

Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time
February 7, 2016

INTRODUCTION: Our first reading is one of my favorite Old Testament readings. It is from the prophet Isaiah who lived about 725 years before Christ. He is describing his call from God to be a prophet. He heard God's call while he was in the Temple in Jerusalem. He sees God there, but notice he is unable to describe what God looks like. He tells us about God's royal robe, the angels, the sounds and the profound sense of God's holiness. In this experience he becomes aware of his own unworthiness. It was the same reaction Peter had when Jesus called him to join Jesus in his ministry as we will hear in today's gospel. Peter said "depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man." You will recognize in today's first reading from Isaiah the inspiration for two familiar hymns: the *Holy, Holy*, which we say or sing at every Mass and the hymn, *Here I Am, Lord*. In the other two readings, we hear how two other people experienced God in Jesus Christ: Paul in his vision of the Risen Christ and Peter in the miraculous catch of fish.

HOMILY: Today's gospel is from St. Luke who tells us about a miraculous catch of fish that occurred at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Many people may also be aware that St. John's gospel also tells us about a miraculous catch of fish that occurred after Jesus' resurrection. Many Scripture scholars are convinced there was only one miraculous catch of fish and Luke and John tell the story a little differently. That's not unusual, as the gospels developed orally over many years and stories about Jesus and his teachings were told over and over again. Events got out of sequence. In composing their gospels, the evangelists were not particular about exactly when a certain event occurred like modern historians today. As a matter of fact, when the same event comes to us from two different sources, (perhaps in a slightly different form or with different details) it helps to assure us of the historicity of that event. In questioning whether something really happened, using the criterion of multiple attestation (i.e. it is attested to more than once) supports the fact the event really did happen.

Since our gospel is from Luke today, I will focus on his account of the event. Luke tells us the miraculous catch of fish happened before Jesus called Peter to follow him. Actually Jesus puts it this way: he told Peter from now on you will be catching people. Peter's livelihood came from fishing and Jesus tells him he is now to start using his fishing skills to capture people for God's kingdom. We can't take this metaphor too literally because, when we consider what happens to a fish after it is caught, it's not good. It is cleaned, cooked and then eaten. Jesus doesn't want Peter to do that to people. The Greek word used here means to capture alive and the Greek root of this word is "life" so the implication is that those Peter brings into God's kingdom will be blessed with the fullness of life. Notice Jesus is speaking in a prophetic manner, saying this almost as a promise, when he says "you will be catching people." This is what Peter did. Jesus prophecy or promise to Peter did come true, for Jesus never lies. Let us

reflect for a moment on that idea as it relates to us. Jesus made many promises to us and we can believe his promises because he is faithful to his promises and he never lies. For example, he promised those who believe in him would have eternal life. In the sacraments he promises us new life in baptism; he promises forgiveness in confession; he promises union with himself in Communion (This is my body, he says and he doesn't lie); and so on with the other sacraments.

The miraculous catch of fish coming before Jesus' call to the disciples to follow him helps explain how it was that they responded to his call so promptly and "left everything to follow him." His divine presence and his powerful deeds persuaded them, even though they didn't exactly know what they were getting into. He didn't hide anything from them. He also promised them rejection and suffering. But they continued to follow, until they followed him into eternal life.

One last thing I want to call to your attention: Jesus, of course, is the main person in this story, but who stands out? It is Simon Peter. This is just one of the many places where Peter stands out as the leader among Jesus followers. James and John are mentioned here in the gospel today, but they are almost like an afterthought. By the time Luke was writing, Peter was long dead, but his office remained and his successors continue to be the leaders of God's people – which they do through the Holy Father. If Peter's office of leadership were not to remain, then it would have been useless for the gospels to keep emphasizing it as they do all through the New Testament. Amen.

