

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT -C-
Isaiah 43: 16-21 Psalm 126 Philippians 3: 8-14 John 8: 1-11
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

There aren't many more dramatic stories in the bible than today's gospel. The story starts well. John tells us Jesus comes to the temple in the morning. The mood is set: a new day's light enters the holy place. Jesus takes a seat, the traditional posture of a teacher. To make the point clearer John even spells it out for us, Jesus "taught them." At first glance the teaching seems interrupted. We wonder if we will ever get to hear what he had to teach them. But of course, the teaching is the unfolding story and we who hear it anew today are anxious to learn what teaching Jesus has for us.

The scribes and Pharisees considered themselves the official religious teachers. We meet the Pharisees frequently in these stories; they are the scrupulous practitioners of the religious observance and the scribes are the legal experts. Men from these two groups bring the woman to Jesus and present him with a dilemma. If he went along with the religious law (e.g. Lev. 20:10, Deut. 22: 13-24) he would lose his reputation for mercy and as one who had welcomed sinners. He would also anger the Romans, since the Jewish people could not impose the death penalty. On the other hand, if Jesus pardoned the woman, he would be accused of breaking the Mosaic law; and more, he might have been seen as one who condones adultery.

The modern reader detects other factors in the story. At a recent scripture reflection with a group of parishioners, we read this story and no sooner had the reading and a minute of silent reflection ended than a woman spoke up, "Where's the guy? It takes two to tango. I bet those men let him go!" (Another reason, when possible, for the preacher to get varied input on a passage: a chance to hear the scriptures from another perspective.) We noted that the woman isn't even named. For the accusers, the woman is just a shameless "case in point" to be used as an instrument to trap Jesus. But God wants no person used, treated as a thing. Remember that in Genesis, humans were created by God and in God's image and likeness, animated by God's breath/Spirit. The learned religious leaders failed to see God's image and breath in the one they called "this woman."

For the charge of adultery to stick, two men and only men, would have had to be witnesses. What a humiliating situation for the woman; made to stand in public before a crowd of accusers and, I am sure, curious spectators. The cards are stacked against her. I think of some people on death row I know who were too poor to afford good lawyers, have spent years on the row hoping to get someone to review their case, pay for DNA tests, move their appeals process along, etc. The woman was guilty, all that was left was for her execution to be carried out. The woman's fate is sealed, yet I am struck by the opening lines of the Isaiah reading: God "opens a way in the sea, and a pathway in the mighty waters...." The allusion, of course, is to the exodus from Egypt. God's people were in vise-like grip, trapped with no future. But God "opened a way" for them. The prophet reminds his contemporaries caught in a new slavery, this time in Babylon, that their God can do again what God did for them once before—free them from bondage, get them out of an impossible bind.

Isaiah tells the people they should look back to what God once did for them and see it, not as something that just happened long ago, but to trust that God can do it again. In fact, their looking to their past will not have to be with a nostalgia to events that are only a distant memory. God will act again on their behalf. "Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" The woman is in the bind Israel was in and she too needs to be let out of a trap. God needs to do "something new" for her.

So often people will say, as they reflect on a past crisis or difficult time, "I would never have gotten through that had God not helped me and given me strength!" We look back at what seemed impossibly difficult and only later, after we passed through the period of trial, see the hand of God helping us. Psalm 23, everyone's favorite, I bet, describes that strong guiding presence as "your rod and staff." Well, Isaiah also invites us to remember how God stood with us and to trust that in whatever bind we currently are in or will get into at a future time, that God's help will "spring forth." In fact, look closer, Isaiah invites, God is already doing something for you—even in the "wasteland."

Wasn't this true for the woman caught in adultery? She was in the wasteland of guilt and surrounded by Isaiah's "jackals" who wanted her end. Even more, she

was just being used to trap Jesus. She must have felt terribly alone; but we believers can see what she did not--- in her wasteland God was “doing something new.” Jesus was with her. The scriptures don’t tell us what Jesus was writing on the ground. Throughout history there have been guesses by biblical scholars and the pious. Whatever he wrote is not the point. But from his silent moment came a word that, like the creative word God spoke in the beginning of Genesis, shattered the darkness with God’s light and creative power.

