

How Discipleship Changes Us
Second Sunday of Lent - Year B - 02/28/2021

Psalm Reading: 22:23-31

1st Reading: Gen. 17:1-7, 15-16, 2nd: Mark 8:31-38

In our reading from Genesis Abram, this 99 year old dude... Ninety-nine! That was a long time to live in a day and age nearly 1800 years on the other side of the birth of Christ, as much as 3821 years ago. People at that time were barely out of the stone age. People were repeating oral histories, and in some places there was even writing, so we can know something of that time other than what we can learn from archaeological digs.

So, Abram, (did I say he was ninety-nine?) well, he is wandering around in the region between the Hittite Empire and Egypt, herding sheep and heading up a large household (but so far without any kids of his own). God tells him to walk “faithfully and blamelessly” and for this God will make him the Father of many nations. This is pretty cool, because it is just what Abram has always longed for, what many of us long for, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and so on. This is the covenant God makes with Abram, and as a mark of this covenant, God changes his name to Abraham (which can mean “father of many” in Hebrew) and God changes the name of Abraham’s wife from Sarai to Sarah.

Now, this name change is significant, because it signals something to Abraham and Sarah and to ourselves. It signifies that in this encounter with God, in this promise to “walk before the Lord and be blameless”, there is a fundamental change in

the character and lives of this aged couple. Because of their new relationship with God they have become more than they once had been. They have come to have a personal relationship with God. In fact Abraham will have several conversations with God on a very personal level. Though the remainder of his life will still be filled with turmoil, Abraham's relationship with God will get him through the hard times and sweeten the rejoicing in the good times.

Now let us fast forward 1800 years or so to the time of Jesus, to our reading from the Gospel of Mark (8:31-38). Here, we have a very different scene. Jesus has just had a disagreement with Peter, his leading Apostle. In fact, it is a pretty heated argument over what it means to be the Messiah and by extension what it means to be a disciple. Jesus has told Peter and the other disciples that being the Messiah means that he, Jesus, will be put to death for the good of humanity. And Peter, in his shock and dismay, "rebukes" Jesus. "Rebuke" that is a pretty strong word. (v.33) The kind of word you would use to chew out a very naughty child or in the parlance of *that* day to expel a demon!

Well, you can imagine the thoughts going through the minds of the disciples, especially Peter, in light of who they thought Jesus was or what they thought it meant that Jesus was the Messiah. Their understanding, by their hopeful reading of some of the Prophets, was that Jesus as Messiah (or anointed one), was going to form an army, push the Roman conquerors out of Judea, and become king. Then these twelve Apostles, being among the first to flock to the banner of Jesus, would be ministers in his government. They would topple the

powers that resided in Jerusalem and Rome, and supplant them with their own power. No wonder Peter dared to rebuke the master, no wonder the apostles did not intervene. In fact, we can imagine them on the side of Peter in this disagreement.

Evidently, they had not been paying very close attention to the ministry of Jesus early on and did not have a very accurate definition of what it means to be a disciple. A disciple is not a minion that simply gives and follows orders in the name of the master. It is not necessarily someone looking for glory. No, a disciple is someone who follows a leader whom they wish to emulate. The disciples should hang on every word of the master because the object of being a disciple is to be just like him. To be a disciple is a process of transformation of the self. In the case of disciples of Jesus, then, growth could not mean to grow in wealth or political power, but to grow rich in faith and to gain spiritual power.

After this disagreement between Jesus and Peter, Jesus decided to call together the crowd that seemed to follow him everywhere. In the Gospel of Mark this is the first time that Jesus personally calls on the crowd. Jesus must have seen how mistaken his disciples were, and his subject matter might lead us to believe that he is disappointed in his lead disciples. Perhaps he wants to clarify to all and sundry just what discipleship in Jesus Christ entails. And Jesus lays it out starkly for them.

This is what Christ said to the crowd, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matt. 8:34b) Jesus is telling whoever is willing to listen that being a disciple is not about power and glory. If

the disciples were expecting to head up departments of state, if they were expecting Jesus to hand out big tracts of land and government contracts when he came to power, they really had it wrong. It would be just the opposite. They would be reviled. They would have to sacrifice. They would take the burdens of others upon their own shoulders. They would carry their own cross.

It is important to understand here what carrying a cross meant at that time. Crucifixion was a cruel punishment designed to punish criminals, in fact it was designed to humiliate them as well as cause suffering and pain and ultimate death. It was not a process that anyone might wish to undergo. But that was the plan for the master, and because discipleship was an effort to be like the master, it was meant for the disciples, too. Jesus would suffer because he was good, because he was faithful, because he had done what God had told him to do.

In speaking of the cross, Jesus was being as plain as he could be. To be his disciple a person would have to be like HIM! A disciple had to be good and to be willing even to die for that goodness.

It is interesting to note that this speech swayed ALL of the disciples. I think it was because even though the disciples had had a misconception of what it meant to be the Messiah, they had no doubt of just who the Messiah was (and is), and it was this belief that would lead them, ultimately, to be as much like Jesus as they could be. In fact most of them, at the end of their careers, would end up being crucified or killed because of their faithfulness. They would give up their lives for the message of

Jesus Christ, as John the Evangelist would call him, the Word Made Flesh.

This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, to forsake the things of this world and concentrate the things of the next. We are called, and each of us is called in different ways. We can be called to preach, to care for others, to serve food in kitchens, to make prayer shawls, to study the Word. In all these things we do as Jesus did, help others and carry the good news with us wherever we go.

When the disciples gave up the idea of gaining power and wealth in this world, they received something far more valuable. First, they received the satisfaction and the peace of mind of knowing that they were moving toward their true calling, living an abundant life within the church. Second, they came to realize that their work in the world was benefiting others and, in effect preserving their own souls. As Jesus said, “Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”

I think we can observe within this scene a remarkable transformation. The Apostles, in the presence of Christ, come to realize that the things of this world are not important. Their whole viewpoint changes. This same thing happens to us as we dedicate our lives to Jesus Christ. Our lives, through our discipleship, become better. We no longer myopically focus on our own wants and needs. We become happier people in the here and now because we come to know that what we are doing in the here and now is of benefit to others. As disciples of Christ we can observe our own growth in becoming better

people, becoming more like Christ. As we pick up our cross, as we follow Jesus during this Lenten season, we find that we may not have an easier life, or even an easier death, but we have a much more rewarding life, and can look forward to a more rewarding future, wherever that might lead.

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