

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 19th SUNDAY -C-
Wisdom 18: 6-9 Psalm 33 Hebrews 11: 1-2, 8-19 Luke 12: 32-48
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Well, this is a rarity! —a reading from Hebrews. Why not take a gamble and preach from it? It will be a challenge, probably feed our own faith and certainly nourish those other “sojourners” who hear us and travel the road of faith with us. Whatever preaching choice you make though, the first reading this weekend will probably confuse most who hear it. If you don’t choose to preach from it, consider a word or two of introduction before the reading to help put it in context. But if you decide to preach from this first reading, maybe the following will help.

The Wisdom reading recalls the first Passover. It emphasizes the care with which God protected the people of Israel. Because the people trusted God, they were ready to begin their journey out of slavery to freedom. This is a favorite and central biblical message: our God is a freeing God and will give us what we need to lead us out of bondage. Over the generations of faith, the Jews could recall what God had once done for them as they faced still one more challenge, one more journey to freedom.

The God of the Exodus and Passover is our God too. Here at our eucharist we offer praise to God for our own deliverance through Christ, our Passover Lamb. But there is still a way to go. What journey are we being called to embark upon? Are we being invited to leave behind false and sinful behavior? Must we renounce the other gods at whose altars we worship—power, wealth, glamor, possessions, etc. Do we need freedom from enslaving habits and addictions? Or do we just yearn for renewed energy and determination to continue our pilgrimage to God, a long journey that can seem insignificant in its routine, arduous in its daily challenges or too difficult in the change it requires in our lives? The Eucharist is our Passover meal. It reminds us of times in the past when God stood us on our feet and urged us on. Here at worship, we remember those moments when we said “Yes” to the inner promptings we heard, when we got up and took our first step on still one more journey of freedom.

A move to the second reading. In “the good ole days,” we kids had our heroes, and with three major league teams in the New York area, they were mostly baseball players. We didn’t know anything about their personal lives; I am sure they weren’t any better or worse than their modern counterparts. But for us, who were ignorant of their personal demons, they shone in a special constellation. Because they were outstanding on the diamond, we collected their picture cards, and memorized their statistics—batting averages, home runs, errors or earned run

averages. We had the feeling that if we tried hard enough, we too might someday glow in the same heroic limelight. Now, as adults, we are more experienced and less gullible. We have heard too much about the antics of some athletes to ever propose them as role models without careful circumspection. But where shall we turn to find new heroes, men and women who help us “hitch our wagon to a star?”

At this celebration today we are reminded again that we are a biblically-inspired people. We listen eagerly for stories of “witnesses,” people whose lives we can admire and hope to imitate. We need such encouragement because, like the Israelites, our faith journey is sometimes long and arduous. It helps to have bright human lights whose lives show us how faithful God is and what God can do through us.

The author of Hebrews wrote for Jewish converts to Christianity who were under stress and in danger of giving up their faith. In today’s section the author tells us, “Faith is the realization of what is hoped for....” Thus, with faith we can experience now a taste of what God has promised us and those things for which we wait in hope.... peace, reconciliation, healing, salvation, etc. The author of Hebrews is a good preacher; rather than merely give a definition of faith, we are given a concrete example of what faith looks like in the flesh. So, today we hear about Abraham. (But let’s not forget his partner in faith, Sarah, who gets only a passing reference in today’s passage.) In his faith Abraham “realized” what he hoped for, his faith enabled him to “see” future generations, his and Sarah’s progeny, dwelling in the land God promised them. With this sight, made possible by faith, he responded to God and “went out, not knowing where he was to go.”

Today’s worship places before us our ancestors in faith, Abraham and Sarah, to bolster us in difficult times. Let’s use today’s celebration to recall those who, in our lifetimes, have been similar witnesses—parents, family, friends and community members, who “went out, not knowing where [they] were going.” Perhaps these modern witnesses volunteer to work in a shelter for the homeless; visit the sick; work in the parish office; sing in the choir; go before local government; teach children in religious ed programs; work in an inner city school; strive to be honest employees or just employers; serve in civic jobs like police officers, fire fighters, as emergency medical personnel----no matter how big or seeming insignificant their “stepping out” was, these are people who decided to follow an inner calling, to choose a life journey faithful to God and responsive to those around them. They may have turned down promotions or other jobs, because, as they might put it, “I like what I am doing, I believe in my own way, I am serving God,” or “I like helping people.”

