

As you can imagine, preachers have options --- even Catholic priests and deacons who are asked to preach through the lens of **fixed readings** on any given Sunday. On this Second Sunday of Lent of Cycle B, many will choose to preach on that incredible First Reading from Genesis --- the story of Abraham and the **near-sacrifice of his son Isaac**. Lots of good stuff there. Others will preach on the Gospel Reading from Mark --- the other-worldly story of the **Transfiguration of the Lord**. And a few will choose that relatively short Second Reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans --- a passage of **deep and profound theology** (which permeates the entire Letter to the Romans).

In other words --- many Catholic priests and deacons will simply pick **one of the three readings** to preach on --- for on the surface they seem so **different**, so **disconnected**. I really don't think that's the case. In fact, I think all three readings are **linked**. I'll do my best - to help us see how they might fit together.

First we have the story of Abraham and Isaac, a story that can be rather **troublesome to hear**. So often, in my estimation, we become **overly focused on why God asked this of Abraham**, focused on why he would demand such a thing of him. "What does that say about God?" we might ask ourselves. Yet, I think that is misplaced attention --- for I truly believe that we should really be **focused on Abraham** in this story. You see, what is most important to me in this story, is the fact that Abraham **BELIEVED** in his heart that **God was asking this of him**.

Abraham was sure (as sure as one can be) that he was "hearing" his God correctly, and despite not knowing **WHY** God was asking this of him, he was prepared to **do God's will** no matter how difficult it was. It's not the action of God that teaches us something in this story. It is the action of Abraham --- a person like you and me. Let's move on to another reading.

The Gospel passage from Mark seems to be all about a remarkable **miracle** that takes place on a mountain in the presence of Peter, James, and John. What exactly happened that day? What precisely did they see? Why did God choose those three? I wish I had all the answers for you. Yet, for how dramatic the "**visual**" was that day (at least how it is described), the heart of the story seems to be not what they saw, but what they heard.

"This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."

And while the three of them (**understandably**) were almost certainly filled with **awe and wonder and confusion** (and probably fear), God didn't want them to remain **all caught up in that**. Rather, he wanted to "ground" them, make sure that they realized that the most **important** thing would be what **Jesus said and taught and did**.

In other words, this Jesus, this friend of theirs (and this Son of God, as they just found out), would have something important to **say** to them, **ask** of them, **expect** of them. **And he has important things to say to us too.**

This is where the two readings are connected --- for they are both about “**listening**”. Abraham “listened” to God, and was willing to do whatever God asked, was willing to do not simply the **easy stuff**, the things that demanded little of him. No, he was also willing to do the **difficult** things, the **painful** things, the things that would even **require that which he loved the most**.

Peter, James, and John (and us, too) have a sort of “advantage” that Abraham didn’t have. You see, in the **time of Abraham**, God was, in a certain sense, **unseen**. But for those early disciples of Jesus, and for us two thousand years later, we have a **person we can look to and learn from and listen to** --- the person of Jesus --- God in the flesh. And sometimes we might try to reduce the message of Jesus to simply, “Be nice.” However, we know in our hearts that it is **much more than that**.

Jesus, not unlike God in regard to Abraham, is **saying** to us some pretty **tough** things, **challenging** things, things that (if we honestly consider them) **demand our all** --- our complete selves. **Think about it.**

Radical mercy.

Radical generosity.

Radical forgiveness.

Radical compassion.

Radical love.

That’s what Jesus is saying to each of us --- through what we know “**about him**”, but also through “**knowing him**” --- through the **relationship we forge** through prayer and contemplation and listening in the **deepest recesses of our hearts**.

Ok --- so far, so good. -----

God wants us to listen to him and do our best to **do whatever he asks of us** --- no matter what, no matter how difficult, **no matter what it costs**. But **why** should we? Why listen to him? Why not just do what we want to do? Why not take the easy way out? Maybe that’s a question you’ve never asked before.

But seriously, why go to all the trouble of listening to God? The answer, I believe,

can be found in the Second Reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans. **"If God is for us, who can be against us?"** This, in a sense, provides us with the "reason", the motivation for striving to do God's will as best we know how. In modern terms --- **God is "on our side"**. And I don't mean on our side as **Catholics**, or Christians, or any other category we can think of.

The God we believe in --- the God we believe **broke into our world** in the person of Jesus, --- the God who **laid down his life** for us, ---the God who continues to **live within us** through his Spirit --- is a God of LOVE. God loves us more than we can imagine. We, the human family, are creatures **He made out of love and in his image**. And He only wants good things for us.

And so, He's not a God we need to cower from. He's not a God we need to bargain with. He's not a God we have to appease. He's not a fickle God who acts on a **whim** or for **no reason at all**.

My friends, **our God is completely and madly in love with us**, and wants us to be **in love with him so that we can have the most beautiful, meaningful life possible**. In other words --- we strive to listen to God because it would be ridiculous not to, would be foolish not to, would be harmful to ourselves and others not to. Put simply --- **God's way is always the best way**.

God's judgment is true. God's compassion and forgiveness are never-ending. God's generosity has no bounds. God's wisdom is Wisdom itself. And most importantly --- **God is Love**. It's as simple (**and as profound**) as that.

"It is God who acquits us. Who will condemn?"

And so as we continue on our Lenten journey, let's do what we can to be better "**listeners**", do what we can to **open ourselves up** to whatever God is asking of us. And when we hear that **voice**, when we come to some sort of **understanding** in our hearts, when we feel our God **tugging** us - to do a certain thing or head in a certain direction --- let's be like Abraham, and not hesitate. Let's be like Peter, James, John, and all those other early followers who gave up nearly everything to follow Jesus.

And let's do all of that - for one simple reason --- because **God loves us**, and we want nothing more than - to **return that love**. God is for us! That's really Good News. The only thing that could make that better is if we found a way to "**be for God**" just as much.

May this Lent help us do precisely that.