

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

The Rev. Robert G. Eaton, Interim Rector
All Saints' Episcopal Church, San Diego, CA

The scripture readings for this Second Sunday in Lent continue to give us opportunity to consider various obstacles that are placed directly in the path of the Mission of Jesus, which is to mean, as well, the Mission of his Church. Jesus calls for both clarity of understanding, and an often painful self-denial to make sure the obstacle is not we ourselves.

O Lord, let your word only be spoken, and your word only be heard. Amen.

I was tempted this week in preparation for this sermon. The temptation was to use the Old Testament lesson and make reference to the search for a new rector for this wonderful parish of All Saints. I thought what a wonderful opportunity to preach about the need to have faith in God, and rely completely on what God would provide. This kind of faith is especially necessary when there appears to be no solution, and we are left wondering whatever is God doing, leading us out here to worship him without him having supplied even a qualified candidate.

But as you can see in the Old Testament lesson from the book of Genesis what kind of trouble there could be making application of this particular lesson to a rector search. Of course, we would need to set aside any comparison whatsoever between finding a new rector and the binding of Isaac to make a sacrifice – although there are some parishes which have that kind of reputation. No, it is after the angel stopped Abraham before slashing with his knife, as he has proved his trust, faith, fear and reliance on God. And then, caught in the thicket was a ram, and Abraham called that place “The Lord will provide” or more literally, “The Lord will see to it”, that is, from the Hebrew, Yehowah-Yir-EH, or as the King James used the letter J, Jehovah-Jireh. And so we could see and rely upon that God will provide a rector for the parish. The problem is that Abraham then took the new rector – I mean the provided sacrificial ram – and offered it up as a burnt sacrifice. No that won't work. What we don't want is find that new rector and they just get burned being here. Or you.

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So Let's just move to the Gospel lesson and see what we can learn about the moving forward, and the provision for, a faithful parish on mission for Christ and his Kingdom, shall we?

Here is the predominant question. How is it possible that Peter, who, only 3 or 4 verses before this Gospel reading, has just proclaimed Jesus as the Christ, the Anointed One, that is the Messiah, with as powerful a clarity and succinctness as you can get, "YOU ARE THE CHRIST!", then turn around and rebuke Jesus for prophesying his passion and death.

About the clarity: I'm not sure which takes the front seat in the mission of God- the clarity of speaking God's word, and thus the clarity of pointing to Jesus as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, as the Christ, the Messiah? Or our absolute UN-willingness to hear such clarity in deference to our need to protect our creature comfort lives – even we have no creature comforts to speak of.

It is clear, so to speak, that Jesus values being clear. We also know from hearing Jesus speak, that, as he was questioned once about using parables rather than "plain speaking" as he was accused. And Jesus said – and this may a clue for us in this matter of resistance – that people are hard of hearing and hard of understanding, hard of seeing, and hard of comprehending. And when it comes to how we are to live our lives following Jesus, like as we hear in the Gospel today, we are those people, those who would rather hear a more comfortable version. And hence the obstacle that WE place before God's mission is Ourselves. You and I can be the obstacle, the hindrance, the block to the Mission of Jesus, which is meant to be the Mission of the Church. And hence Jesus saying, to be fully open to the Kingdom of God moving, you have to die, die to self in you. Of course, the promise of true life is not attached to death in itself, but Jesus means to the loss of life to self..

Now, on this matter of clarity, Jesus calling to us, or even how we perceive, I do think that Jesus understands the capabilities of any one person to be able to comprehend for themselves just who Jesus is. No one is off the hook here in this matter of acceptance and repentance, and knowing just what that means. And I'm not talking about watering down the Kingdom proclamation to make allowances. I just believe that, as I read Jesus interacting when he just stops and looks intently at someone, and then as the bible says, "loves them", and then speaks to them, he is providing a custom mad challenge to that person

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right then and there, from the king of glory who knows you better than you or your mother knows yourself. You may have had that experience with Jesus Christ in your devotions and prayers at some moment.

Still, I have found often that the people we might consider the least capable of understanding are quite capable in their own comprehension, and wisdom often comes forth.

I am reminded of that 1994 Tom Hanks movie, Forest Gump– wow, that's 24 years ago – but still very entertaining to watch.

Now what I'm going to share is not from that movie, but it is a humorous and fictional story that illustrates so well the mind of Forest Gump. He sees things differently. He doesn't think OUT of the box, he doesn't even consider that there IS a box. In one way, a totally helpless individual dependent upon others, severe autism, mislabeled often as mentally handicapped. But in another way, a brilliant mathematical savant, with words of wisdom that change people's lives by the way they see things differently.