First Sunday of Lent – C Cycle February 14, 2016

INTRODUCTION: (*Deut. 26,4-10; Rom. 10,8-13; Lk.4,1-13*) In our first reading from Deuteronomy, we hear Moses instructing the people in the proper way to worship God. They were to bring to the priest one tenth of the fruits of their land (aka: "tithing"). Along with their offering, they would acknowledge they were once a people without freedom or land. They were now to bring their offering in gratitude for all the ways God has blessed them. The reading prepares us for the gospel where the devil tries to tempt Jesus into worshipping him. The devil promises he, in return, would give Jesus power over all earthly kingdoms. Jesus quotes another part of Deuteronomy which says, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him alone shall you serve." (*Deut. 6,13*)

HOMILY: Five weeks ago we celebrated the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist at the Jordan river. Since then we've heard about events that happened early on in Jesus' ministry, such as his first miracle at the wedding feast at Cana. Today we backtrack a little, to hear what happened right after Jesus' baptism.

When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit came down upon him and God proclaimed that he was well pleased with Jesus, his Son. Suddenly, as we just heard in the gospel, the scene changed dramatically. The Spirit that came down

on Jesus at his baptism led him into the desert. This dramatic shift tells us a lot about the dramatic ups and downs in our own spiritual journey. I trust most of you can remember times when you felt close to God as a loving Father, or you felt some special consolation. Without warning you felt as if you were in a spiritual desert. Suddenly God seemed far away, he seemed to be ignoring you and, as it were, hiding his face from you. Many saints have had experiences like this. In this desert, a person often feels they've done something wrong, and God is angry. They don't realize these ups and downs are part of everyone's spiritual journey, including Jesus himself, and that it's during those desert periods our faith will be growing deeper and stronger if we don't give up or get discouraged. Thinking about the experience of Jesus has always been comforting to me when I feel as if I'm in a desert.

The desert times make us more vulnerable to temptation too. It's easy to pray and to love God when we feel that he's close to us and it's harder when he feels far away. Luke tells us in today's gospel that it was only after Jesus had fasted those 40 days that the devil showed up. In other words, Jesus was at his most vulnerable point, at least physically. So the devil suggested Jesus turn stones into bread to satisfy his hunger; he offered Jesus power and control over all earthly kingdoms; and, finally, the devil told him that he should come floating down from the peak of the Temple and the Jewish people would instantly recognize him as their messiah.

These temptations, at first, seem so strange. They appear to be quite different from the run of the mill temptations most of us have to deal with: pride, lust, greed, envy, anger, etc., but in some ways our temptations are similar to those of Jesus. Basically, Jesus' temptations involved the possibility of his using his divine powers for his own benefit. I would suspect temptations like these continued to suggest themselves to Jesus throughout his entire life. For example, we might remember how, after he had fed the people miraculously, they wanted to make him their king. He may have found that tempting, but we know he turned away from that possibility. Remember too how when he was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane, he said: "don't you know that I could call on my Father for help and at once he would send me more than twelve armies of angels?" (Mt. 26,53) Yet he would not call on his supernatural powers to save himself. Jesus came to serve, and we see him time and time again using his unique powers to serve others, not himself.

In this, the temptations of Jesus are similar to some of our own. Jesus has given us an example that when God has blessed us, we should not be greedy and selfish with what we've been given in terms of time, talent and treasure, but we should be willing to help others.

Now, my last thought, I do not say to those who are already perfect. If you are already perfect you can tune me out, but if there is some room in your spiritual life for improvement, then I have one last word about temptation. During Lent we

are encouraged to do something that will bring us closer to Christ or to give up doing something that may keep us from serving Christ more wholeheartedly. Whenever I decide to do something special for Lent, after a couple of weeks I discover that 40 days is a long time, and I begin to let my good intentions slip by the wayside. That's one of my temptations during Lent. I think it's true of others, that many people begin Lent with good intentions, but then get tired of doing what they promised themselves they would try to do better. You will be blessed greatly if you persevere. I say this not just to encourage you, but I say this to myself as well: "don't quit the good work you planned on doing for Lent." Amen.

