our daily lives. Is it possible that the holy resides beneath the routine and daily sameness? We don't live with rarefied visions on mountains, we live on the flat surfaces, the grind of daily labors and struggles. Because of Jesus, we can see these plain events of daily life as suffused with the light of the Holy One. Resurrection has already begun, and our lives are already transformed for those who look beneath the surface, for those who have heard this story of the Transfiguration and taken it to heart. Jesus was transfigured and that tells us that nothing about our lives is ever the same.

At a recent group sharing of this Gospel account, a woman participant tells her own transfiguration story. She was raised in a small-town environment. There she knew all her neighbors and people were pretty much alike. She now works at a church with a youth program that does a summer outreach to a soup kitchen in inner city Philadelphia. Last summer she was asked to go as one of the adult leaders. She said that she had usually categorized people into two groups, weeds and wheat. The people she expected to meet at the soup kitchen would assuredly fall into the "weeds" category, she thought. But working in the soup kitchen and getting to know the people from the streets who came in for food and companionship changed her perspective. She says it was her "transfiguration event." She got to know and like the regulars. She heard their stories and realized

that the only thing separating her from their life was income. One man she met used to, “go to work in a three-piece suit.” “The people there were a family, caring for one another,” she says. She learned how they never wasted any food that was given them and would bring leftovers to friends on the streets. This summer she is volunteering to go back again. No one requires her to go, she says she wouldn’t miss it for the world. Now she sees people in a whole new light. That’s the power of a Transfiguration experience.

QUOTABLE

We and the prophet have no language in common. To us the moral state of society, for all its stains and spots, seems fair and trim: to the prophet it is dreadful. So many deeds of charity are done, so much decency radiates day and night: yet to the prophet satiety of the conscience is prudery and flight from responsibility. Our standards are modest: our sense of injustice tolerable, timid; our moral indignation impermanent; yet human violence is interminable, unbearable, permanent. To us life is often serene, in the prophet’s eye the world reels in confusion. The prophet makes no concession to man’s [sic.] capacity. Exhibiting little understanding for human weakness, he seems unable to extenuate the culpability of man.

---Abraham J. Heschel in, THE PROPHETS.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

Gowan, Donald E. RECLAIMING THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR THE CHRISTIAN PULPIT. Edinburgh: John Knox Press, 1980.

Uses the concept of tradition history to show the continuity bridging biblical times and our own and the exegetical tool of form analysis to get at the intent of texts. Six basic genres are studied to get at their messages for contemporary preaching. Sample sermons accompany each genre. Very good, even though it lacks both the song genres (especially the Psalms) and a fuller treatment of the prophets.

JUSTICE PREACHING--- Genesis 22:1-2,9, 10-13,15-18

This week’s reflection is from : Elyse Marie Ramirez O.P. Preaching Promoter - Springfield, Kentucky.

- God calls...Abraham hears...Abraham responds...Confuses,. Justice is listening to/for the voice of the other...Abraham's obedience is in the listening...His listening leads to justice...He is able to hear the voice of the other...Sometimes we

are confused with what it sounds like on the surface...

- Abraham is caught in his contemporary culture...yet he hears the voice of God and responds counter-culturally...he does NOT sacrifice his son.
- Love and justice have to be linked...Abraham's love for his son and love for his God pushed him into a precarious situation...he had no idea how...only that he had to...Often this is how it is for us faced with the Truth of those standing in the margins. We know they have to be heard...they have to be brought into the center...but how?? Even noticing they are there can lead us into a precarious position.
- Abraham has to start up the mountain before he understands the whole Truth. What mountains are we avoiding in terms of justice? What expressions of our lifestyles do we avoid scaling? Consumerism? Militarism?
- God is NOT asking for a human sacrifice. God is asking for a single hearted response. What humans do we continue to sacrifice? Whose human dignity are we willing to stab on the mountain of US Foreign Policy? The price of oil looms as the mountain...The children of Iraq? How will we become single-hearted for justice? The price of clothing looms as the mountain for countless maquiladoras.

READER'S RESPONSE

I just read your First Impressions for Ash Wednesday. It made me think of a friend who says that when she was a little girl her Dad told her that the earth and the planets and the stars are all made from the same elements. She said that she got really excited, and still is, to think that she is made of stardust. I love the thought of being a tiny part of the great sparkly universe. I used to think that the old "Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return" sounded dreadful and dreary and I used to fear Ash Wednesday. But now, with a change in perspective, I think it is thrilling to be a part of the plan and to say, "stardust we are, and to stardust we shall return"!

—Dr. Bernadette Page

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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