

A Breath of Life from the Wilderness - 103 - 2nd Sunday in Lent B

Last Sunday the Lord reminded us of the covenant He made with Noah and his family: the rainbow in the sky would be the sign that God will never again allow humanity to perish in a great flood. Next Sunday, we will hear echoes of the covenant God made through Moses to care for his people. Today, the Lord brings to our mind the covenant he made with Abraham.

To our eyes and ears it seems barbaric for God to ask Abraham to kill and sacrifice his only son, the son that God himself had promised to give to Abraham decades earlier. God's request did not seem so strange to Abraham, though, because human sacrifices to gods were made by people who practiced ancient religions in the land from which Abraham came in what is today south-eastern Turkey on the border with Syria. That land is not a stranger to violence even today.

So what is going on here? What is God up to? What does all of this ancient history have to do with us today, here in Saint Gabriel Parish in Pointe Saint Charles? Well, let's see.

The people of Noah's day who perished in the flood were living badly, mistreating each other and abusing strangers, women, and children. Worse still, they had no use for God and thought that God was a joke. When Noah began building a huge boat nowhere near any water they laughed and ridiculed him for months, until that is, it rained for 40 days and nights and the water level began to go up. Then they feared for their lives but it was too late.

Only Noah and his family were saved because Noah was the only human being alive who not only believed in God but actually listened for God's voice. Noah wanted to know God's will; so that he could then do his will. All that God wanted from human beings was to have a lively personal relationship with them, a relationship in which human beings would respect and honour God, in which they would trust and love God enough to want to do his will.

When God gave the Ten Commandments to his people Israel through the hand of Moses, it was to guide his people back to this personal relationship that God has always wanted to have with people. When people turned away from God, or when the younger generation didn't care to know God or to honour Him or want to do his will; then those people found themselves cut off from God. By their own choice they isolated themselves from God and, as a result, had to face the challenges of life on their own, without God's help, strength, wisdom, or guidance.

A few moments ago we heard that "God tested Abraham." The truth is that God tests every human being on a regular basis. We may not like the idea of God testing us, and we may even resent it, but how we feel about it won't change the ways of the Lord. God has his ways; exactly as it is for each of us. We each have our own way of living, thinking, feeling, and doing things. In fact, we insist on having our way. Do you think that perhaps this may be the reason why we would want to tell God that He cannot have his way?

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So what was this test that God put to Abraham? We can't understand that unless we first remember Abraham's vocation. While his name was still Abram, God called this man, and he heard God's voice and answered him. God called Abram to leave his people and his land and go off to a land he did not yet know. Only once he left and got going would God tell him where he was to go. So Abram took his wife Sarai, his servants, his nephew Lot with his family, and all Abram's livestock and worldly belongings and they set off for a land which he did not yet know.

What would your family think if you suddenly decided to sell your house, get rid of most of your stuff, pack your bags, and leave without knowing exactly where you were going? They would probably think you were nuts, and that is very likely what Abram's family thought of him. He was hearing voices, or more precisely, God's voice; so he must be crazy. Abram was 75 years old when he left the land of his fathers and Sarai was 65.

God sent Abram to Canaan, a land that came to be known as the Promised Land because God promised He would give Abram numerous descendants to live there forever. Abram and his wife had numerous adventures – which you can read about in the Book of Genesis chapters 12 to 16. Then, after 24 years when Abram was 99 and Sara was 89, God again spoke to Abram and made a covenant with him. God had not yet given them the son He had promised. They had been waiting for 24 years for God to fulfill his promise, and they weren't getting any younger.

Circumcision was to be the sign of this covenant by which God would finally fulfill his promise and give Abram and Sarai numerous descendants. God changed Abram's name – which meant “noble father” to Abraham – which meant “father of many”, and Sarai – which meant “princess” God changed to Sarah – which meant “mother of nations”.

Sarah gave birth to her first born son Isaac when she was 90 and Abraham was 100. This historical account sounds unbelievable, but the point of truth God has recorded for posterity here is that it was impossible for this couple to have children because they were well beyond the age to have children; yet with God, what is impossible can become possible.

This is precisely why God waited so long to fulfill his promise to this couple; so that it would be painfully obvious to everyone that there was no way on Earth that this elderly couple could have had a child on their own without God's miraculous action and intervention.

