

FIRST IMPRESSIONS SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT -C-

Genesis 15: 5-12, 17-18 Psalm 27 Philippians 3: 17-4:1 Luke 9: 28b-36

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The few verses (15: 1-4) prior to today's Genesis reading narrates an exchange between God and Abram. God has promised that Abram and Sarai will have an heir. But Abram challenges God and protests that they are childless. Abram/Abraham has always been a model of biblical faith; in fact, today's story says "Abram put his faith in the Lord...." However, that faith wasn't the reason for God's blessing, rather, God took the initiative and promised descendants to Abraham and Sarai. God is quick with free gifts, while we humans drag our heels into faith. We seem to be sleepwalkers who need to be awakened to God's constant love and presence.

The fact is, Abraham's faith was awakened by God's insistence. The stars are a sign of the aged couple's innumerable descendants. Abram surrenders to God's plan and trusts in God's power. He is "right" with God; we are told God "credited it to him as an act of righteousness." If we were asked to voice our faith, we might give a list of the things we believe. But the Abraham story of faith is rooted in the relationship between God and this believer who trusted God's word. Abraham did what all believers are invited to do, he believed that God would do what God said. What proof did God give Abraham to cement his faith? Nothing concrete or immediate—just a promise. God made a covenant with Abraham.

Animal rights people will shudder at the description of how this covenant was ratified. A selection of animals are slaughtered. But we are in ancient times here and our faith ancestors got the point. Traditionally, when such a covenant was made, both parties would pass between the split animals. The gesture signified, "May what happened to these animals happen to me if I should break this covenant."

Night comes and Abraham falls into a trance or deep sleep and "a deep terrifying darkness enveloped him." We are in the realm of mystery here. Then the smoking pot and flaming torch pass between the split animals. They symbolize God. What's the human's participation in all this? The human being is looking upon a mystery and has no active part in the sealing of the covenant. God alone passes between the

split animals. It is a biblical theme repeated again: in the divine and human exchange, it is God who acts first. God doesn't put a prior test of faith to Abraham and then "reward" him by making a covenant with him. God takes the first step, makes a binding covenant and the human is invited to respond by trusting. Which Abraham does and that is what we are invited to do. What "proof" does he have to turn to in the future when the going gets rough? Can he go to his closet and pull out something specific to reassure him? Does he get a magic box to rub when his life turns difficult and his faith falters? No, he doesn't and neither do we! He has a Word from God; that will have to be enough. Like Abraham and Sarai, we too will need to keep listening and trusting in that Word. That's our part in the covenant.

Which is what the voice on the mountain of Transfiguration tells the frightened disciples: "This is my chosen Son; listen to him." Jesus' life, what he says and does, will be the Word God gives the disciples to place faith in. They will have to keep their eyes and ears open and their hearts ready to respond. As the voice suggests, they will have to listen to Jesus. The events on the mountain have an air of mystery similar to the one Abraham experienced. The disciples, like the patriarch, are asleep. They wake up to the presence of the divine.

Lent is wake-up time. However, at first glance it doesn't seem like we are asleep; quite the contrary! Modern life demands so much from us. We work hard to balance time and energy for family, work, friends, church and the needs of our community. The days of friends, who happen to be in the neighborhood, stopping by for coffee and a visit are long gone. Who has that free time? If we want to visit we have to call ahead and get it on the calendar. On the exterior we are wide awake, though sleep-deprived. But how often can we take even a little break in the course of a day to really be awake? ----to wake up and reflect on things of importance? For example, by reflecting on: whether or not our spirits need refreshing; where we find God in our daily lives; our need to rekindle friendships or pay attention to a fading one; how we respond to those in need; what or whom we have been avoiding, etc. We are very busy, "Life is full," we say, but in truth, our spirits may be like the disciples on the mount, "overcome by sleep.'

Prior to today's Transfiguration account, Jesus told his disciples that he would be rejected, suffer and die in Jerusalem (9:18–22). Peter had just proclaimed Jesus as the messiah; but he doesn't understand the way Jesus will fulfill that role. Not only

will Jesus suffer, but he tells his disciples that they too must take up their cross and “follow in my steps” (9:23). The story of the Transfiguration follows immediately after Jesus says this and the voice from the cloud affirms who Jesus is and directs the awestruck and frightened disciples to listen to him.

Jesus will show them what true messiahship entails and they need to pay attention; they need to stay awake. The disciples’ fright and misunderstanding don’t cease. They will go down from the mountain; their notions of worldly success and glory will go downhill too, as Jesus meets more and more opposition and rejection the closer they get to Jerusalem. They could have used some help and they would have had it if they had remembered their experience on Mount Tabor. They needed to follow the directions they got from the voice: listen to Jesus. The disciples forgot the hope they experienced on the mountain when they saw his glory. They were amnesiacs.

Being disciples requires that we remember the One we are following: he is, as the voice announces, “the chosen Son,” the One who appeared in glory, not only on the mountain, but in his dying and rising from the dead. The Transfiguration certainly sounds like a resurrection account, doesn’t it? We disciples need to remember it is the risen Christ, the glorified one, who continues to act and speak in our lives. He is the One we listen to and, during Lent, we need to recommit ourselves to that listening process, through prayer, hearing his Word and receiving his life in this Eucharist.

