

Rev. Jeff Nicolas
Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 9:28b-36

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT
February 27-28, 2010

This morning I want to begin by thanking our Worship Committee, our Worship Team. When we come together for liturgies, if it's all done well, it just seems seamless, and I think sometimes we can lose sight of how much work and planning goes in weeks, if not months, before any given season. Our Worship Team has been working very hard to create for us as a community an environment where we can encounter Christ, perhaps in a life-changing new way. And so I want to thank them. A part of what they do for us when they're trying to create an environment for us is they themselves break open the scriptures, and they try, with the Spirit's help, to let the Spirit guide them into these liturgies.

When they looked at the scripture for this weekend, they saw in that scripture that we are being challenged as individuals and as a community to consider how willing we are to change our perspectives. And trust me, this is being directed at all of us – you and me. Admittedly, I'm not that comfortable with their challenge to change my perspective. So as I went into this scripture this past week in my prayer, I didn't end up Saturday afternoon with a finished, refined homily for you today. So you're not getting one. This homily is more a work in progress -- as am I, as are you. But I will today hold up for you, the assembly, my struggle with this idea of change and transformation so that it might serve perhaps as a mirror that you might recognize your own struggle. And if that doesn't happen, at least you know why I'm so weird.

Personally, when I looked at this scripture and the idea of changing, I have one, big obstacle that in my prayer became like the big elephant in the middle of the room. The big obstacle for me changing my perspective is justice. And by justice I mean what is fair, what is right. Most, if not all, of my perspectives, in my opinion, spring up from this ground of justice from this perspective of what's fair and what's right. And I am hesitant to change my perspective, because I think my perspective is fair. I believe my perspective is right. Indeed, the more I prayed about it, it seems to me that justice dictates that I win you over to my perspective -- because it's fair, and it's right. Jesus is for what is fair and right is he not? Change my perspective? God shares my perspective.

However, if you really think about it, fairness is a matter of perspective, which is why it is probably so hard to nail down. Something can seem right to me and not to you. Something can feel fair to you, but not to me. Now I'm not saying there is no objective right or wrong – fair or unfair. There is. It is what our church's teachings, guided by the Holy Spirit, attempt to articulate, even as our grasp of it continues to develop and evolve. This is why I give presumptive regard to our church's teachings.

But like that slave that rode in the chariot with Marc Anthony, whispering, "You are only a man," the ashes crossed onto my forehead at the beginning of Lent whispered to me, "Remember, you are dust, and to dust you will return." Can I from where I stand at any given moment grasp fully the objective right or fair? Can I know enough, feel enough, intuit enough, or reason enough to ever hold an all-encompassing perspective? And if not, the ground of perspective upon which I stand in my justice is tenuous. Then upon what can I stand? I am a limited being. I have prejudices and blind spots. What if I'm not seeing something? I'm not saying I'm a bad person; I'm not – just a finite one.

Abram in our first reading likewise was not a bad person. He just couldn't see God's promise ever being fulfilled. Abram couldn't see it. So it took a radical act on his part to shift his perspective, to open his eyes. Like the 3-year-old heifer, she-goat and ram he split open, Abram had to "open" himself to hearing God's promise. That was his radical step, his radical act. What radical step must I take?

Step away from my perspective of justice based on fairness and rightness, and step into God's compassion. A compassion that embraces not-yetness, rather than a perspective that enshrines principles. A compassion that entrusts myself to God's care, rather than a perspective propped up by my power. A compassion that believes in new beginnings and resurrection, rather than a perspective requiring winners and losers. Like Peter, I don't know exactly what Moses, Elijah, and Jesus were talking about that day on the mountaintop. But today I find myself wondering if it might not have been about what standing in God's compassion would look like for Jesus.

We know for sure where Jesus goes when he leaves that mountain. He goes right down that mountain, straight to Jerusalem, up to Golgotha to his cross. Somehow there is something necessary and essential about the cross and compassion. Somehow they are connected.

As I was reading through the Worship Team's minutes, they were brainstorming, in their ideas there was an obscure reference in there to Flip Wilson. Does anybody remember Flip Wilson? Anybody under 10? 20? 30? All right. "The devil made me do it." That's Flip Wilson. Well, their obscure reference kind of put my mind this week into thinking of other obscure references, and it called to mind for me an obscure song. Let me see if anyone remembers this one. "I am a rock, I am an island." Anybody remember that? Anybody under 20 remember that? Anybody remember who sang that? Simon and Garfunkel. And as I remember, I don't remember much of this song, but I remember the last two lines. They go like this: "And a rock feels no pain, and an island never cries." And that's the end of the song. The moral of the song? Avoid love. Avoid love because it hurts. Avoid love. Well, our faith calls us to step right into it, to step right into love through compassion. Love, when it involves incomplete, imperfect, not-yet people or communities, necessitates a cross. It's not fair. It's not right. It just is.

As was the case with Abram, compassion calls us, beckons to us to a radical act. Jesus calls us to not be the rock or the island, but to take up the cross, carry it, and die to self so as to live for him. Then God's promise of a new life and transformation, the new covenant, resurrection, can be ours.