

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh
February 28, 2018- 2nd Sunday in Lent (B)
Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

Genesis 17.1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22.22-30; Romans 4. 13-25; Mark 8. 31-38

**'For you are setting your mind not on divine things
but on human things.'** †

Isn't that true for most of us? We set our minds on those things that are in our own best interest... it's human nature. Peter was severely rebuked by Jesus in the passage from Mark's Gospel for doing just that. He was concerned about the advancement of his own agenda and ideas... not necessarily God's. And Jesus makes it very clear just how different Or ways and God's ways can be:

'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it...'

I recall one of my former teachers of NT at Duke, Clifton Black (then a doctoral student, now a big wig professor at Princeton Theological Seminary), teaching about Mark's Gospel and quoting Mark Twain, the great American humorist:

"It ain't those parts of the Bible I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand."¹

The Jesus in Mark is pretty straight forward... and make no mistake, the disciples knew what 'the Cross' meant—crucifixion was the most humiliating, tortuous execution in the Roman Empire— and we hear Jesus tell them the Cross is where he must go, and where they must follow.

This week, in addition to praying about this Gospel passage, I've thought a lot about the OT passage from Genesis and the tremendous faithfulness of Abram and Sarai... who because of their faith in God became the father and mother of great nations. Abraham, 'father of multitudes' and Sarah 'great princess.' The promise from God (*El Shaddai*) and covenant were heard read today... follows from the earlier willingness of Abram to follow God's wishes. At the beginning of chapter 12 he orders, "Go from your country and your kindred... to the land that I will show you" (12.1). The willingness to leave everything and trust in God is simply... remarkable.

¹ "Wit and Wisdom of Mark Twain," ed. Alex Ayres, 1987, p 26.

And Paul, in his letter to the Romans, reminds us is not about adherence to The Law, but faithfulness that made the difference for Abram. So often we tend to focus of rules and specifics... It's easy to get caught up in the passages from Genesis, indeed much of the Torah, that we've heard over the past weeks— of Noah and the Arc, of the destruction of Sodom, of the trials and successes of Abraham and Sarah— these stories have been taken so literally by some... We Episcopalians understand the stories contained in the OT are meant to show us so much more... they're not meant to focus on specifics, but to promote ideals.

There's a beautiful quote from another Writer, Madeleine L'Engle, "That limited literalism which demands that the Bible's poetry and story and drama and parable be taken as factual history is one of Satan's cleverest devices. If we allow ourselves to be limited to the known and the explainable, we have thereby closed ourselves off from God and mystery and revelation."²

With this in mind, we can see the underlying message from these Scriptures today is about trusting in God's ways rather than our own! Jesus in Mark's Gospel warns that if we reject God's ways and desperately try to save our own lives, we will lose ourselves... it won't work, we'll gain nothing and lose everything.

'If you want to be my disciple, you've got to understand and accept this: Deny self and take up the Cross!' Any attempt to save yourself is futile... So long as the tyranny of self-interest exists, you'll never reach salvation! 'Get behind me... follow me... deny yourself and you'll have eternal reward.'

"It ain't those parts of the Bible I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand." I must admit... I'm inclined to agree with Mr. Twain.

We each have to endure our own manner of hardships, while faithfully believing our God is with us through them all. It's only by letting go of our own self-interest and trusting in God, as we learned from the story of Abraham and Sarah... only when we hope beyond all hope, as Paul says in Romans... only when we 'let go and let God' ... only when we stop our attempt to control things and leave it all in God's hands... only when we are willing to sacrifice our wants for the sake of another, that we become true followers of Christ.

² Madeleine L'Engle, "A Sone for a Pillow."

'For it is in giving that we receive, in pardoning that we are pardoned, and in dying that we are born to eternal life.'³ It is only when we are willing to lose everything that we will really gain anything... and, what we will ultimately gain, shall be eternal!

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³ A Prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, *BCP*, p. 833.