It’s hard to stay focused on him when our lives are shaky and the need to respond to the sometimes chaotic situations around us distracts and disorients us. They throw us off balance and we forget to “listen to him”—to remember his presence in the mess, as well as in the good times of our lives.

More than the other gospels, Luke emphasizes Jesus’ prayer: he prays before important decisions and he frequently goes off to pray. Today, Luke tells us that Jesus was transfigured “while he was praying.” He suggests that Jesus’ openness to God and to his mission was nurtured by his prayer. The disciples in the garden of Gethsemani, as well as on today’s mountain, were sleeping. Luke is reminding us that we need to be awake to discern God’s presence and purpose in our lives. Jesus understands who God is and trusts what God is doing because he meets God in prayer. So too for us disciples. The Transfiguration is a lenten reminder that we are

called to prayer; not so much to tell God what we want or to make casual conversation. Rather, we need to pray to be opened to God and transformed by prayer to better hear who Christ is for us and what he is saying now in our lives. After all, God was not just telling the disciples to listen to Jesus back then; but is also reminding us now to be constant listeners as we journey with Jesus to Jerusalem. The Transfiguration prompts a biblical response within us today, “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.”

Mountain climbing is supposed to be an exhilarating sport--- I wouldn’t know, I’m afraid of heights. I do know that people have died on mountains; they can be dangerous places. Significant events in the bible frequently happen on a mountain. It is there that people encounter God and experience the divine; sounds exciting, but mountains also threaten our lives. In Christ we have a mountain experience; in him we meet our God. That can be a dangerous, life-threatening mountain experience because the encounter with Christ can alter our lives. We may have to make big changes; let go of the false securities we have been clinging to and accept the way of Christ. If we truly “listen to him,” there will be many small and some large deaths along the way. We will have to continue making choices in response to what he says and they surely will run counter to what the world has told us offers security and happiness. Listening to Christ will require, as he told his disciples, that we pick up our crosses and follow him each day.

Abraham and Sarai didn’t have a lucky charm to turn to for assurance when their travels proved arduous. What they had was a covenant God made with them and a promise to carry them into the future. And what do we have? We have Jesus, our covenant with God, an unbroken word from God that God has not and will not abandon us. What should we do as our lenten practice? Do our best to find ways and places to listen to Christ, just as the voice on the mountain tells us disciples today.

A REQUEST

Recently I had a request for prayers for preachers. I must confess, I didn’t have any—except for the one that comes immediately to mind—“HELP!” If any of our readers have, would you send them to me and I will post them. Thanks. We preachers can use all the prayers we can get.

QUOTABLE

This is the advice of Clement W. Welsh, of Washington's College of Preachers. He says, "*Let the preacher know that out there in the pew there is at least one listener expectantly waiting for a sermon that will interest, move, and inspire, and who is anxious to help--one listener, determined to survive.*"

----Joseph T. Nolan in, *The World, The Church and Preaching: The Best of Good News Commentary* (Page '94).

JUSTICE NOTES

"To your descendants I give this land"(Genesis 15:17-18)

In the fall of 2003 the US Catholic Bishops unanimously approved a new document entitled, "***For I Was Hungry***" This letter examines agricultural issues from genetically modified crops to crop subsidies and market forces affecting rural life both in the United States and in the nation's trading partners.

"For I Was Hungry" observes that the "increasing concentration and growing globalization" of agriculture are having the effect of "pushing some ahead and leaving others behind." "They are also pushing us toward a nation and world where the powerful can take advantage of the weak, where large institutions and corporations can overwhelm smaller structures, and where the production, marketing and distribution of food and the protection of land lie in fewer hands,"

The bishops ask the following questions:

Do our national farm policies help to overcome hunger and poverty?

Do they provide a safe, affordable and sustainable food supply?

Do they ensure a just and decent life for farmers and farmworkers?

Do they sustain and strengthen rural communities?

Do they protect God's creation?

Do those affected by agricultural policies have a real opportunity to participate in their development?

Did you know?

An estimated 840 million people worldwide are malnourished, despite the fact that

farmers globally produce 2,800 calories of food per person per day: enough to adequately nourish everyone on the planet. 30,000 children die of hunger and related causes daily;

In 2001, the developed countries gave six times as much in subsidies to their own farmers as they gave in total foreign aid to poor countries. These agricultural subsidies cause “direct harm to poor countries,” They lower the prices poor farmers could otherwise receive for their products.

What I can do:

Read the bishops' statement, "For I Was Hungry”

["www.usccb.org/bishops/agricultural.shtml"](http://www.usccb.org/bishops/agricultural.shtml)

Consider supporting small local farms. Shop at the Farmers' Market or join a Community Supported

Agriculture cooperative

www.ces.ncsu.edu/chatham/ag/SustAg/csafarms.html

Pray for those who produce the abundance we eat.

Start a garden. You will appreciate the work of farmers.

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

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"It is time to abandon the death penalty -- not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners -- to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person."

-----("Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

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:.....

Eric F. Murillo #0499258 (On death row since 4/18/96)

George F. Page #0310202 (4/26/96)

Guy T. Le Grande #0238344 (4/26/96)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available:

"First Impressions Preaching Reflections: Liturgical Year C." 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 C** 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 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
Or 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,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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