

February 25, 2018 Second Sunday of Lent

Bishop Bradley's Reflections on the Sunday Readings

The incredibly destructive rain storms from earlier this week, and the subsequent floods that have devastated so many parts of the country, including right here in every part of our Diocese have caused much human suffering and great loss of property and possessions. These are sad, but real, demonstrations of the powerful effects of Nature. We can almost expect that at this time of year there will be clashing of powerful weather systems as winter is trying to turn into spring. And yet, amidst the roller-coaster cycles of heavy snow falls, moderating temperatures, and torrential rains, it will be soon time for the crocuses to start pushing their heads through the ground, and we can rejoice in the fact that Spring is less than a month away. Life is a constant "roller coaster" of emotions, a combination of highs and lows, ups and downs, reasons to worry and to rejoice.

In the midst of all that, we come together on this Second Sunday of Lent as God's holy people on a Journey of Faith. And during these still early days of our Lenten journey, we are hopefully continuing our Lenten resolutions in an effort to help us make room for God in our lives and to develop more of an openness to following God's Will, whatever that might be for us.

The Scripture Readings for this Second Sunday of Lent reflect that paradox of spiritual highs and lows. In today's First Reading from the Book of Genesis, we heard about Abraham who was experiencing an incredibly challenging situation. After waiting literally all his life for the fulfillment of God's promise that he and his aged wife Sarah would have a child, which was the high point of his life, now "*God put Abraham to the test*". God was asking Abraham to go up the holy mountain, and there "*to take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love and....offer him up as a holocaust.*" That was clearly the low point of his long and venerable life. He was being asked to do the **unthinkable!** Abraham's response to God was "*Here I am!*" In other words, I don't understand, but I trust you, and so "here I am"---I will do what You ask, I will go where You lead, I will follow Your Will. God

stopped Abraham, and would not allow him to do that “unthinkable” act. We can certainly understand why Abraham deserves the revered title of “the Father of Faith” by the three major world religions: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

At times our own life journeys can be perplexing as we encounter moments when we have to make major difficult decisions, or dramatically change directions in our life journey. The critical question to ask in those transitional moments is: where is God’s Hand in this? Do we see God Present with us through those difficult moments? Do we respond to those situations as “persons of faith”?

In today’s Gospel passage, St. Mark tells us about the Transfiguration event as Jesus takes Peter, James and John to go up the holy mountain for a time of prayer. Just a few days before that, Jesus had shared with these three apostles, as well as the other nine, that soon, He would have to go up to Jerusalem where He would suffer and die. While they had all been on a high point joyfully following Jesus where they thought He was leading them all to great earthly success, this new revelation brought them to a very low point, and one with which they did not know how to deal. So Jesus wanted to “renew their spirits” and to allow them to share in an incredibly high point, both for Himself and for them. Jesus was “transfigured” into the glorious image of what He would surely be after the Resurrection, and was accompanied by the two great “heroes” of the Old Law, Moses and Elijah. Jesus wanted them to see that even in the midst of the most dreadful time of their lives---even at the lowest point in their lives--- Jesus would always remain with them, gloriously Present! He wanted them to see that nothing they encountered along the way---no fear, no darkness, no opposition, no amount of suffering---not even Jesus’ death---would take His glorified Presence away from them! And the crucial words that Peter, James and John heard during that “glorious” experience were the words of God the Father speaking: *“This is My beloved Son; Listen to Him!”*

That is a very important lesson that we can all learn on this Second Sunday of Lent. Wherever we are on our life journey---whether we are at a high point, or at a low point, we should allow nothing to overshadow the dazzling Presence of Christ Who remains with us no matter what. That is precisely what St. Paul was

telling us in today's Second Reading: nothing---no-thing and no one---can ultimately be against us when God is for us!

While God would not allow Abraham to do the unthinkable of sacrificing his only son, God asked of Himself that very "unthinkable" act---and He did so, for us. God knew that the only way to restore unity between Himself and humanity was through the Ultimate Sacrifice of His only-begotten Son. The Good News is that, through Jesus' death and Resurrection, we have been given a share in Jesus' victory over sin and death.

Every time we come to Mass, it is as though we are going "up the holy mountain" so that we can have that same kind of "glorious Transfiguration experience". As we pay attention to the Readings from God's Holy Word, we are being told: "*This is My beloved Son; Listen to Him!*" When we receive the Holy Eucharist, the very Body and Blood of Christ, we are definitely being told: "*This is My beloved Son; Listen to Him!*" When the Mass is ended, and it is time for us to "come back down the mountain" and return to our homes and the realities of our lives, we are being sent with the beautiful reminder: "*This is My beloved Son; Listen to Him!*" And when we look at ourselves as a nation, each of us individually and all of us collectively, are being challenged to resist the growing trend to remove God and God's ways from public life and discourse, and remember: "*This is My beloved Son; Listen to Him!*".

Our Lenten journey is an important time in our lives, and in some ways, we could see this as a time when we, like Abraham, are being "*put to the test*". We are asked to "*sacrifice*" something near and dear to us---certainly not our "first born" child---but perhaps something significant. God is asking us to "sacrifice" those parts of ourselves, or those actions of our lives, or those attempts to completely secularize our society, which keep us from "*listening to Him!*" That which gave Abraham the trust to do what God was asking of him, and that which gave the Apostles the courage to go with Jesus to Jerusalem, is precisely what we celebrate together when we are united with Christ in prayer and in the celebration of the Mass---our union with Christ Himself. He is the One in Whom we place our trust; He is the One Who gives us courage; He is the One Who will

lead us into the Promised Land where there are no highs and lows, ups and downs. There is only the “highest point” of being Home with our Loving God Who remains with us, and is for us, always!

Faithfully yours in Christ,

+ Bishop Paul J. Bradley