

Lent 2B – Feb 25, 2018

Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16

Psalm 22: 22-30

Romans 4: 13-25

Mark 8: 31-38

Let us pray:

Almighty God,

who calls us to worship.

*We acknowledge our weakness
and our stubbornness.*

*So often deciding to do our own thing,
forgetting to listen for your voice;
in our decision making
and in our lives together
as a Christian community.*

*We remember Jesus' determination to
do the will of his Father
and acknowledge our own desires;
so often at odds with 'the right thing to do'.
We ask, through your Holy Spirit,
for Christ's strength in times of struggle,
his patience in times of waiting and
his faith in times of uncertainty.*

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.

We asked earlier for God's grace and mercy to help us “**embrace and hold fast the Unchangeable Truth of Jesus Christ**”. If this “Jesus way” were just about holding some abstract Truth in our mind on Sunday mornings, it would be easy. Walking in the

eternal embrace of the Truth about Jesus Christ is much harder. It requires daily choices that sometimes **go along** and sometimes **go against** the culture of the families we live in, the friends we live among and the jobs we depend on.

In today's Gospel Lesson, Jesus is very straightforward, very simple and clear, as he tells the disciples about his upcoming suffering, death AND about his resurrection. The Living Bible uses the words: ³²*He talked about it quite frankly with them, so Peter took him aside and chided him.*^[b] *"You shouldn't say things like that," he told Jesus.*

Jesus moved Peter aside, called the disciples and the crowds closer and said more: *"If any of you wants to be my follower," he told them, "you must put aside your own pleasures and shoulder*

your cross, and follow me closely. The Message version of these verses reads like this: "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how."

Jesus is clearly talking about following him into the fearful and frightening will of God. God called Jesus to shoulder an actual cross, a heavy wooden instrument of torture, and to die, hanging in public, suffering beyond our imagination. In turn, Jesus calls us to follow him closely. We are often no readier than Peter to follow Jesus. David Lose, a Lutheran pastor, wrote about Peter's objections to Jesus:ⁱ *It's not what his disciples expect. They, (like us), are children of the world. And although they weren't bombarded with 5000 advertising images each day as we are, yet*

they still imagined that the secret to life was strength and power rather than vulnerability and love. And so they interpreted Jesus' miraculous acts as demonstrations of power rather than manifestations of love. And when Jesus describes the greatest act of love – giving his life for them and the world – they can only object.

What is the most important symbol of our Christian faith? [Pause for answers.] The cross. How many are in this room? We like to wear crosses, put them on the wall, but we are not so fond of taking them up and following Jesus into the path of suffering, of self-sacrifice, of totally yielding our will to God's plan in each moment.

As we live out our lives as Christians, we are challenged to grow in trust and faith. Part of growing up and maturing in Christ is learning to make decisions FOR GOD and to

live with the outcome of those decisions. Sometimes that process sets us against family members, friends, or even our boss and our work. Sometimes, we are called to take public stands that put us in line for ridicule, anger or physical danger. We may be asked to give up things we love. We cannot do everything or have everything we want and still follow Jesus. We may not be called to a physical cross, but Christians are almost always called to go places they do not want to go and to do things that they do not want to do. *(I suspect that the reason I was not ordained until age 49 was that I was afraid God would send me somewhere far away where people did not speak English. That foolish fear kept me from an amazing life of love as a priest!)* We are called to face our fears, trust God and act. It's no wonder we need the season of Lent, so that those of us

who have gone astray can turn back and try again.

The Bible lessons this week are about trusting God and responding to God, **even** when we WANT to do something else; **especially** when we want to do something else. These lessons are perfect for Lent, a time when Christians strengthen their self-discipline and build up their reliance on God's grace and mercy. In this season, we are building courage and confidence and character through participation in spiritually driven choices. It seems funny to talk about the things we give up for Lent, like chocolate, in such lofty terms as stretching ourselves or responding to God in faith. But the big picture truth is that we are daily forming our character; we are building our eternal life story through the choices we make; in what we

think, say, and do. Ideally, we are daily taking up our cross and following Jesus.

