

Second Sunday of Lent (B)

February 25, 2024

Today we begin our second week of lent. In it we are called to transform our sleepy spiritual life into dynamic Christian life during this grace-filled season. And we do so by cooperating with the grace of God and the strengthening of the Holy Spirit through prayer, fasting, and sharing our blessings with those in need.

Our three readings in a way refer to transfiguration on three mountains. The first reading explains how Abraham's obedience and faith were transformed to blind obedience and trusting faith in his God. In the second reading, St. Paul speaks about the Mount Calvary transfiguration of Jesus, the only begotten Son of God when instead of saving him from death as He spared Isaac, God the Father permitted Jesus to die a shameful death on the cross. In the Transfiguration story in today's Gospel, Jesus is revealed in His Heavenly glory, with Moses and Elijah on the Mountain of Transfiguration.

I believe many ministers of the Gospel will simply pick one of the three readings to preach on, for on the surface they seem so different, so disconnected.

But I really don't think that's the case. In fact, I think all three readings are linked in a way. And I'll do my best to help us see how they might fit together. First we have the story of Abraham and Isaac, a story that can rather be troublesome to hear. So often, in my estimation, we become overly focused on why God asked this of Abraham, focused on why he would demand such a thing of him. "What does that say about God?" we might ask ourselves. Yet, I think that is a misplaced attention, for I truly believe that we should really be focused on Abraham in this story. You see, what is most important to me in this story, is the fact that Abraham BELIEVED in his heart that God was asking this of him. Abraham was sure that he was "hearing" his God correctly, and despite not knowing WHY God was asking this of him, he was prepared to do God's will no matter

how difficult it was. I think it's not the action of God that teaches us something in this story. Rather it's the action of Abraham, a man like you and me.

On the other hand, the Gospel passage from Mark seems to be all about a remarkable miracle that takes place on a mountain in the presence of Peter, James, and John. What exactly happened that day? What precisely did they see? Why did God choose those three? I wish I had all the answers for you. Yet, for how dramatic the "visual" was that day, the heart of the story seems not to be what they saw, but what they heard.

"This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."

And while the three of them were almost certainly filled with awe and wonder and confusion, God didn't want them to remain all caught up in that. Rather, he wanted to "ground" them, make sure that they realized that the most important thing would be what Jesus said and taught and did. In other words, this Jesus, this friend of theirs, and this Son of God, would have something important to say to them, ask of them and expect of them. And he has important things to say to us too.

This is where the two readings are connected - for they are both about "listening". Abraham "listened" to God, and was willing to do whatever God asked, was willing to do not simply the easy stuff, the things that demanded little of him. No, he was also willing to do the difficult things, the painful things, the things that would even require that which he loved the most.

Peter, James, and John and us too have a sort of "advantage" that Abraham didn't have. You see, in the time of Abraham, God was, in a certain sense, unseen. But for those early disciples of Jesus, and for us two thousand years later, we have a person we can look to and learn from and listen to, the person of Jesus - God in the flesh. Jesus, not unlike God in regard to Abraham, is saying to us some pretty tough things, challenging things, things that if we honestly consider them demand our all

- our complete selves. Think about it. Radical mercy. Radical generosity. Radical forgiveness. Radical compassion. Radical love. That's what Jesus is saying to each of us through what we know "about him", but also through "knowing him", through the relationship we forge through prayer and contemplation and listening in the deepest recesses of our hearts.

God wants us to listen to him and do our best to do whatever he asks of us no matter what, no matter how difficult, no matter what it costs. But why should we? Why listen to him? Why not just do what we want to do? Why not take the easy way out? Maybe that's a question you've never asked before. But seriously, why go to all the trouble of listening to God?

The answer, I believe, can be found in the Second Reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans.

"If God is for us, who can be against us?"

This, in a sense, provides us with the "reason", the motivation for striving to do God's will as best as we know how. In modern terms, God is "on our side". And I don't mean on our side as Catholics, or Christians, or any other category we can think of. The God we believe in, the God we believe broke into our world in the person of Jesus, the God who laid down his life for us, the God who continues to live within us through his Spirit - is a God of LOVE. God loves us more than we can ever think of or imagine. We, the human family, are creatures he made out of love and in his own image. And he only wants good things for us.

And so, he's not a God we need to cower from. He's not a God we need to bargain with. He's not a God we have to appease. He's not a capricious God who acts on a whim or for no reason at all. My dear friends, our God is completely and madly in love with us, and wants us to be in love with him so that we can have the most beautiful, meaningful life possible. In other words, we strive to listen to God because it would be ridiculous not to, would be foolish not to, would be harmful to ourselves and others not to.

Put simply, God's way is always the best way. God's judgment is true. God's compassion and forgiveness are never-ending. God's generosity has no bounds. God's wisdom is Wisdom itself. And most importantly God is Love. It's as simple and as profound as that.

"It is God who acquits us. Who will condemn?"

And so as we continue on our Lenten journey, let's do what we can to be better "listeners", do what we can to open ourselves up to whatever God is asking of us. And when we hear that voice, when we come to some sort of understanding in our hearts, when we feel our God tugging us to do a certain thing or head in a certain direction, let's be like Abraham, and not hesitate. Let's be like Peter, James, John, and all those other early followers who gave up nearly everything to follow Jesus. And let's do all of that for one simple reason - because God loves us, and we want nothing more than to return that love.

God is for us! That's really Good News. The only thing that could make that better is if we found a way to "be for God" just as much.

May this Lent help us do precisely that.