

Spring Training

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Rick Cross at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, March 12, 2006.

“So daily dying to the way of self, so daily living to your way of love, we walk the road, Lord Jesus, that you trod, knowing ourselves baptized into your death: so we are dead and live with you in God.” (“Eternal Lord of Love,” hymn 149, verse 2)

Welcome to the Second Sunday in this forty-day season of Lent, the journey of preparation for observing the passion of Holy Week, and the greatest celebration in the Christian year—Jesus’ resurrection on Easter Day. I suppose Lent and Easter is for Christians, what spring training and opening day is for the Cincinnati Reds.

While we put special emphasis on this six-week period of spiritual self-examination and reflection, actually, our whole lives are meant to be lived in relationship to the resurrection of Jesus. Even the disciples had a hard time understanding that the discipline of letting go was the prerequisite of discovering the new life God was promising.

The Reds may be good examples of faith. Each grueling day of workout during spring training, is achieved in the hope that there will be an opening day. Without the sacrifice of disciplined blood, sweat and tears, there is no winning ball game on opening day. Likewise, turning away from a delicious glazed pastry on the dessert table at coffee hour, only makes sense if I can somehow make the leap later this spring into my size 42 suit. But like Abraham, I am hoping against hope.

Abraham’s story is really a story about a Lenten journey. And I suppose that is what was going on with Jesus and the disciples. Let’s listen in. The Gospel story: Mark 8:31-38 “Hey guys, I know all these preaching and healing tours and hanging out together as a tight support group are exciting and are pumping you up... And I really appreciate all you are doing to promote my Father’s New World of Love and Peace. And although it is exhausting, I am feeling good about our ministry.”

Jesus was speaking to his group of friends as they sat around an open, crackling, fire, sharing a meal of roast lamb together, after a long day’s journey along dusty country roads, and two more healing services with more crowds of needy, hungry, curious followers.

Peter spoke. “Dear Lord, meeting you and getting to know you personally and learning to serve you has changed our lives. Speaking for myself, I have never known such a rewarding and life-giving relationship, and I know how much we are all looking forward to building this movement bigger and bigger, and as you become more and more popular, and we get stronger, I can see success!”

Emotionally expressive, he got up off the homespun woolen blanket which several of the disciples were sitting on as they ate. James and Simon muttered, “Amen, brother!” as

they held tender, sweet pieces of roasted lamb away from their greasy bearded mouths. As John swished a mouthful of dry red wine around in his mouth and swallowed slowly, he just looked at Peter, then slowly shook his head at another typical diatribe from his impetuous colleague.

After eating a torn-off piece of pita bread into which he had sandwiched a healthy scoop of spicy humus, Jesus cleared his throat and looked straight into each man's eyes, as he spoke softly and quite openly to each friend around the circle. "There is something I must tell you. Soon I will undergo great suffering, and be rejected by our own clergy and lay religious leaders." He paused, as an ember caught a gust of wind and a tongue of fire flared up into the darkness, illuminating the puzzled faces, now hanging on each word. "I am going to be killed, and after three days, I will rise again."

The only word they heard was "killed." A gasp in unison went up like a sudden billow of smoke from the camp fire. Peter lunged toward Jesus, grabbing his arm and tunic, clumsily pulling him up to his feet, and away from the others in the circle.

"Don't talk like that! You are not going to be killed. We wouldn't let anyone hurt you. And all that talk about suffering and rejection... we don't want to hear it. That's depressing. We need to feel good and be happy."

Pulling himself out of Peter's grasp, Jesus turned toward the men. "Your way of thinking is limited to human standards. Don't tempt me to take the easy road and put myself first. I am here to pay the price of love, and that will cost me my life, so that you and others may be free and live."

With that, Jesus called the crowds of followers who had been gathered around their own camp fires throughout the makeshift camp site. "If you really want to follow me, deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow. If you put yourself first and try to control everything in your life for your own happiness and pleasure here on earth, you will be a loser in God's eyes. But if you are willing to let go of everything and to let God guide you in the way of love, you will be a winner and discover new life that lasts even beyond death itself."

And thus began the first Lenten journey, with Jesus' challenge for us to take up our cross, and follow.

The righteousness of faith: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25 Many years before Jesus, Abraham and Sarah were invited on a Lenten-type journey of their own. Abraham and Sarah were almost one hundred years old, yet they remained childless. Having a male child to carry on the family bloodline was about the most important value held by people in that time. It was the signature of God's blessing and confirmation that life would go on.

So the Lord appeared to Abram and told him to walk the talk, and promised to make him exceedingly fruitful, in fact the ancestor of a multitude of nations. This was the supreme

blessing Abraham and Sarah had been praying for during the eighty-five years of their marriage, without success.

