

Lent 2, Yr. B

February 25, 2018

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:31-38

The readings this morning have to do with the changes we have to make, the journeys of growth that we have to be willing to undertake if we decide that we're going to be disciples, followers of Jesus. Looking first at the words of Jesus in Mark, we can understand quite clearly that our response to the invitation doesn't mean that, at least in earthy terms, all will be well. In fact, someone has suggested the Jesus needs a PR person – because he's laying out the demands too clearly – he talks about dying to save one's life and about picking up one's cross when what most people would prefer to hear is that religion, church, following Jesus, will mean clear sailing and a life without problems.

A word about Mark's Gospel is in order here. By the time he was writing, real persecution of Christians was going on. The Roman emperor Nero had blamed the Christians for the fire which had destroyed almost half of Rome (when it was suspected that he himself had set the fire) and large numbers of Christians were martyred. So, when Mark wrote these words, he was talking about real, physical death and he was warning his readers that if they deserted Christ in order to save their lives in the short run, they ran the risk of losing them for eternity. There are undoubtedly Christians around the world who are still reading this text in that context, but we are not among them. Does that mean that Jesus' words aren't applicable to us? No – they're for us, too, because while we may not be facing immediate, in-your-face persecution, the demands of the spiritual life – those demands for self-denial and self-sacrifice and self-giving are just as real, whatever the context.

These scriptures go right to the heart of what it means to be human – what are our deepest desires/ our deepest hopes and dreams – what do we want from life – what do we want enough to order everything else around that goal? That question has been asked, I'm thinking, as long as humans have been around. And many answers have been offered. You may remember the English philosophers who developed the ethical system of utilitarianism. It's easy, they said in effect. Human want to maximize their pleasure and avoid pain. They did have some pretty sophisticated arguments, but it's hard to ignore the fact that that philosophy could easily boil down to: IT'S ALL ABOUT ME, ALL THE TIME. Some theologians argue that our central sin, at least our central temptation, is our self-centeredness. We could certainly use that as a way to understand Peter's remarks in Mark's Gospel – you're the Messiah, and we all know that the Messiah is about power and glory, not about suffering and dying and ALSO, one has to think that Peter might be a bit self-interested here. He has, after all, given up everything to follow Jesus and if the Jesus project goes down in flames, what's going to happen to me? Jesus berates Peter for setting his mind on human things but, that is, after all, where we have to start.

Keep that in mind and then take another look at the Genesis reading. Abraham is held up as the paragon of trust, as Paul says, someone was deemed to be righteous because of his faith. Abraham's story began when God told him to leave his country and his father's home for a "land that I will show you." Nothing more explicit than that. Trust me, God said to Abraham. And he did, leaving all he knew. And, in return, God promised Abraham that he would make of him the

father of a multitude of nations and that through him, all nations would be blessed. But Abraham's journey wasn't a straight-line affair. There were detours and false starts and decisions that could have upended the whole project. For instance, when Abraham tries to pass Sarah off as his sister so that the Pharaoh won't kill Abraham in order to have Sarah in his household - as I recall, there were two such episodes. Abraham doubted - when Sarah was clearly getting too old to have a child and Abraham had heard the promises about fathering nations and no son was appearing. The journey of trust couldn't have been easy. But he kept putting one foot in front of the other, following. There's something really key here in this reading, though, that I'd like to point out and that is that God's promise is universal - it's about many nations. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his book on religion and violence, points out that all three "religions of the book," Judaism, Islam and Christianity, count Abraham as their father in faith. He talks about how that has led to conflict between the religions. He notes that, in the beginning, each of them thought the others would fade away or at least some to see that THEIR way was the only right way. When that didn't happen, they struggled with each other. He points to a couple of things in that struggle: first of all these religions are like siblings, each competing for the Father's favor and blessing. But, he says, that's human thinking, that's the kind of thinking we've developed because our experience has been that only ONE can be the favored one, only ONE can get the coveted blessing. And you'll remember how many of the stories in Genesis have to do with just that: Cain killing Abel over jealousy as to whose sacrifice was more acceptable, Jacob and Esau competing for their father's blessing, Joseph of the many-colored coat who was favored by his father and therefore hated by his brothers. But Sacks points out that a careful reading of the text shows that God rejects no one and in each of those stories there's a kind of subtext in which the one who would appear to have been lesser, not favored, receives his or her own blessing. God, says the Rabbi, rejects rejection. Everyone is loved, everyone is included.

There's another point here. In addition to that kind of sibling rivalry between the three religions, Sacks points to another, all-too-human dynamic which he calls our "groupishness." Being in groups was often necessary for survival, especially in times of scarcity. But he points out that that kind of thinking also means that we develop a kind of in/out thinking. My friends, my family, my tribe, my country - all worthy of my best efforts, BUT not yours if you belong to some other group. I know I've told you the story about the great Jewish Rabbi Hillel who was one approached by a fellow who said, "I'll become a Jew if you can recite the entire Torah standing on one foot." And Hillel, undoubtedly standing on one foot, said, "What is hateful to you, do not do to another. That is the whole Torah; go and live it." You'll recognize that as one version of the Golden Rule, which is shared by all three religions. It's a place to stand to counter our groupishness.

So, there's human thinking and there's divine thinking and we're asked to move from the one to the other. Like Abraham and Peter, though, it's probably not a straight-forward instant journey. That would be our preference, I think. I remember reading about a comedian who came from Russia and said he wasn't prepared for the array of instant foods in American grocery stores. He said that on his first shopping trip he saw powdered milk - you just add water and you get milk. And then he saw powdered orange juice - just add water and you get orange juice! And

then he saw baby powder and he said I thought to myself, "What a country!" (Yakow Smirnoff quoted in Synthesis)

One final story, though, which is told by William Willimon, a Methodist bishop who writes about a time when he was dean of the chapel at Duke. A recruiter from Teach America, an organization that tries to recruit this nation's most talented college graduates to go into some of the nation's worst public schools, in an attempt to transform them into something better, had come to speak in the chapel. He said, "The woman stood up in front of a large group of Duke students, a larger group than I had supposed would come to this sort of thing and said to them, 'I can tell by looking at you that I have probably come to the wrong place. Somebody told me this was a BMW campus and I can believe it looking at you. Just looking at you, I can tell that all of you are a success. Why would you all be on this campus if you were not successful, if you were not going on to successful careers on Madison Avenue or Wall Street? And yet here I stand, hoping to talk one of you into giving away your life in the toughest job you will ever have. I am looking for people to go into the hollows of West Virginia, into the ghettos of South Los Angeles and teach in some of the most difficult schools in the world. Last year, two of our teachers were killed while on the job. And I can tell, just by looking at you, that none of you are interested in that. So go to law school or whatever successful thing you are planning on doing. But if by chance, some of you just happen to be interested, I've got these brochures here for you to tell about Teach America. Meeting's over.' With that the whole group stood up, pushed into the aisles, shoved each other aside, ran down to the front and fought over those brochures." Losing one kind of life, but gaining another.

At this point, probably none of us are going to teach in a ghetto school. But the central question applies to everyone. That central question is what it means to be a fully human person, what it means to be a flourishing human being. The answers are in these readings: moving from a selfish, me first, last and always vision, to a universal vision that means everyone belongs and everyone is loved. Setting your mind on divine things and then moving your feet in accord with that vision. Amen.