

## MARCH 16, 2014: SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Genesis 12:1-4a II Timothy 1:8b-10 Matthew 17:1-9

The disciple of Paul responsible for today's II Timothy passage states one of Christianity's most fundamental truths: "(God) saved us and called us to a holy life"

Three Sunday's ago we delved into the biblical concept of "holy." Today we'll do the same for "called."

Our sacred authors presumed all their readers knew they'd been called either by Yahweh or by Jesus, else they wouldn't be listening to their writings. They were interested in learning more about the implications of responding to that call. That's why our Genesis passage is so significant. It contains the first call in all of Scripture.

I always remind my students that the first 11 chapters of Genesis are biblical "pre-history:" they're involved in simply setting the stage for what's going to happen in chapter 12. Our salvation history technically begins with Abram's call and his response to that call. This short narrative not only sets the pattern for all biblical calls, it also applies to our own calls, and the response both Yahweh and Jesus expect.

Notice Yahweh's first words: "Go forth . . . !" Nowhere in Scripture is anyone called to stay in the place he or she is currently inhabiting. All biblical calls demand the called person move, if not geographically, at least psychologically.

Abram's call initially involves a change of residence: ". . . from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you." Yet, it also includes a change in mentality. We presume before this Father of Judaism encountered Yahweh, his basic security revolved around where he lived and his family relationships. Once he says, "Yes!" to this call, he's putting all his security in Yahweh. And most important, Yahweh isn't telling him exactly where he's going. It's just "to a land I will show you." From now on, Yahweh's dictating his itinerary.

In the same way, back in Matthew 4 when Jesus' first four disciples said, "Yes!" to his call, abandoned their fishing equipment, left their families and began to follow him, they had no idea where he would eventually lead them. I presume they initially thought they were just agreeing to accompany a former Caparnum carpenter who was going town to town making people aware of God's presence in their lives. They had no idea this itinerant preacher would eventually be transfigured before their eyes. After his resurrection, when today's gospel pericope took shape, they would begin to see him not only as God's special Son, but as God actually among them, the fulfillment of everything their Jewish faith promised. It wouldn't have crossed any of their minds on the day they first encountered Jesus along the seashore that they would one day be giving up everything to carry on his ministry.

What would motivate anyone to make such a commitment?

Our II Timothy author gives us a hint. By doing so we become part of God's design for the world. Instead of just being observers of God's actions, we actually participate in those actions. Instead of being in the audience, we're up on the stage. We help God "destroy death and bring immortality to light." It's worth the insecurity.

Coming from a Catholic tradition in which only priests and religious women were regarded as being called by God, it takes a giant leap of faith for many of us to notice the calls God and the risen Jesus give all of us every day of our lives.

With the number of priests and nuns drastically falling, if the rest of us don't agree to become part of God's design for the world, this world will never become the world God intends it to become.

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## MARCH 23, 2014: THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Exodus 17:3-7 Romans 5:1-2, 5-8 John 4:5-42

One of Scripture's most important messages is that we have a God who works with what God has.

We Catholics are accustomed to hearing tales of canonized saints: people whose relationships with God and those around them were impeccable. Many demonstrated signs of holiness from their early years. Most spent their whole lives in "the state of grace." Not too long ago one of the best-known persons involved in the canonization process was the Devil's Advocate: an individual whose one job was to surface "dirt" on the man or woman being considered for sainthood. There was always the possibility that the quest for someone's canonization could be torpedoed by just one newly uncovered sinful action.

Rarely do we find Devil's Advocate approved saints in our Scriptures, and even when we do, there's always the suspicion that our sacred authors might have bent the facts a little. For better or worse, the biblical God works through real, fallible - often sinful - people.

This is especially clear in the greatest event in the Hebrew Scriptures: the Exodus. My old prof Frank Cleary often reminded us that the majority of those liberated Hebrew slaves would have preferred to stay in Egypt instead of spending years trekking through the Sinai wilderness. They're anything but happy campers.

Today's first reading provides a classic example of their disgust with Moses and Yahweh. "Why did you ever make us leave Egypt? Was it just to have us die here of thirst with our children and our livestock?" They go so far as to question the basic premise of the Exodus. "Is Yahweh in our midst or not?"

Yet for better or worse, these specific blasphemous sinners are Yahweh's people; and it's these people for whom Yahweh provides water and eventually leads to the Promised Land, without demanding they first go to confession before he works in their lives.

In a parallel way John's Jesus doesn't hesitate to work with an heretical Jewish woman, a Samaritan who's already gone through five husbands and is living in sin with a sixth man. It's to this public sinner that he entrusts his teaching about the "living water" he offers to his imitators. And it's this shady woman who becomes an apostle to her fellow-Samaritans. If Jesus' disciples were at first amazed to discover him talking to a woman, they eventually must have been doubly amazed on his insistence to stay two extra days in Sychar so he could teach these border-line Jews about Yahweh's presence in their lives.

Yet, as Paul reminds the Christian community in Rome, openness to "sinners" is simply an essential part of Jesus' personality. And we don't have to go further than ourselves to surface an example of it. "For Christ," the Apostles writes, "while we were still helpless, died at the appointed time for the ungodly .... God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us." Thankfully we didn't have to be exemplary Christians before Jesus began working in our lives.

Back in the early sixties, I and several of my North American College classmates were privileged to stand in San Giovanni Rotondo's sacristy and watch Padre Pio make his thanksgiving after celebrating a very early Mass. At one point, another monk approached his *prie dieu* and asked him for something. The eventual saint looked up angrily, glared at his fellow brother and yelled, "Let me alone!"

Years later I waited in vain for the Devil's Advocate to contact me during the venerable stigmatic's canonization process. But actually I'm glad no one told him about the dirt I had on the good Padre, since I really started liking him from that angry moment on. He's my (and Jesus') kind of saint.

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