

Abraham is one of the reasons I got into the preachin' business. In a way, it's kind of Abraham's fault. When I was struggling with my call to ordained ministry, I kept telling God that I was just too old to be considering a radical life-change like this. Isn't it amazing how often we try and tell God He's got his plans wrong? That's what I was doing, always telling God that He must have me mistaken for somebody else. "You must be thinking about somebody younger than me for the ordained ministry, Lord. When you sent that message into my heart, stirring in me the urge to explore the priesthood, why, you probably just got a keystroke wrong before you pressed the "send button" on your holy keyboard. That message about the ordained ministry must have been intended for somebody else, Lord, somebody younger. You can hit the 'recall' tab on your Outlook program if you want to Lord, I really don't think that message was intended for me." That's kind of where I was in my conversation with God.



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And then, on the Second Sunday morning in Lent of 2003 I was sitting in the Church Sanctuary of Holy Comforter in Sumter, South Carolina minding my own business. I had just settled down for the Old Testament Lesson, which was when I often read the announcements. I had just started catching up on who had been put on the prayer list since the previous Sunday, and whether or not there was going to be a Parish supper that Wednesday night, when I heard the Lector say, "When he was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram." (Gen.17:1) And then that niggling, insistent, irrepressible voice echoed in my mind saying, "You know, James, you're not even half as old as Abraham was when he set out from Ur." Now why did He have to go and say that?!!

If last week, Mark's Gospel was about suffering, today it's really all about denial. And I've decided that the best way to preach about this kind of this denial is to talk about going dress shopping with my wife. Donna is a perfectly reasonable person in just about everything. She's even a reasonable person when it comes to most kinds of shopping. For example, her motto for shoe-shopping is, "If the shoe fits, buy three pair!"

But when you go dress shopping with Donna, well, it's a completely different story. There are those moments when she comes out of the dressing room with a potential new dress on, and I will say for the 16'h time, "Well I think that looks really nice." And for the 16th time Donna will look at herself in the mirror and say, "Hmm...no, that's just not me." The dress does not fit the image that Donna has in her mind of who she herself is, and so the dress is discarded, and joins the other 15 outfits to be returned to the racks of the clothing shop.

"That's just not me" is actually a very powerful phrase. How many times have you been at party, or at a gathering of acquaintances, and perhaps there's some behavior going on or some things are being said which strike a chord of discomfort with you. Do you have the strength, the courage to say, "No, that's just not me"? "I don't need to be here participating in the things that this group of people is doing." Do you have the courage in moments like that to say, "No. That's just not me!"

How many times have you said or done something that's hurt somebody you love? Have you had the courage at times like that to tell yourself, "No, that's just not me," and to go to the person you've hurt and apologize? How many times have you had a resentful, or jealous, or envious, or vengeful thought about somebody? When that happened did you have the strength to look in the mirror and say to yourself, "No, I'm a child of God, and I'm a better person than that. That kind of thinking-that's just not me." When those

kinds of thoughts that grieve the Father's heart occur, have you had the wisdom and the humility to go to the Lord and fall on your knees and ask forgiveness? Because you know, that really is at the heart of what Lent is all about.

When Jesus says in the Gospel lesson of today, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me," (Mk.8:34- NRSV), when Christ says let my followers **deny** themselves, He's using the Greek verb *aparnhomai* which means "to disown." The only other time Mark uses this verb is to talk about Peter's denial of Christ on Good Friday evening. Effectively, with his three denials before the rooster crowed, Peter is "disowning" Jesus.

So, if to really become followers of Jesus we have to deny and actually "disown" ourselves, tell me just how do you do that; how do you "**disown yourself**"? Well, evidently, there is a process of leaving behind involved here. Abram had to leave behind the life he knew in Ur of the Chaldeans in order to truly follow God. Paul says in his reading for today that the righteousness of Abraham came through his faith in God. (See Rom.4:14,16) And through this faith Abraham was able to strike out at the threshold of his second century on this planet. Through this kind of faith Abraham was able to leave behind him the things that kept him from following the voice of God. Through this faith, Abraham was able to disown and deny the things that made up his former self. But tell me, just where do you find that kind of faith?

Jesus' rebuke of Peter in the Gospel passage this morning is evidence that Peter is actually backsliding into his former self. Peter wants Jesus to stop stirring up angst among the people by talking about his impending crucifixion. "Don't rock the boat, Lord!" Peter is saying, "Don't stir the pot too much here, Jesus! We don't want people to start thinking we're crazy, and we certainly don't want to arouse the ire of established religious authorities. So, don't kick this particular hornets' nest. Don't go too far with this crucifixion and resurrection stuff, Jesus." Yes, Peter is slipping back into his old fears; and doubts, and worries. He's going back to pick up the dead skin of his former self and slip back into that past reality. Peter is getting ready to don the rotting rags of his former self, and so Jesus in a moment of startling rebuke says, "Get thee behind me Satan!" And then immediately the Lord reminds his disciples that if they truly want to be his followers, if they really want to be among the redeemed, they have to deny themselves. The followers of Jesus will have to disown the things of the former self.

But, of course, that leaves us with a problem. Because once we empty ourselves of the things of our former life - once we have disowned the habits, and the relationships, and the crutches, and the worry, and the resentment, and the jealousies, and the prideful thoughts and actions of the old Adam, then we have to fill that empty place with something. And this is where the indwelling of The Christ through the Holy Spirit can truly begin for us in earnest. We pray at the end of every Rite 1 Eucharist our fervent hope that "we may dwell in [Christ] and that He may dwell in us." And if we can truly do that, if we can fill the emptied out, swept clean places within us with the Christ light, then it is nothing less than the faith of the Lord Jesus that fills us to brimming over, and through this faith of and in Him, we find that we can truly strike out to parts unknown and follow in the footsteps of The Lord wherever He leads. And yes, it's terribly exciting, and more than a little audacious and intimidating this road of the faithful into the unknown.

But here's the thing: God will always be there. He'll never stop loving you. Because you are his beautiful, beautiful child, and **nothing** can change that. Even though this broken life and the Prince of Darkness in this fallen world will try every trick in the book to convince you otherwise. Nothing, "neither death nor life nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things yet to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom.8:38-39) Dear ones, we are all children of God. But it's up to you to claim your paternity: Over and over again, St. Paul assures us that we are God's children by adoption.

But before any adoption can be complete, there is a process of disowning which must take place - disowning the claims of the old in order to receive entry into the new family. So, what about you? Have you claimed your place, or are you still living in the orphanage? Because once you begin to realize, to recognize just who you are, whose child you really are, then you can begin to see yourself as the completely different being from what this twisted world would have you masquerade as. And in fact, you can indeed start disowning that broken being of the old Adam. Through the grace of God resting on the faith of none other than Jesus himself, you can start denying the lies of this world about who you really are, and truly pick up your Cross, that emblem of your glorious place in the Father's Kingdom. And there is nothing in this world or in the next one that can take that place away from you.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Blessed Lent. JWB+2-18-18

