

## Homily for Sunday, March 20, 2022 – Third Sunday of Lent

If you don't remember, I'll recall it for you. Last Sunday's first reading was about God promising Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation. Believe it or not there would be more inhabitants, in this great nation, than there are stars in the heavens. It seems, today's first reading tells us that the party is over. Abraham is long dead, and his descendants are slaves in Egypt. So much for a great nation...or is it?

What they had to learn then, is the same thing that we have to learn now, is that God's plans may be delayed but they are never destroyed. Just because **we** break the covenant with God and with one another does not mean God breaks the covenant with us. God always remains the faithful one, even when we are not. God is always interested in re-establishing the covenant with us. To put it in layman's terms—there is a permanent invitation, once we've fallen off the horse, to get back in the saddle and begin riding again.

It's this present moment--this present moment alone--that counts for everything in God's eyes. The past and the future seem to be of little concern for God. Maybe that's why when Moses ask God for God's name, in today's first reading, God responds with "I AM WHO I AM." God describes himself/herself/itself only in the present. God doesn't say, "I am the one who did those great deeds in the past," although that would be true. Nor does God say, "I will do great things in your future," although that also would be true.



God does not want us to hold onto past sins, past faults, past flaws, or past stupid behavior like when you had a little too much to drink at last year's Christmas party and made a fool of yourself. I bet every one of us has held the whip of past sins and beat ourselves with it over and over again. Perhaps Moses did that as well. Before God is revealed to Moses in the burning bush, we have to remember that Moses is a self-imposed fugitive. He has killed an Egyptian back in Egypt and is afraid that his murderous deed will catch up with him. For his own self-preservation, Moses goes into a type of witness protection program. He puts on a blonde wig, sunglasses, and a cheap trench coat from Value Village and runs off to the desert to hide. This is worse than the time when Adam and Eve tried to hide from God behind a couple of strategically placed fig leaves. But God's plans, as I've already told you, will not be thwarted. Although Moses feels guilty and unworthy God, nonetheless, tracks Moses down in the desert and gives this fugitive the job of going back to Egypt and liberating all the Hebrews. It was as if God was saying, "Moses, you've beaten yourself up enough. Let go of the past. I need you to bear fruit right now. I need you, and--from the cries of your brothers and sisters still enslaved in Egypt—they need you, too. Let go of the guilt of the past and go forward with my blessing."

In that second reading, Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul is saying something very similar. Paul is recalling how poorly people were living their faith and how **God was not pleased with most of them**. Yet, he says, **"these things occurred as an example for us,"** and two lines later, **"These things happened to them to serve as an example."** Paul, I believe, is saying to the people of Corinth and, by extension, to us: Don't remember your past sins as a way of continually punishing yourself but learn from your past sins so that you don't have to repeat them but, instead, can grow into a better person. Past sins, like history itself when we don't learn from it, have a way of repeating themselves. Paul is addressing the Church in Corinth, but because these scriptures are living words, Paul is also addressing the Church here and now. Paul may be telling us as Church: learn from the sins of the past, how they hurt others and how they were not worthy of the name Christian, and never repeat them. We can't undo the past, but we can chart a new path in the present.

The gospel, once again, is like a mirror held up to our own faces. It seems to be saying: Don't waste time trying to figure out why bad things happen to good people, both back then and now. Instead, spend some time, right now, looking at yourself in the mirror. You, at the end of the day, are the only one you can change for the better, anyway.

I think we all play this little game called "On Balance." "On balance" works this way. Picture it; you're the priest. Someone comes to you and wants to "offload" their sins in confession. No problem, except for the fact that they start this way, "Father, don't get me wrong. I don't pretend to be a saint, but I'm not as bad as that S.O.B. who lives at the bottom of my street. Let me tell you about him!" From that moment on, the confession is no longer about the person in front of you, but about the S.O.B. who lives at the bottom of the street. This is what I call the "on balance" game. "I may be a sinner but, on balance, I'm nowhere near as bad as that guy over there. And since the word on the street is that God is merciful and forgives the sins of even those rotten S.O.B.s, then, on balance, God surely can forgive **my** sins." What's the problem with this (and trust me there is a big problem with this)? The problem is that we use the teachings of Jesus to shape up others but never turn the mirror on ourselves. The problem is always over there.

Jesus has his own little "on balance" story does he not? Today's gospel passage starts this way. **Jesus was teaching the crowds; some of those present told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. Jesus asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"** Jesus is referring to a true story about how Pontius Pilate sent his thugs into the Temple and murdered people while they were at prayer. (Just as an aside: how many times have we heard, in recent years, about Jews, Muslims, and Christians being killed while at prayer in their synagogues, mosques, or churches? More than I'd like to remember). These Galileans Jesus refers to were faithful Jews who were at the Temple offering sacrifice. The sacrifice involved killing animals so, naturally, animals' blood is spilled. Pilate sent his troops in to do the dirty work. They slaughtered the Galileans and allowed their blood to mingle with the blood of the animals. In the very act of offering atonement for their own sins, these Jews were murdered. Misguided thinking concludes: How great their sins must have been that God would allow them to be killed while in the very act of worshipping God! Jesus says that way of thinking is foolish. It's wrong because it's the old "on balance" game again. Those people must have been super bad in order for God to strike them down in church! On balance, that will never happen to me, because I'm

not nearly as bad as those rotten people. God is not in the game of punishing but of redeeming especially what we've considered "unredeemable."

The Scripture stories given to us today are **not** about finding some theological explanation about why bad things happen to good people. They are about us. We are that tree that's given every opportunity to bear fruit now. You are not your past sins, so get back on your horse and ride again. You are also not a person who should go around comparing yourself to other in the hopes that you can feel good about yourself "on balance." You and I are good trees who use only Jesus, and nobody else, as our measuring stick. He says to us, "Remove your shoes, for you are not only on sacred ground but you are planted on sacred ground. Go forth and bear good fruit with your life."

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