So the story, that when Forest Gump died, he stood in front of St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter said, "Welcome, Forest. We've heard a lot about you." He continued, "Unfortunately, it's getting pretty crowded up here and we find that we now have to give people an entrance examination before we let them in." "Okay," said Forest. "I hope it's not too hard. I've already been through a test. My momma used to say, 'Life is like a final exam. It's hard.' "

"Yes, Forest, I know. But this test is only three questions. Here they are."

1) Which two days of the week begin with the letter 'T'?"

2) How many seconds are in a year?

3) What is God's first name?

"Well, sir," said Forest, "The first one is easy. Which two days of the week begin with the letter 'T'? Today and Tomorrow."

St. Peter looked surprised and said, "Well, that wasn't the answer I was looking for, but you have a point. I give you credit for that answer."

"The next question," said Forest, "How many seconds are in a year? Twelve."

"Twelve?" said St. Peter, surprised and confused.

"Yes, sir. January 2nd, February 2nd, March 2nd ..."

St. Peter interrupted him. "I see what you mean. I'll have to give you credit for that one, too."

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"And the last question," said Forest, "What is God's first name? It's Andy."
"Andy?" said St. Peter, in shock. "How did you come up with 'Andy'?"
"I learned it in church. We used to sing about it." Forest broke into song,
[singing] "Andy walks with me, Andy talks with me, Andy tells me I am His
own."
St. Peter opened the gate to heaven and said, "Run, Forest, Run!"

The obstacle itself should be quite clear: often where Jesus wants to take us – and that includes Jesus' leaders as we trust them to be forthright, faithful, and walking in the fear of God – we have no desire, and no inclination to go

What made the Forest Gump in the movie itself such an inspiration? Because he was trusting. And he was confident in his trusting. That seems a key issue. We start questioning ourselves, and it comes out sometimes as absolute resistance and denial. The comfort of our lives is put onto the altar.

I may have said it to you already, but a simple aphorism is that the problem with living sacrifices is that they keep crawling back off the altar. This is not about putting yourself into harms' way just to try to prove yourself! No, it is first, the intention to follow with all of our hearts, all of our souls, all of our minds, all of our strength, and then second, when the call DOES come, or the way IS presented, that we don't lay ourselves down in the middle of the street to stop what we think is an unrighteous Tank.

As we look then to the interaction between Peter and Jesus in today's gospel, whatever the cause of Peter's response, it was not received by Jesus, obviously. Peter's strong will and warm heart linked to his ignorance produce a shocking bit of arrogance. And isn't this the issue, the obstacle to God's kingdom within us – or within us together in this parish – or within the entire Universal Body of Christ?

The command from Jesus to 'get behind' is clearly a rebuke. However, as we know Jesus to have come not to destroy, but to gather, a closer look into the Greek tells us it can also carry a sense similar to the idea of "fall back in line, behind Me" (i.e. with the other disciples, be my disciple, follow my example). This could strongly enforce the idea of "Follow Me" in the way of suffering unto death in the following statements.

What are the values at stake? Scripture (and the Prayer Book) tell us what Jesus lays out for Peter in his rebuke, that the devil has influenced this world so deeply that the world's values are quite often the devil's values, and so by valuing the things humans value such as lack of suffering, Peter shows himself to be in league with the devil; and then quite directly Jesus tells Peter "for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."

There they are. Our priority enemies: The world, the flesh and the devil.

Peter has a choice, as do we all—he can either be a hindrance or obstacle serving Satan and so be something Jesus must leave behind on the way to the cross, or he can be a follower of Jesus, in which case he gets in line behind Jesus, takes up his own cross, and prepares for suffering as Jesus is doing."

And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me." This is the "cost" of being a disciple.

Hard words. And more so in our culture. The Gospel tradition emphasizes that those who wish to follow Jesus must understand from the start that they are surrendering their lives to him. From this perspective, most modern Western Christians remain unconverted, a point we should grasp to grapple effectively with the impact Jesus' words would have had on his own contemporaries.

What about Peter, later, after Jesus? How did this obstacle maker turn out? Well, besides the other interactions between he and Jesus, we can take a quick look at Peter's writing inspired by the Holy Spirit as in his letters, and we see that he indeed learned and humbled himself unto the way of the cross and sought to model and exhort this to his audience. His apostolic, Mission of Jesus zeal was reoriented to follow the Crucified Lord in His way.

He wrote in his first letter, "4:1 Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, 2 so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God."

Finally, remembering that story of Abraham, and the ram, and the burnt offering to the Lord, I find it quite ironic how, before he takes time to close his letter, Peter says, “12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; 13 but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.”

Hopefully in our lives as Christians looking to be ambassadors and not obstacles to the progress of the Mission of Christ, we will rejoice in being willing servants.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.