Second Sunday of Lent – C cycle February 21, 2016

INTRODUCTION (*Gen. 15,5-12.17-18; Phil, 3,20-4,1; Luke 9,28b-36*)

Abram, whose name was later changed to Abraham, lived almost 4000 years ago. God had already inspired him to migrate to the Land of Canaan and leave behind his home in southern Iraq (referred to in today's first reading as: Ur of the Chaldeans). Today we hear God make two promises to Abram. 1) He would have so many descendants they could not be counted and 2) someday his descendants would occupy the entire land of Canaan. As a proof that these promises would be fulfilled, God gave Abram a sign, a sign which consisted of a covenant ritual, a ritual that was a common practice in the culture of those times. Those participating in the covenant could be simply two individuals making a deal between themselves all the way up to a treaty between several nations. This ritual involved cutting an animal in half and then the participants would walk between the halves. It was a symbolic way of saying, "may the same thing happen to me as to what happened to this animal if I am unfaithful to my promise." Recall that God is often represented as light and/or fire in the Scriptures and in today's first reading, only God, symbolized as fire and light, moved between the two halves of the animals. The meaning of this was that God was not asking Abram to do anything in return for God's favor except to always believe God would be faithful to his promises and that Abram would die a rich man in terms of land, offspring and God's blessings. In the psalm that follows, we express our own trust in God as our light and our salvation." The ecstatic experience we hear about Abram in today's first reading is meant to prepare us for the account of Jesus' transfiguration, when his glory was revealed to Peter, James and John on Mt. Tabor.

HOMILY: The account of the transfiguration in Luke's gospel begins with chapter nine, verse 28. I want to begin my homily with verse 22, just six verses earlier. In verse 22 Jesus speaks, for the first time, of his suffering, death and resurrection. Then Jesus warns his apostles that their life as his followers will be very challenging. Luke tells us that about eight days after these warnings, Jesus took Peter, James and John up a mountain to pray. I want everyone to notice that the transfiguration is so closely tied in with Jesus' prediction of his passion and death.

How often do we hear a time reference between two events? Hardly ever. So this is important to mention – that Jesus' transfiguration happened just a few days after he warned the apostles that he would suffer greatly at the hands of the Jewish leaders. On a very mundane level, this time sequence describes our own lives, sometimes things are going well, sometimes life is really the pits. That pattern repeats itself day after day, month after month, year after year our whole lifetime. With Jesus, however, it ends on a positive note. For Jesus, all his suffering and rejection ended with his rising from death to eternal life and his ascension to the right hand of the Father in heaven. Our own lives are not nearly so dramatic, but the pain and the glory are just as real. We have to keep remembering that with Jesus it will end in glory.

When it seems that our life is all pain and misery, we just need to keep God's promises in mind. We heard the story of Abraham to whom God promised much land and many descendants, but the promise never seemed to happen. Yet it did. All Abraham had to do was to have faith, a faith that really challenged him. In the second reading, Paul assures us that our citizenship is in heaven – our life in this world is brief and we are just tourists here. Our true home, our native country is heaven, and we will be transformed into a glorified body like Jesus' own risen body and enjoy forever the home that God is creating for us in heaven.

Along with this theme, the sufferings of this life will be transformed into glory just as Jesus' sufferings would be transformed into glory. His transfiguration was meant to show this to his three disciples who went up the mountain with him. Luke is the only gospel who tells us what Jesus was talking about as he spoke with Moses and Elijah. He was talking about his exodus – his passage from this world to the next. Jesus is talking with us today about our passage from this world to the next. He wants us to trust him. He has great plans for us. He wants us to know God is faithful to his promises; God does not lie.

Jesus said in John's gospel, "I came that they might have life and might have it fully." (*Jn. 10,10*) God does not lie. God is faithful to his promises. We have to see that especially in the sacraments: in baptism we are born from above, we are called God's children and indeed that is what we really are. (*1 Jn, 3,1*) In the sacrament of reconciliation, Jesus tells us through the words of the priest: "I absolve you from your sins." In the Eucharist he tells us "This is my body. This is the cup of my blood which will be shed for the forgiveness of sins." God does not lie; God is faithful to his promises.

