

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” Second Sunday of Lent -C-

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

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The Transfiguration story is still a long way from the Passion narrative that begins in chapter 22 of Luke's account. One would think that at this stage of Jesus' ministry we would still be in the halcyon days of early success and spreading reputation. But even a closer look into chapter 9, from which this account is taken, shows a gathering of storm clouds on the horizon.

The chapter begins with Jesus' sending out the Twelve to preach with authority and power. We quickly hear of Herod's growing curiosity about Jesus. Next the disciples return with glowing accounts of their accomplishments. The crowds who are following Jesus are healed and fed with the multiplied loaves and fishes. Peter then makes a strong profession of faith in Jesus, a faith bolstered perhaps by the signs of Jesus' success. But Jesus interrupts Peter's enthusiastic acknowledgment by introducing the message of Jesus' upcoming suffering and rejection at the hands of the religious authorities. He adds that anyone who follows him, must likewise pick up the cross. So goes the story of this Gospel: Jesus' words and works are attracting larger crowds; his disciples have seemingly hitched their wagons to a star. But Jesus mutes their ecstatic spirits by the sobering reminder of what lies ahead. The Transfiguration account has the same blend of spectacle and muted tones of harsh reality. The disciples see the splendor and miss the reality of discipleship Jesus is attempting to teach them. They are sleepwalkers.

Jesus takes the three disciples who have been the closest to him, Peter, James and John and they climb a mountain, traditionally a place of encounter with the divine. The three have been his followers, maybe they are ready to see more of who Jesus is and be ready to learn what following him really entails. Just when they should have been most spiritually alert and ready, they fall asleep! Disciples of Jesus tend to doze off at crucial moments. Remember the night in the garden when Jesus was arrested?

We too doze off, close our eyes at crucial times and unless we wake up we miss the vision and lose our way. There is a danger in our not really seeing. The disciples were sleepwalkers who had followed Jesus and had their own dreams of

the great changes Jesus would bring about. How could someone so powerful and charismatic not change things that desperately needed changing? The world needed to be made anew; rich harvests were needed to feed still more hungry people; a new order had to happen so that the poor would no longer be the victims of those in power, etc.

But the disciples were asleep during Jesus's conversation with Moses and Elijah. They missed the conversation about Jesus' passage, his "exodus", and what would be accomplished by this exodus in Jerusalem. They missed important details about self sacrifice and how all would be helped by Jesus' sacrifice. So, when Jesus was given his cross, no wonder there were no disciples around to help him carry it; the cross had taken them completely by surprise. They should have stayed awake on that mountain. They would certainly need to be awake during Jesus' suffering in Jerusalem and if they stayed around, keeping alert, eyes and ears open, they would not miss his resurrection and the truly new life it would bring all of them. Then they would be fully awake!

The glow of the Transfiguration would become the glow of Jesus' resurrection. And his disciples would certainly pick up that glow from him. They would change and the world would be changed by them so that food would be shared, the poor would be treated with love and respect; and each person, regardless of age, gender, economic level, education or health would be treasured. The light shining from the resurrected Jesus would change us so that we too would be transfigured; or at least it should bring about these changes.

Lent catches us in the process of being transformed into disciples. We are learning to open our eyes and to leave behind our sleepwalking selves—our false illusions our own notions of glory. We want to see more clearly what discipleship means in our lives. We could even be sleepwalkers here at this Eucharist. We could take the bread and wine and look for the warm and comforting glow of this mountaintop. Or we could let the Eucharist transfigure us, show us the way to bring about real change in our selves and in our world.

In the Genesis reading we have walked in on the middle of the story. Remember that earlier in Genesis (12:1 ff.) God had promised Abram that he would be the parent of a great nation. Abram believed the promise and, with his wife Sarah, left everything and followed to a then unknown land. They modeled faith for all their

descendants, a willingness to trust God's promises even without tangible, present signs of confirmation. Abram and Sarah have been following God, but at this point of the story, they still have no children and no land.

What does Abram get for reassurance?--a renewed promise of descendants. It is clear that emphasis isn't on Abram or any mortal's faith. The focus has turned to God, the One who says to Abram, "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land as a possession". Abram asks the question we would want to ask. It is the question of this chapter in Genesis: can we trust God? We might add our own questions, depending on our own situation and needs. Will God stand by us in situations when we have no tangible proof of God's fidelity? Were we mistaken to throw our lot in with God? Does our faith sound hollow in the light of the harsh realities that surround us?

God's response is the ritual action that ancient peoples performed when making a binding covenant or contract (cf. Jeremiah 34: 18-20). Animals were cut in half and each party of the covenant would pass between the halves, as if to say, "May what happened to these animals happen to me if I ever break this covenant". This ritual is powerful in the statement God makes to Abram and us. God's very honor is on the line. And note that Abram is not performing the expected other half of the ancient promise, for usually both parties passed through the animals, both were bound to observe the covenant. Abram is not making the promise, God is. Abram and we must invest our lives, our present and our future, in God's fidelity to us.

But we are not just speaking about our present and future. For Lent also stirs up memories of our past deeds; deeds which shame us as we recall them. We take courage, because this story says what we will hear Paul enlarge for us in the New Testament, "For I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor powers, neither height nor depth nor any other creature, will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, our Lord". (Romans 8: 38-39)

In the ritual, God has assumed an obligation by swearing an oath and taking on a curse ("let it happen to me..."). God will deliver us from sin, not because we are worthy of it. The main actor in the story of our salvation is God. God will come to our aid because God has made this promise and will not go back on it. In effect, God is obligated to us.

There may be a lot of evidence of the absence of God in our lives. Each person, each family, many of the peoples of the world, can list their grievances. Does God hear our earnest prayers? We are sorely tempted to doubt the covenant that promised God would always be there for us. Yet we are still asked to trust that grace and mercy will be the end of the story, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The Eucharist today is a full statement and reminder of how far God is willing to go to reassure us that the God of the promise is keeping the covenant made long ago to us.

READER'S RESPONSE:

Lynne Worthington, from Immaculate Conception parish in Durham, North Carolina, sends this.

Something for our Lenten practice, and beyond.

LOSHON HORA

Rabbi Chaim Feld, a Cleveland, Ohio Orthodox Jew, is at the center of a growing national movement to curb gossip and hurtful speech. "Loshon Hora," is a phrase in Hebrew roughly translated as 'negative speech' or 'negative tongue.' "The Talmud equates loshon hora with murder," Feld says. "If you've never met Michael, and someone tells you he is a jerk, then Michael has been murdered for you, before you even meet him."

From Feld, the Rules of Loshon Hora:

1. Say only positive statements. Derogatory statements, even if true, are forbidden.
2. Promote people's well being. Any statement that can cause someone emotional harm is also loshon hora.
3. Humor is great, but make sure jokes aren't at someone else's expense.
4. Be kind to yourself. Speaking badly even about yourself is loshon hora.
5. Loshon hora cannot be communicated in any manner, be it through writing, body language, or verbal hints.
6. It is loshon hora to speak against a community or to make harmful remarks about children--even your own.
7. Communicate with your spouse, but not loshon hora.
8. It is forbidden to listen to loshon hora.
9. Always give people the benefit of the doubt.
10. Loshon hora is permitted, or even required, when warning a person about

potential harm.

Original story by Karen R. Long for The Cleveland Plain Dealer, Sunday, November 26, 2000, L1.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: "FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C" This compilation, from past "First Impressions," includes two reflections on almost all Sundays and major feasts for this liturgical year. For more information and to purchase go to: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>

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 address: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.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, Leobardo Almazan, Juan Torres, 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 or 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.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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

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