Imagine the pulls and temptation they have to face as they, like Abraham, “realized” their faith.

But, though they might not put it as Hebrews does, they looked “forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and maker is God.” I love that image! In a world where so much is passing and unreliable, Hebrews invites us to take a long look forward to see the solid city “with foundations.” Those who place their hope on this city will not be disappointed or shaken. Hope in that sure destiny, though still in the distance, feeds us with a lively faith now so we can keep going in the direction of “things not seen.”

Luke must also have been writing for people under strain, for Jesus first addresses the issue of their fear, “Do not be afraid any longer, little flock....” He is like a mother or father speaking to a frightened child in the middle of the night. He encourages us to trust in God, rather than in accumulated wealth—or anything that does not have, what our second reading describes as, “foundations whose architect and maker is God.” Jesus also calls his disciples to “roll up their sleeves” for the hard work ahead (his image is, “Gird your loins....”) and to light their lamps. In what kind of darkness will they have to wait or pass through? Lest we get discouraged along the way, we are encouraged by the witness of Abrahams’ fidelity, as well as Jesus’ promise, that he will return, sit his faithful ones at table and wait on them.

Here at Eucharist, we are like, or trying to be like, the servants in the parable whom the master finds vigilant. At this table we “take a breather,” we pause from our labors to rest and gather strength. Here we “recline at table” and are fed by the master. Jesus offers himself to us in nourishing word and food. And aren’t we also fed as we look around at the other servants who also have come in from the fields of their own labors to join us in voicing praise to God? With them we reach out with hungry hearts for the food that sustains us all as we work for the Lord and try to be vigilant during our long wait for his return.

Gospel meal images point us to that final banquet we will have when all this period of work, diligence and temptation is finally over. This Eucharist is a “realized” sign of the final banquet, it makes visible in faith what the gospel promises, for at this meal we gather, “recline” in faith and receive what Jesus offers us---his very self for nourishment.

Today’s readings sound like those we expect to hear at Advent—all this talk of perseverance in trials, faithfulness in waiting and hope in Jesus’ return. But vigilance isn’t a part-time virtue, a one-season practice. We are always on the watch for the Lord in our daily lives, trying to discern how to respond to him in prayer and service to others. At the most unexpected times and surprising ways, the Lord knocks on the door of our lives and asks to be let in. Let’s be vigilant at our celebration today and give him entrance through the Word we have heard and the Eucharist we are going to receive.

JUSTICE NOTES

In Darfur, Sudan, 1,000 people are dying every day, and that number is rising. Over one million black Africans have been bombed and burnt out of their villages, and their crops and water supplies destroyed by Arab ‘Janjaweed’ militias. The Government-backed Janjaweed surround the refugee camps and block life-giving food and medicine getting through. Anyone leaving is raped or killed.

The US Government estimates that 370,000 human beings are already dead or certain to die of starvation in these extermination camps. Up to 1 million could die within the next few months.

As people of faith and members of the human family, we cannot let this horror continue. Our government’s response so far has been slow and weak. Only an immediate international humanitarian intervention to protect the people of Darfur and ensure aid gets to them will stop the slaughter. Click below to send a fax to Congress telling them to vote for bi-partisan House and Senate Resolutions demanding the US take these actions to stop the genocide in Darfur:
www.faithfulamerica.org/darfur.htm

The faith community has mobilized to address this moral outrage. Daily, peaceful protests at the Sudanese Embassy in Washington DC have echoed protest tactics used against Apartheid in South Africa. Religious leaders, celebrities and political leaders are being arrested each day in acts of civil disobedience, including Reverend Bob Edgar, Congressman Charlie Rangel, and actor Danny Glover.

For more information on the crisis in Darfur, or to get involved in activism in your community, please visit www.darfurgenocide.org

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.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

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:.....

- Marvin E. Williams #0443375 (On death row since 1/25/95)
- Jerry W. Connor #0085045 (4/30/91)
- Charles Walker #0420511 (2/7/95)

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