Lately, what I have been reading about near death experiences helps me understand more concretely what Jesus has promised. Not everyone has a near death experience and not everyone has a good one, but those who do have a good one report on the sounds, the colors, the friends and relatives they meet, the light that casts out everything that is dark in us and most of all, the desire not to return to this life. It reminds me of Peter who wanted to stay on top

of the mountain permanently – the experience of Jesus' glory that he had was so awesome. I'm not an expert on near death experiences, but when people report a good experience, it gives me an idea of all the blessings that God has promised to us when we love him and serve him. God is faithful to his promises; and God does not lie.

Third Sunday of Lent – C Cycle February 28, 2016

INTRODUCTION – Our psalm refrain is: “The Lord is kind and merciful.” Those few words give us our theme for today. God's kindness and mercy is seen in our first reading as we hear about God calling Moses to lead God's people from slavery in Egypt to freedom. It was on that occasion that God gave Moses a special gift. God revealed God's name as Yahweh, a name usually translated as “I AM.” Why is that so special? It was like giving someone your private phone number. God was assuring Moses of a special relationship Moses would have with him and letting Moses know he could call on God whenever he needed him.

In our second reading Paul reflects on the many blessings and marvels God's people experienced as God led them through the desert to the Promised Land. But in spite of all the wonderful things God did for them, when they arrived at the Promised Land, they would not cross the Jordan and enter for they were afraid. They were afraid because they lost their faith in God's protection. So God had them wait for the next generation before they could move into the Promised Land. Paul tells us to learn a lesson from them and not to be like them.

In today's gospel Jesus tells us God is merciful but we must not take his mercy for granted.

HOMILY – Here's a story you might enjoy. A preacher started his sermon by showing his congregation four glass jars. The first jar contained some alcohol, the second was full of cigarette smoke, the third had chocolate syrup and the fourth good garden soil. Then he produced four worms and put a worm in each jar. He put the jars aside as he preached on the evils of drinking alcohol, of smoking and of chocolate. After about ten minutes, he finished and said “now lets see what happened to the worms.” He took the worms from the first three jars, each of which contained alcohol, tobacco smoke or chocolate, and they were dead. He took the worm from the last jar with the good garden soil and it was just fine. So he asked his congregation, “what does this show you?” A person in one of the front rows said: “if you drink alcohol and smoke and eat chocolates, you won't have worms.” That was the end of the sermon.

It's not the end of this one, though. The story shows how different people can interpret the exact same thing in totally different ways.

People came to Jesus to ask him what he thought of one of Pilate's cruel and brutal acts of violence against the Jews. The people who were questioning Jesus expected Jesus to say that those whom Pilate killed were the greatest sinners in Galilee. Jesus, instead, brought up another situation about 18 people meeting their death accidentally when a tower, most probably a part of the old city wall, fell on them. Perhaps they were trying to shore it up. Jesus used both cases to say that bad things do happen and it doesn't necessarily happen because someone has sinned. Bad things can happen to anyone, accidentally or otherwise, but Jesus said the important thing is to live a good life; in other words, to repent as John the Baptist preached, which means "to accept in faith the saving word of God that Jesus has come to announce." (*The Anchor Bible, The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV, Joseph Fitzmyer, pg 1005*)

Jesus reinforced his message with another parable about an unproductive fig tree. The tree represents us and demonstrates how God has given us his grace and his love. He has given us time to do something with what he has given us. He may even give us extra time like the merciful gardener begged for from the owner of the land. The time will come when we have to account for what we have been given. This is not something any of us like to think about. God is merciful, but we must use his mercy in such a way that we can live a life that pleases him. Our culture likes to believe everyone is going to get to heaven in the end. As much as we would all like to believe that, that's not what Jesus is telling us today, and it's not what he has told us many other times in the gospels. It is through the Scriptures that God speaks to us, and that is one reason we are here at Mass, so we can hear his word and that our lives can be formed by his word. There is one more thing Jesus said to us that we must remember - it's not our place to judge a person's heart. How often do we make judgments about people's fate when they pass away, deciding they will never make it to heaven, or surely they have gone to heaven. Quite possibly we are right most of the time, but we can judge only by externals. Only God can look into a person's heart. Amen.