

A MOMENT OF REALIZATION

2 Lent – B February 25, 2018

Mark 8:31-38

My Lenten journey began on the day before Ash Wednesday. I didn't realize it at the time, but it happened.

The season of Lent is filled with images, sometimes dark, as we make our way to the cross; but, very often, there are moments of light and clarity. In this journey with Jesus, we begin to realize that our beliefs and even our instincts about life, death, and God don't necessarily coincide with God's plans. As we face that reality we get a lesson in humility.

The day before Ash Wednesday, February 13, was our daughter Christine's birthday. Not only did I ponder being the father of a 23-year-old (in addition to our 25-year-old), but I thought about all the ways their lives are different from what I had envisioned for them. That's not a negative, but rather an "Aha!" moment. We, together with our children, have been blessed in many ways—just not necessarily according to our (my) expectations and our (my) schedule. It didn't take me very long to realize that Brenda and I did not fit into the molds our parents had created for us; neither had our parents fit into the molds that their parents had envisioned for them.

I read portions of a note from Janet Kott last week and, to the congregation I shared her reminder: "If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans." It was a reference to her original plan to retire to, and remain in, Southern Shores for the rest of her life. But plans change, and Janet is now settled in with, and being watched over by, her daughter Barbara.

Lent is like that. It disturbs our pre-conceived notions and plans. For that matter, the whole of the story of God's love revealed in Jesus disturbs us. For instance, on this Sunday in Lent we hear the prediction of Jesus with about the same level of shock that Peter and the other disciples had. They had plans and dreams for themselves and Jesus. Even we might agree that Jesus' announcement and the events to come do not sound like the preferred way of sending the Messiah into the world—and that's from our vantage point of knowing how the story turns out! We follow Jesus' path to the cross thinking, "This is not the way *I would have written* this story." And God chuckles.

Little wonder that our first reading is the story of the covenant God made with Abraham and Sarah (who were Abram and Sarai before God gave them new names and new meaning for their lives). God has a plan to turn this elderly couple, not only into parents, but into the forebears of a multitude! How is that possible? (Sarah laughed, but God had the last laugh.)

Like the people in our readings from Scripture today, I suspect we've all had that moment we realized that we were no longer in control (and never really were!). We like that illusion of "having it all together," so, anything that suggests otherwise is a hard pill to swallow. In spite of the influence I've had in our children's lives (and believe me, we *do* have influence), they will make their own decisions, particularly as adults, and (for that matter), pretty much as they did when they were growing up.

As we tread down the path of Lent this year, we will see that many, like Peter, will need to surrender their wills and realize that God alone controls their future, and that of the entire universe. Learning to surrender ourselves means accepting that God will lead us: often where we had never planned to go, and sometimes where we fear to go.

Jesus' words to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan," are strong, even harsh. But they are not a rejection of Peter, rather a rejection of the temptation behind the words. Jesus understands this "control thing"

we have. He also understood that Peter *thought* he was chastising Jesus out of love and concern. What Peter didn't realize at that moment was that he was trying to control the outcome, and thus, God's will, for the world. That's the force of The Tempter at work, trying to get us to take the more convenient, less painful path. It's our inner voice trying to exert control over our world, to keep our little part of the world nice and compact and manageable, and stress-free. But the story of *the incarnation* is the story of the bigger picture, the plan for God's people, everywhere, and it means taking a risk as we surrender ours will for the greater good.

Jesus understood all of that, so he still told Peter, as he beckons us: "Follow me." In the moment, Peter couldn't see the big picture. We also have trouble stepping back enough to see the entire "big picture," but God will allow us glimpses of that future. In fact, God plans to use us to help make that vision become reality. But it might mean giving up some control, perhaps listening more and speaking less. And it means opening our eyes and ears to where God needs us to work and serve in this world to make that kingdom real for others. God will undoubtedly lead us to places and give us opportunities to bless the world as we have been blessed.

How we do that will depend on the circumstances and those places of "holy ground" to which we are led. Last week in Florida, when the plans of young people and adults were changed abruptly, *some people created a space of holy ground* by sheltering students in their classrooms, while some others sheltered them from bullets with their whole bodies. And God will use many more to grieve with and stand by those who are devastated and whose lives are forever marked by such a senseless tragedy. Many students (and others) from the Parkland community and across the country are trying to make this "the last school-shooting tragedy"—and with every fiber of my being I pray that *this time will be different* from all the others. Most of us are still numb, as we often are when these terrible things occur; but I believe God can inform us and transform our numbness into wisdom and appropriate action. And act, we must. In a quotation attributed to Miroslav Volf, "*There is something deeply hypocritical about praying for a problem you're unwilling to resolve.*"*

This past week we also heard that lifelong evangelist Billy Graham died at the age of ninety-nine. Like us, he wasn't perfect, but one of God's saints: a forgiven sinner. I doubt he could have ever imagined the millions of lives he would touch; and we will never know the kind of influence this "pastor to the presidents" might have had on making the world a better place. I suspect he probably (respectfully) told most, if not all of them, things they didn't want to hear. Taking up the cross means doing that, you know. I suspect Rev. Graham knew that well. Just as any of us who try to be faithful to God's sovereignty take a risk when we speak truth to power and ruffle the feathers of the *status quo*. But I believe he persevered in faith. And the Apostle Paul reminded us that our faith will be reckoned as righteousness. "It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification." [Romans 4:22-25]

Certainly Jesus knew that. And he called us his own and has sent us forth so that we might know both the joy and the frustration of bringing the prophetic word. Changing the world is possible, even doable; but most likely it won't happen according to our schedule or our plans. Amen.

* Attributed to Miroslav Volf by Kirsten Powers, "Why 'thoughts and prayers' is starting to sound so profane," Washington Post, Nov. 6, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/10/03/why-thoughts-and-prayers-is-starting-to-sound-so-profane>.