

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

March 8, 2009 B

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

As a young boy in a Catholic elementary school, I remember as early as second grade, that the first class of the morning was religion. And even though, at that early age, I had a strong attraction to the mystery and rituals of the church's liturgical year, religion wasn't my favorite class. The 'show and tell' tactics of Sister Aloysius put enormous pressure on our class to have all the answers to our catechism questions memorized. She would call out a name quite randomly, which meant we had to anxiously stand at our desk, waiting for her to ask the question. God forbid if we didn't answer verbatim.

"Robert: Who made us?" God made us. "Why did God make us?" God made us to know him, to love him and to serve him in this world, and to be with him in the next.

Most of the time I had all the answers...but through the years I've come to appreciate the questions more than the answers, knowing that, at best, all we perhaps have, at the end of the day, are insights to our life's journey and our search for meaning and purpose.

There's a question which never came up in my second grade religion class with Sister Aloysius which our scripture readings for today have prompted me to ask.

It's a question both Abraham and Sarah had to explore in their lives.

It's a question Peter and his companions had to struggle with in following Jesus.

It's a question Jesus himself had to ask.

It's a question you and I face as well.

And it is, "How do I know the will of God in my life?"

It's a good question – and one for which there are no simple answers which can be memorized. It's not the sort of question we approach like we would if we were trying to solve a puzzle, or, better yet, go about setting a 3 or 5 or 10 year 'strategic plan' for our life. No, it's rather a question that invites us to pay attention to the mystery of the life we're living. It's a life-long process which requires an ongoing discernment.

Imagine Abram and Sarai, for a moment! Abraham was seventy five when God called him, asking him to take his wife, family, servants, slaves, livestock – all his possessions, and basically begin a new journey to a land God would show him. I can't help but wonder whether his wife, Sarai, was delighted or devastated by the news. (The Book of Genesis doesn't tell us.) But Abram and Sarai set out on this tribal migration, not having a clue that twenty four years later, at ninety nine, God would establish a covenant through Abram, changing his name to Abraham and his wife's name to Sarah, promising that Abraham would become the father of many nations. But the story, as we know, doesn't end with today's lesson. And for those of us who struggle with trying to know the will of God in our lives, there's the difficult and challenging story in a latter chapter of Genesis of how Abraham listened to God and thought he heard God telling him to sacrifice Isaac, the miracle child born to him and Sarah in their old age. Abraham's obedience to what he perceived as doing the will of God took place in a cultural climate where the ritual practice of killing children, to say the least, was not as horrifying and shocking as it is today. When we look closely at the text in this part of the story (Genesis 22), what we see is that the voice of the god who told Abraham to sacrifice his son at the beginning of the story is a different god from the one at the end who intervenes. I don't want to turn this reflection into a Bible study, but the word to describe the 'GOD' who tells Abraham to sacrifice his son is the Hebrew word Elohim, which is the word used regularly to refer to 'other' gods. When the First Commandment says, as we heard in our penitential rite, "You shall not have no other gods but me," the word Elohim is used to refer to the false gods. The Hebrew word for LORD, on the other hand, refers to the special name God gives Moses when he's not sure what to call God. God told Moses, "I am who I am" – Yahweh.

And it's the angel of the LORD Yahweh whom Abraham listens to in doing God's will at the end of the story. My point here is that, even for Abraham after many, many years of following the LORD, trying to know the will of God wasn't easy. But he was intent and passionate about seeking and doing God's will in his life, even when he wasn't quite sure. Perhaps the lesson for us is that, no matter what mistakes we make early on in listening to other voices, voices of culture, or politics, or ego, or even our own selfish motives (though often unrecognized) – if we maintain our intention and our desire to know the will of God in our lives, God will show us the way. That's what faith is like. We don't always know for sure whether or not we're moving in the direction God is calling us to go, but we trust that God is somehow present in the choices we make, the risks we take, the confidence we may place in the people we meet along the way.

We hear some 'hard-sayings' of Jesus today in Mark's gospel. Jesus speaks about sacrifice. He talks about self-denial and tells us something we know all too well but don't always feel comfortable hearing – and it is that if we desire to truly be one of his disciples, we need to take up our cross and follow him.

The cross is at the center of what it is to be a follower of Christ. Sooner or later we face it. Good Friday comes whether we're ready or not. How it comes and when it comes and where it comes in our life (and even 'why' it comes) we never really know or fully understand. It's a mystery. We don't know what we'll face on the road before us, anymore than Peter knew, or the other disciples, for that matter. There's just no telling. But what we do know is that Jesus invites us to follow him. And that invitation, should we accept it, for the first time or the umpteenth time, can take us into new places and situations we never dreamed or imagined. But it means being open and vulnerable to God's grace. It requires a willingness to trust. It means taking some risks for Jesus' sake and the sake of the gospel.

Wendy Wright, a gifted writer in the field of contemporary spirituality, tells a story in her book, "The Rising," of a day of Lenten reflection she gave for a group of church women at a retreat center in Northern California. She was a fairly new graduate student at the time, beginning her studies in the history of Christian spirituality. The day got off to a good start, except for one woman who irked

her more and more as the day went on. Wendy writes, “She did not fit my notion of someone who should be on a prayer retreat. For one thing, she was loud – in her demeanor, her dress, her voice. Whenever we ended one of our conferences and I instructed us to move silently into the depths of our hearts, she would inevitably begin to talk and laugh raucously. She was overweight, wore tasteless clothing, and chain-smoked. She, of course, was to become the instrument of my own instruction.” And she goes on to say how they ran into each other during the lunch break – and, at the end of the day, the woman wanted to share with Wendy the answer to a question she had spent years asking holy people. She had only been satisfied recently and wanted to share with Wendy Wright what one man had suggested in response to the question, which was “How do you know the will of God?”

“If you think you sense the will of God in your life in some long-range, highly detailed plan, something you can see stretching out with clear goals and successes into the future, that is not the will of God. If, however, you have an insistent sense that the next, very hesitant step beyond which you can see nothing is in fact the step that must be taken, that is most likely the will of God for you.”

It’s good food for thought for the ongoing task of discerning God’s will on our life’s journey – and a response to a question I suspect even Sister Aloysius would approve of, from where she now sits in the kingdom of heaven!

Amen.
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