

“Deny Yourself and Follow Me”

by Tim Hall

Sunday February 25, 2024 – 2 Lent, Year B

(RCL: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:22-30; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Here’s a bit of humor to start us off on this Lenten Sunday. Harkening back to our Shrove Tuesday pancake supper recently past...

A mother was preparing pancakes for her sons, Kevin, 5, Ryan, 3. The boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake. Their mother saw the opportunity for a moral lesson. "If Jesus were sitting here, He would say 'Let my brother have the first pancake, I can wait.'" Kevin turned to his younger brother and said, "Ryan, you be Jesus!"

And on the opposite end of the meal spectrum...

A wife invited some people to dinner. At the table, she turned to their six-year old daughter and said, "Would you like to say the blessing?" "I wouldn't know what to say," the little girl replied. "Just say what you hear Mommy say," her mother answered. The daughter bowed her head and said, "Dear Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?"

So often, different tracks in life converge to gently, and sometimes surprisingly, guide us down an unanticipated path. That’s what we see in the lives of Abram and Sarai this morning. The promise made by God to Abram 5 chapters and a half a continent earlier, is finally coming to fruition. Now, even in their old age, when the thought of Sarai bearing Abram a son to be the father of many nations is but a fleeting fantasy, God fulfills to their great wonder. Their years with penitent hearts and steadfast faith are being embraced by God’s unchangeable truth. And God changes their names to recognize them as the father and mother of the multitude yet to come.

I had a few things converge this past week to steer my actions. First, and foremost, Rev. Rob Banse told me that his post-surgical recovery was not moving along as quickly as he had hoped and he would be unable to join us this morning, although he’s doing okay. Rev. Martha kindly agreed to celebrate today and I took the opportunity to give a homily. However, as the week progressed, my prayer preparations were somewhat like that little girl, “Dear Lord, why on earth did I offer to give the homily?” But actually, as more convergences occurred a theme began to emerge.

Not only is this the second Sunday in Lent, it's also the last Sunday in February, which is also Black History month. You've seen and heard many of the promos, I'm sure. A quick narrative vignette followed by "I'm raising my voice for black history month." Specials on many of the TV stations. Replays of Dr. Henry Louis Gates documentaries, "The Black Church" and "Gospel", which I love. Special museum exhibitions. Heartrending stories of slavery, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movements. Stories of African Americans overcoming adversity... "Hidden Numbers", "The Jackie Robinson Story". Thought provoking, often agonizing, inspirational stuff!

Judy took me to see "Origin" last Monday night just as I was starting to come down with something. Luckily, we were the only ones in the theatre. "Origin" is the story of author Isabel Wilkerson writing her groundbreaking book "Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents" while coping with personal tragedy. Her book compares American racist and segregationist behavior to the caste social hierarchy system of India and even the Nazi treatment of the Jews. I'm sure there's more in the book, but this is what was addressed in the movie.

Her book came out in the Summer of 2020, the same summer George Floyd was murdered for all to see. It was five years after the horrific mass shooting at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC. But it had its roots in the stalking and killing of Trayvon Martin 8 years earlier, something that Wilkerson, a journalist, had been asked to expand upon and which years later became this book, and now this movie. Which was excellent, by the way.

Meanwhile, we've been working on the narrative responses for our 2023 Parochial Report where, when asked to "tell stories of how you have spent the last year naming, addressing, and dismantling the injustices of racism in yourselves, congregations, and your communities", our response is the same this year as it was for 2022... that while this is something on our hearts, we made no progress towards an actual, organized approach to working on these questions. However, on a positive note, we did raise funds and give generously to several causes dealing with injustice, and the results of our parish survey showed 46% of respondents are interested in "Peace & Justice Issues".

Finally, there is the message that has come down (via word-of-mouth) from the Diocese that Creation Care would be moving to one of the back burners this year, with the front burner issue now being Racial Reconciliation and Economic Justice.

We've started our Lenten study: "Will You" where we are taking a deeper dive into the promises we make in our Baptismal Covenant. Five powerful "will you" questions that we'll be discussing. The last one asks, "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" To which we all respond... *[congregation]*

How will we do this, with God's help?

Jesus invites us, even implores us, to take up our cross and follow him. What are the crosses we need to lift up in our lives? Well first, it's the cross of self-denial. Perfect for this season of Lent. We need to deny the fear we have of doing something different, of being different. We must deny the doubt we have in ourselves to be effective conduits for change. We need to deny our comfort-zones, our anxiety over offending others, especially when we know our cause is righteous.

Second, it's the cross of salvation. That cross that we are all a part of on the cover of your bulletin; that cross is the body of Christ and we are, each of us members of that body. By lifting that cross and following Jesus all the way, even to the grave, we are saved. Jesus said, "Those who want to save their life will lose it. And those who lose their life for me and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

That's a heavy burden. Sometimes we might feel like the older brother in the pancake joke... Ryan, you be Jesus! But the rewards are incalculable. And we won't be doing it alone. We'll be with each other. With Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit. With the multitude of saints that have gone before.

Yesterday several of us attended the showing of "The Philadelphia Eleven" at Grace Episcopal in Berryville. This movie showed how a few faithful Christians, through years of perseverance and belief in the righteousness of their cause, challenged the accepted norms of the patriarchal Episcopal church and changed the world.

Eleven women, after years of struggling to be ordained, after being voted down at both the 1970 and 1973 general conventions, being continually wrapped in love by the laity that surrounded and supported them, were ordained by four brave bishops who dared to put their mitres on the line, at the Church of the Advocate, a historically black Episcopal Church in Philadelphia in 1974.

You see, no other church would allow it. But the Church of the Advocate had always been on the forefront of radical Christianity and radical love. Our black brothers and sisters came through for all of us. And the future first female (and black) bishop to be ordained was a teenage crucifer that day.

As Dr. M.L. King said (and I'm de-gendering his statement): "the only thing it takes for evil to succeed is for good people to do nothing". Those people did not do nothing. They did something! And while it may have upset many, that church was filled with so much joy and the Holy Spirit that it overflowed. It overflowed into another church later that year where the Washington Four were ordained and it became a movement that could not be contained. Thanks be to God.

Dr. King also said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter". Well silence was not kept that day nor in all the days leading up to that day. And lives were continually being reborn!

So what am I proposing? I say it's time we take the next step, as a congregation, in striving for Justice and Peace among all people. What will that look like? We don't know yet. There are many good books on changes already underway in the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement... It will start to become clear if we put our heads, hearts, and hands together, pray to the Advocate for guidance, seek help from the Diocese, study, and start figuring it out.

Our Lenten Study is a good beginning. What's next? If we keep our hearts penitent and our faith steadfast, we shall come to see what surprises God, who can do infinitely more that we can ask or imagine, has in store for us.

That is my hope.