

Sermon 2nd Sunday of Lent Year B March 4, 2012 8:00a.m. Service

Given the traditional connection between Lent and preparation as well as penitence, this is an appropriate season to reflect on one's understanding of God. For too many and for too long, penitence and repentance have been understood in terms of human fear and divine threat. That is to say, if one does not repent, one will be severely punished, even damned by God.

Our readings today couldn't be further from this image of God. Genesis; Romans; and Psalm 22 share a converging emphasis on how God is able to secure a future for those who do not seem to have one. The Psalm tells us that God is about delivering those we cannot yet imagine, "a people yet unborn." In Genesis the focus on Abram and Sarai, is similar to the Psalm, and emphasizes unexpected descendants and offspring from two individuals in their 90s, and hence the wonder of a God who is able to create a future for people who seem to have none.

The amazing message from Paul in Romans is that through faith, God not only "*gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist,*" but also makes Abraham "the father of many nations" and "father of all of us." In other words, family, lineage and inheritance need not be bound by blood, biology or legality. Paul's words hold the promise that no matter how bleak things may look, what seems or is considered dead will still rise again.

This posterity represents the continuation of the promised covenant, generativity, new names, new beginnings, and an inextinguishable future – even when our own finitude and conventional wisdom would say that such a future of a fulfilled promise is not possible. We will make a new people with whom we can praise God.

Our shared faith brings us together in a family with a common heritage...a family of unlikely members...a family not defined by blood relationships, but defined by how we love and the compassion we have for one another and the world around us. We at St. James' are no exception. We gather here this morning as we do each Sunday as a family bound together by faith and a love for one another.

In the book that we've been discussing following this service the writer, Robin Weeks says that Christianity is about compassion, not condemnation. He writes that *"compassion is the authentic religious move—beyond the life of the self into the pain and possibility of another life."* This is also the primary image that Jesus gives us of God, be compassionate as God is compassionate. Sadly, in many of the translations the word has been changed from compassionate to merciful. Weeks writes, *"One's view of God determines one's view of faith, and thus to say that God is compassionate is different from saying that God is merciful. A compassionate God is one who models compassion for us (thus the cross), which is not the same things as a God who may not extend mercy to us for something we may or may not have done wrong."*

The gospel passage today which is the passage that precedes the story of the transfiguration that we heard a couple of weeks ago has Jesus foretelling his death and resurrection to his disciples...the essence of modeling compassion. The cross which today we use as decoration was seen as anything but that in its use. It was an instrument of state run terrorism used by the Romans to keep people in line. It was used frequently by the Romans as a public warning to anyone who sought change or was seen as a threat to their Imperial power.

Jesus was put to death in this way because he was a threat to the power structures of his day. It wasn't because God needed the blood sacrifice of his Son as a means of salvation for us, even though this is what the church has taught for the past 900 years or so. For the first 1100 years of Christianity this idea of a blood sacrifice demanded by God to set things right was not the dominant theology. Robin Weeks writes, "*the first followers of Jesus ceased the practice of sacrifice that was dominant in the Jewish Temple tradition...the first followers of The Way, (the named used for the Jesus communities) saw Jesus standing against sacrificial thinking and in favor of compassion.*" We describe the events leading up to Jesus' death as his passion, but for early followers it's more accurate to say that Jesus' passion had to do with justice. *Healing was his passion. Gathering up the last, the least, and the lost and helping them to stand up straight in a world that kept them permanently bent over was his passion.*"

As people who claim to be followers of Jesus our future should be characterized by our identification with those who are the least among us. Just as God hears and cares for the

afflicted by becoming a crucified Christ (a shameful display on a Roman cross for all to see), we should not be ashamed of those who have been socially shamed and shunned. Rather we are called to adopt Jesus' passion, his compassion for those on the margins ...those bent down and cannot stand up straight because of the way in which the world makes it nearly impossible for them to do so.

Our job is to participate in God's dream to secure a future for people who seem to have none. Amen.