John’s gospel has strong ties to Genesis. The first book starts with the creation account. John’s gospel opens in a similar way, “In the beginning....” John is showing that Jesus is the Word and wisdom of God, recreating a broken and sinful humanity. Isaiah reminds us that throughout the history of God’s people, God was always at work in the process of recreation. God is always ready to forgive us the sin that defaces the Creator’s image in us and make of us a new creation, free from sin’s destructive control. This forgiveness and new life is what the woman experienced at Jesus’ word.

Maybe we have been successful in our chosen lenten observance—or not. Taking our cue from today’s readings, we are stirred to a lenten prayer of thanksgiving at this eucharist. The psalm response to the first reading sets the tone for our prayer today. Even as we remember the great deeds God has done for us, we take Isaiah’s advice and move our gaze from the past to the present—and then to the future. As we look back and see the hand of God at moments of need and reflect on the saving work God did for us in Jesus’ life, we can say, with the psalmist, “The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.” We are thankful that God was there for us when we were “captives,” when we sowed “in tears” and when we reaped a harvest of “rejoicing” (Psalm 126). And in our prayer of thanksgiving we also express the firm hope that God will lead us out of any barren place we now or in the future will experience.

How could Isaiah have known that the “something new” God had planned for us was Jesus? Today’s gospel shows how he was the oasis for the woman in her wasteland. Jesus makes a new way of living God’s law possible, not by relying on external rules and observances, but on the Spirit’s new life given us at baptism—our “rivers in the wasteland.” Jesus set the woman free from the trap of her accusers as well as from her sin, “Neither do I condemn you, from now on do not sin any more.” As with the woman, so with us, Jesus frees us from our past

sin, reanimates God's image in us and sets us free and now able to overcome sin. The woman was as good as dead, but was given new life through his freeing word. So it is with us this Lent, we stand aware of our sins before God and Jesus' word frees us to live a new life—Isaiah was right, God has done “a new thing” for us.

QUOTABLE

“Indeed, any sermon that remained entirely in the realm of abstract thought, never touching the real world of field and crops, parents and children, employers and workers, feasts and banquets, toil and play, would hardly qualify as christian preaching at all.”

---Thomas Long in, *The Witness of Preaching*.

JUSTICE NOTES

When considering economic, social and environmental policies on behalf of agriculture and rural communities, The National Catholic Rural Life Conference considers the following as one of its principles:

Subsidiarity

In harmony with personal dignity, human beings hold the natural right to organize, to associate with one another, and to exercise responsible self-governance in their communities and local regions. No higher political authority - no state - should strip a person or local community of their capacity to judge and act on their own behalf.

Subsidiarity means local control and democratic participation, as long as people within the locality are willing and able to fulfill their necessary functions.

Opposite to subsidiarity is centralized bureaucracies or economic concentration which rob people of their ability to act freely. Subsidiarity creates attachment to a real place - a person's town or city - which in turn creates strong feelings to the preservation of the nation and our constitutional republic.

In respect to international agreements and global authorities, interventions should be applied to correct economic, political, social and cultural imbalances, but then fade away as responsible local control regains its rightful place. The World Trade Organization, for example, may facilitate global trade, but not at the risk of superceding national or local labor and environmental laws. In many rural areas here and abroad, the land is turned into an endless stretch of commodity production for global export rather than a natural landscape of community imbued with rights. This we fight for in solidarity.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see you next week,’ when you never know if they’re going to call and say, ‘He’s up next—it’s time for his execution.’”

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

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:.....

Henry L. Mc Collum #0265106 (On death row since 11/22/91)

Clinton R. Rose #0351933 (12/19/91)

Edward E. Davis #0100579 (3/12/92)

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

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.

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 to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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