In all the readings this morning, people are called by God to believe God and to focus on God. These Bible people, Abram and Sarai, the readers of Paul's letter to the church in Rome, and the disciples and crowd who heard Jesus -- all were asked to profoundly change their lives and follow the way of God. We, too, are called ignore the strong pull of our human desires and our neighbor's opinions. These readings call us to make God our highest authority, to make the way of Christ our deepest desire; even when it seems difficult beyond our wildest imagining.

Remember how upset Peter got with Jesus in the Gospel? Peter and the other disciples were just starting to envision the wonderful resolution to Roman occupation

that Jesus the Messiah would bring, when Jesus started talking about his execution and shameful death. Peter was appalled, and angry!! But, Jesus rebuked him and reminded him to focus on the things of God, not the standards for success which the world gives.

I want to spend a moment honoring Billy Graham, the famous Christian evangelist who died this week. My teen-age life and faith were strengthened by attending Billy Graham crusades and doing the follow-up studies to find God's will for my life. I looked at a recent stud publication from the Graham Association which advised that to remain on God's Pathway we need: A. To Set our Mind on Christ; B. To Choose God's Pathway of Truth; C. To Maintain a Relationship with Christ; and, D. To follow God's Direction for the Priorities of our Life. Still, even Billy Graham had regrets and felt like he had shied away

from God's call to participate in the March for Justice during the 1960's Civil Rights movement.

We all lack the will to follow God at one time or another. When we see our failures, we repent and turn back to try again. If we are convinced that God is calling us to take a position, however difficult, we must conquer our fears and misgivings and step up to speak and act.

One of the great things about being Episcopalian is that we have a wide range of views on social issues. *(There are many issues, gun control for sure, where the arguments are not clear-cut and where people hear God's word and the Holy Spirit gives them conflicting answers. I grew up in Texas gun culture; my secretary in Dallas carried a handgun, I've been to the shooting range in Tuckerton and I love gifts of venison and moose from my hunting friends. That said, I cannot see the justification for automatic weapons. And, my experiences as a chaplain to the 90-something set*

cause me worry about dementia and suicide with weapons easily available in homes.) Christians can have varying opinions, but our tradition requires that we wrestle in prayer, with scripture and with each other, all the while “respecting the dignity and freedom of every human being.” Some issues, we will only know the truth of in heaven.

Our baptism enrolls us into God’s family, a membership that lasts a lifetime and beyond. Our sponsors, or we ourselves, claimed God’s promises. In turn, we or our sponsors made promises to God and to God’s people. God’s fulfillment of his promise was the sending of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who showed us the way to live into God’s kingdom. In his life and death, Jesus listened for God’s instructions and followed them—even to the cross. The mark of the members of God’s family is Love, love that will go so far as to sacrifice our devotion to all other things. The

life of a Christian requires faithfulness and love that extends beyond any obvious payback or reward. Just as God gave everything to us -- through our creation and through the salvation of humanity by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – we are called to give everything to God, trusting in his grace, mercy and love.

Lent is a time to remind ourselves that what the world calls success or happiness or contentment may be a marked contrast to the joy and peace and love that God has planned for us. We must listen carefully always and act with deliberate choice in the way that Christ leads us. It is the faithfulness to following God's will that lies at the heart of all good choices. It is in the accumulation of smaller, faithful choices that God builds in us the true character of a disciple.

Each moment; Christians try to keep our eyes on the things of God, not the things of this earth, trusting in God's promises. We make our daily choices, seeking God's will and trusting in God's grace. I ask you to turn to page 833 in your Book of Common Prayer and join me in the prayer of St. Francis, which captures quite well the spirit of Lent and the faithful followers of Jesus:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/02/lent-2-b/>