

The Second Sunday of Lent – Feb. 24-25, 2018

Do we really understand the meaning and purpose of the season of Lent?

Just recently I came across an article that said most of us feel that Lent is about learning perseverance and strengthening our ability to be more self-sacrificing. Presented annually with the traditional Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, it is not surprising that we see Lent as focused on making us stronger and tougher in following Jesus and living out our faith. But the truth is that Lent is more about transformation and change than simply about getting tougher and stronger in our faith. However, transformation and change are difficult.

Lent is really about preparing for Easter and rising from the dead. It is about entering into the power and new life flowing from the Resurrection of Jesus. Resurrection sounds great. However, we must not too quickly overlook the implications of that word. – It follows death. The definition of resurrection involves and includes death. You can't get to resurrection from here except by way of the tomb.

If you want new life, you have to surrender the old one. If you want to feel less run down, you have to make more time for rest and exercise. If we need to de-stress, we need to learn to say no more often. If we don't like the way our relationships are going, we need to come up with some new ways of communication. etc.

Lent is about making room for the new life God wants to raise up in us. Lent challenges us to surrender, deny and divest. It is our annual time to reflect on what we give to God and what we withhold from God. With Abraham, we climb Mt. Moriah lugging our dearest possessions along. Surely we think, God doesn't want this from us. Anything but this.

Lent is about letting go and making room for living out our discipleship in new and deeper ways than we can now imagine or understand. Moving to new ways of thinking and acting is not easy or something we do on our own. That is why today's readings are so important and helpful.

Today's first reading is about obedience to God as shown by Abraham. It is only through doing things that God says we should do that we will come to learn the new and greater things that God has in mind for us.

As one spiritual writer said: it is like learning a new language. At first is just work, but eventually we learn enough to want to learn more. – We can't know the joy of God's vision of things very well, and we cannot begin to know them except by continuing to obey and allow God to lead us and teach us. We will in time see the point, but only after the effort.

By obedience to God we are led to see that in many ways we have been too ready to go after lesser joys belonging only to this world, rather than seeking the ultimate joys that God has planned for us. We stop at the immediate pleasures we experience and don't go after the deeper things that they are pointing to.

For example, so many young people get stuck in quick encounters with others and never go beyond them to the deeper and permanent relationship of marriage. So many when faced with difficulties, instead of working through them are tempted to find escapes in drugs and alcohol or other pleasures.

Instead of this, Lent's disciplines, if we obediently follow them, will help us to see more clearly what God wants to give us. As one spiritual writer said, "too often we are satisfied with making mud pies by the water puddle when God wants to bring us to the ocean.

Although we cannot fully see where God wants to lead us, he has placed in every person certain desires and longings which if followed will lead us on the path want us to take.

For example, through Abraham's desire to serve God, God tests his obedience, and through Abraham's obedience God is able to reveal to Abraham that through following God he will have blessings and be a blessing to others in ways that he cannot imagine. The same will be true for us.

Through obedience, Abraham and we as his descendants in faith can learn to trust God even in the greatest trials. As the writer of today's psalm says: "I believed, even when I said I am greatly afflicted."

To help us to trust and obey God, Paul, in today's second reading assures us of the unbreakable love and desire of God for us and for our greatest good. As he says, "He who did not spare his own Son, how will he not give us everything else along with him?"

Trusting in God's love – we obey God's voice and follow his Word.

How well do we listen to God's voice?

So many of us might say that we have never heard God speak to us. But that is absolutely not true, because every one of us has a conscience through which God constantly is speaking to us and guiding us.

The catechism of the Church says this: "Deep with his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself, but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths. --- when he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking." #1776-77

The message in all this is that if we like Abraham start listening more to the voice of God in our conscience and acting on it we learn to hear God speaking to us all of the time. And it will not just be a voice in our heart or head but it will lead to a true relationship of communion with God and new joy.

This is the potential for all Lenten disciplines and actions. The disciplines of Lent can go from being just an extra burden to real joy and deeper communion with God. Following the Lord in obedience, we will no longer be satisfied with making mud pies, but rather seek to grow in the joy of a new and deeper relationship with Christ.

In today's Gospel, to help his disciples through the time of his coming death on the cross, Jesus seeks to give his disciples a glimpse of the new resurrected life that will follow after his cross and death.

However, the disciples do not know what to think or say as they experience Jesus' transfiguration. All they can offer is a weak suggestion that they set up some kind of shrine to commemorate the event. But the transfigured Jesus asks more of them and us than memorials of wood and stone. He asks all to go forth and be his living presence that will transform the world.

The transfiguration reveals a glorious vision and future, but one that will be realized at a heavy price. Accepting God's blessings and joys is one thing, but when God asks us to serve others generously, and give ourselves humbly and sacrificially for others, and forgive others without limitation, we hesitate.

The weeks ahead call us to descend the mountain with the "transfigured" Jesus and to take up our crosses whether they be physical, emotional, economic or intellectual and to realize the glory and power of God within each of ourselves to

bring the new life of Easter into our lives and the lives of those we love.

Jesus transfiguration is a reassurance that the sufferings he faces and we will face will lead to glory and new life. As said earlier, we can't really know all the blessing and rewards that God has in mind. Therefore, we need to trust and obey. And God does give us glimpses of the things that will result when we follow him in obedience.

Let Jesus's transfiguration give us hope for peace in Syria, settlements of conflicts and wars, and so much more.

This past week we had the death of the evangelist Billy Graham. Someone said that one of the secrets of the success he had in his crusades was his belief that deep down people were not as bad and close-minded as they sometimes appear, and that "people everywhere were seeking continuity with their past, reassurance about the beliefs of their parents and families, and guidance for the future".

May this same hopefulness be in our hearts for all people and may we see that daily God gives us signs that his grace is greater than all our sins. If nothing else, let us go to the sacrament of reconciliation and experience for ourselves how God can overcome evil. He will do it in your life and you will then trust that he can do it on the larger level if persons in obedience allow him to work in them and carry out the purpose in life for which God has made each of us.