In those days there were no fertility clinics; Viagra was not yet on the market. Abraham and Sarah were on their own. All they had was God's outrageous promise. Can you imagine the conversation at the breakfast table the next morning after God's message came to Abram? "Uh... Sarah, dear. I had a dream last night."

"Oh?"

Sigh. "Yeah...uh...well...uh...It was really a crazy dream."

"The older you get, the crazier are your dreams, old man."

"Yeah...I suppose you're right. But...but...this dream was... different."

"Why are you so nervous, old man?"

"Don't call me 'old man,' Sarah."

"Well, you are ninety-nine, and your body is as good as dead."

"Please, Sarah. I know I'm ninety-nine. But I feel much younger. You're only as old as you feel, you know. This dream was about me and you, and about all these years we have become so discouraged about not being able to have children."

Sarah looked away. Her failure to have conceived during their life time, brought a heavy black curtain of guilt and grief down over her wrinkled face. They had had similar conversations year after year.

"Sarah, God promised me last night that you and I would have a baby."

I wish we could have seen the look on Sarah's face as she slowly turned toward her husband.

"Not only is your body as good as dead, your mind is at the ticket counter and the train has left the station!"

Sarah began to laugh. And their Lenten journey of nine months began. And you know the rest. It is their Easter story of new life and procreation, as they became the primal ancestors of many nations and the world religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

So here we are, invited into our own Lenten faith journey. Your need or dream, or the deepest desire of your heart may not be to have a baby at age ninety-nine. It may be something far more ordinary, like health, or serenity, or reconciliation of a relationship, justice in the world, or guidance in an important decision, or peace of mind. But however

you need God's presence of love and healing in your life, and whatever obstacles or challenges seem to prevent you from connecting, remember Abraham and Sarah. They have something important to teach us.

The letter written to members of one of the earliest Christian churches in Rome hundreds of years later, explains the faith Abraham and Sarah had in God's promise, despite seemingly insurmountable odds. "It depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace.... of the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.... He did not weaken in faith.... No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness."

God gives life to the dead, and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Abraham grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. God's nature is to resurrect, to breathe the breath of life into us, our families, our institutions, our neighborhoods. Where there is death and destruction in personal lives, in this City, and in the world, God is waiting to call into existence ministries that give life to the dying. I know many of you are involved in life-giving ministries. To tap into that oasis of life force and resurrection, we must have a right attitude and give glory to God, being thankful and positive in our thinking. That kind of attitude grows strong faith and empowers new life. A new exhibit of photography by sixteen young adults with Down Syndrome from greater Cincinnati opens today in the South Corridor Gallery. There is one reason it is here. My daughter Katherine who is a new member of this congregation is one of the photographers, and God has used her to bless my journey of faith.

Twenty-six years ago, my wife Amy and I, (in the tradition of Abraham and Sarah, and Jesus' first disciples), found ourselves on a Lenten journey, being asked to take up our cross. I know every one has a cross, and one is not heavier than an other. God gave us the gift of a second daughter. I can only speak for myself and confess that I felt totally blindsided by God, to whom we had prayed for a healthy, perfect baby.

I hear Jesus' talk to his disciples of his impending rejection, suffering and death, as the context in which I have understood my experience of the death and loss of my own stereotype and expectation and preconception of what it means to be human, and to be perfectly created in the image of God. I experienced all the stages of death, like denial, anger, bargaining, and even today, still pray for acceptance. God has given me grace to let go more and more of my own selfish pride of intellect, the temptation to need to "look good," to have it all together, to be in control, to run with the "in" crowd (whoever they are), and to be cool. All of us in God's family have differences. Katherine has one extra chromosome in her genetic make-up, and learning to accept and embrace the uniquely mysterious and beautiful person she is, has stretched me and inspired my faith to grow. The world has been conditioned to hold a narrow stereotype of what it means to be perfect, successful, strong, beautiful, and competent. Katherine and her friends who have

Down Syndrome cannot fit into this distorted steel mold. Thank God! And Jesus' words to the disciples are to us, "You are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things." They have been differently gifted with what matters most to God, and what the world needs so desperately —the gift of love.

People with Down Syndrome have ministries way beyond our low expectations, and lives will be touched by their gifts, as we take the time to see God in one another. The photography is only a tiny glimpse and symbol of the ways this particular group of young people are integral and hidden gifts in our world and right here in Cincinnati. And for too long, they have been separated from the mainstream of education, society, employment, and worship.

In the tradition of Abraham and Sarah, and Jesus and his disciples, they are witnesses of how God gives life to what we may perceive as dead, and brings into existence the things that do not exist. They are contemporary pilgrims carrying crosses on the Lenten journey with us. Theirs are lives of faith. I am so thankful that this Cathedral is privileged to welcome them during our journey this Lenten season. They are Easter people! To God be the glory! Amen.