This scenario repeated itself in the conception and the birth of John the Baptist to his elderly parents Joachim and Anna, and in Mary's conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit without the intervention of a man. When God wants to make a point, He wants the point to be very, very, very clear, with no shadow of a doubt.

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Now we can understand the nature and purpose of the test that God put to Abraham. His son Isaac was a young man – it was probably 40 years or more after Abraham had left the land of his fathers – and now God was asking Abraham to go back to the old ways and offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice, a human sacrifice like his ancestors used to do in those pagan religions.

More than that, God was asking Abraham to trust Him and do his will. The test was that God put Abraham in a difficult position between the old ways and the new ways, between the human sacrifices of the pagan religions and the sacrifice that God was now asking him to make of his own human will. God tested Abraham to see whether he would be willing to put aside his human will and instead to make room for God's will. It was the old ways versus a new way.

Pagan religions offered human sacrifices to try to influence the gods into doing what the people wanted. Even though we are Christians, we can slip back into pagan ways whenever we try to do something to influence or change God's will; as if God were temperamental like we human beings are temperamental. We put ourselves in a very awkward position when we think we must appease God or placate Him, or bribe Him into changing his mind. It's as if we don't really believe that God loves us; that instead we need to try to convince Him or buy his favour.

God wants to have a personal relationship with us as our Father, with Jesus his Son as our Saviour, and with the Holy Spirit as the Lord and Giver of life. This is always what Saint Paul is writing about in all of his letters. If we don't understand or accept that God wants a personal relationship with us; then we can never understand any of Saint Paul's writings or, for that matter, any of the Gospels. In fact, this is what the entire Bible is all about.

When Jesus was transfigured on Mount Tabor in the presence of his three closest Apostles, Peter, James, and John; God the Father's voice was heard by them, and through the vision God revealed to these three chosen disciples that Jesus is really God, the Beloved Son of God. God the Father revealed to them that God is real, that Moses and Elijah were also real, and that they appeared to Jesus to encourage Him for what the Father was calling Him to do by going to Jerusalem, where He would suffer and die to save us.

So, brothers and sisters, which way are we going to have it? How are we going to conduct the rest of our lives? How are we going to go on practicing our faith? How are we going to manage our involvement in our Church, here at Saint Gabriel?

We have two choices, and only two choices: the old pagan ways or the new ways of faith in God. There is no other way. Even people who don't know anything about God also have to make this choice, but to them it looks more like a choice between imposing their will on the people in their lives, or instead, to make room for the will of others, to respect and love others.

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Choice number 1: Will we allow ourselves to slip back into the old ways, the ways of the pagan religions, where human beings try to keep everything under their own control and try to coax the gods into doing our will, offering human sacrifices as a kind of bribe to the gods, and always trying to impose our own will on others?

Choice number 2: Are we going to practice the faith of Abraham and accept, as he did, to give up trying to get our way? The faith that Abraham practiced in God allowed him to give up trying to keep control over things. Abraham, with faith in God, gave up trying to convince God to do his will, and instead, courageously and with complete faith in God, Abraham accepted to do the most difficult thing: to offer up as a sacrifice his own will in order to do God's will.

Those are our only two choices: to do our will or God's will. Either I insist on having things go my way, or I accept to do things God's way. Jesus gave us the perfect example for us to follow. In Holy Week we will follow Jesus closely and relive the drama of his struggle to give up his will and preference in order to make room for his Father's will.

Jesus did not face his challenge alone, but trusted in the presence and love of his Father. In Baptism, we were adopted by God the Father as his very own children, his daughters and his sons. We have been given a share in the divine life of love and community that describes who God is in the Holy Trinity.

So, like Jesus, we are not alone either, because we also have the Father here with us, as well as Jesus as our Saviour, and the Holy Spirit. In addition, we have the friendship and help of Blessed Mary, Mother of Jesus, Saint Joseph, Saint Archangel Gabriel, and all the saints.

As we do our best to make room for God to dwell within us, honouring and obeying the will of the Father with the help of Jesus and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we will continue to pray for one another as we continue our Lenten journey of faith.

God bless you.