

MARCH 5TH, 2017: FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT
Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7 Romans 5:12-19 Matthew 4:1-11

Back in the late 60s, Pope Paul VI convened a unique meeting at the Vatican. Realizing the majority of anthropologists were convinced the human race evolved from more than one set of “original parents,” the pontiff was anxious to explore how this rather new theory of polygenesis could fit into the Christian doctrine of original sin. Based on today’s first reading, that doctrine presumed we all sprang from one set of parents who at one point in their early existence had committed a sin so serious that it not only affected them personally, but was somehow passed down to all their descendants.

Among those whom Paul gathered were eminent scientists, Scripture scholars, anthropologists and theologians. Their final report was eventually published in the now-defunct Critic magazine. Though their opinions differed, they all seemed to agree on two things. First, the Yahwistic author of Genesis never expected us to take her biblical account of the “fall” literally. She simply created a classical myth to explain the origins of something we all experience: a basic sinful disorder in each of our lives. Second, the actual original sin probably wasn’t something our ancestors did, but something they didn’t do.

According to these experts, the first humans were few enough to have definitively changed the moral environment in which they lived. But they didn’t. Instead, time and time again they caved into their “dog eat dog” surroundings, refusing to replace the hateful situations they encountered with the love God intended them to display. The result was that their descendants were forced to face the same disordered environment – a climate which guaranteed it would be only a matter of time before each individual committed his or her original sin.

It’s good to hear today’s second and third readings from this perspective. Paul is convinced Jesus of Nazareth totally changed the environment we daily encounter. He reminds the Christian community in Rome that they no longer have to give in to the hatred and mistrust flourishing around them. The risen Jesus has overcome all that. And if we have the courage to join him/her in dying and rising, we’ll also replace our disordered surroundings with an environment of love. “For, if by the transgression of the one, the many died, how much more did the grace of God and the gracious gift of the one man Jesus Christ overflow for the many?” Each of us has the ability to change our surroundings for the better.

In a similar way, Matthew’s Jesus begins his public ministry with the message that no longer will it be “business as usual.” He’s determined to alter the way people live their lives. He isn’t, for instance, going to spend his life just taking care of people’s physical needs. Changing stones into bread won’t be a top priority. He’s determined to tackle the roots of our “screwed up” environment, not just the externals.

Neither is he going to do the spectacular, something that would make the headlines. No jumping off high buildings. Instead, he’s committed to the day by day loving of those around him: the one thing that would definitely change everyone’s life.

In the end, he’s simply not interested in having dominion over the “kingdoms of the world.” Those who lust after such a grandiose position have obviously made a pact with the devil to manipulate their sinful surroundings to their own selfish benefit, not to eradicate them.

It’s easy to forget the kind of person we’ve committed ourselves to imitate; someone who just didn’t want his followers to avoid sin. More than anything, he expected them to change their environment enough that sin might no longer be the trap it was for those who first inhabited our planet.

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MARCH 12TH, 2017: SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Genesis 12:1-4a II Timothy 1:8b-10 Matthew 17:1-9

Many of us falsely believe God only works through those individuals who've lived lives worthy of God working through them. We grew up believing in the non-biblical statement of St. Bonaventure: "Potuit, decuit, ergo fecit." *God is able to do it, it would fitting if he did it, therefore he does it.*

One of my grade school religion teachers once applied this reasoning to the Blessed Virgin. His reason for believing Mary was the most beautiful woman who ever existed was simple. Following Bonaventure he asked, "Couldn't God create such a uniquely beautiful person? Doesn't it make sense such a woman would be the mother of His Son? Therefore Mary was that most beautiful woman."

Such reasoning might make sense to us, but as I mentioned above, it's non-biblical. Going counter to Bonaventure, our sacred authors were convinced, "God could do it, it'd be fitting if he did it, but God almost never does what we expect him or her to do!"

This kind of theology especially kicks in when it comes to biblical "calls." God never calls people to a special ministry because they're the "holiest" persons in the room. They haven't necessarily engaged in an ascetic lifestyle, gone to Mass frequently, never forgot their meal prayers or even said a daily rosary. The God we know from Scripture simply calls certain individuals without any reference to who they were or what they did before that call. Only what they do after the call is important. This is especially true of the very first biblical call – the one narrated in today's Genesis reading – that of Abram.

The sacred author never tell us why Yahweh chooses Abram from the thousands of migrating people around him. Nor is there any mention of the kind of relationship the two had before the call. The significant thing is that the passage ends simply with the statement, "Abram went as Yahweh directed him."

Yet notice what this resident of Ur agrees to do. He's leaving all the security he's ever known – his land, his kinsfolk, his father's house – and sets out for a still-to-be determined country. Though Yahweh promises to one day make his family a "great nation" and his name a "blessing," Abram can't fall back on Yahweh's track record. At this point there is none. Everything starts from here.

That's the key to biblical calls: the person called is expected to put all her/his security in the one doing the calling. They're expected to follow not an institution or a set of rules and regulations, but a person; to live their lives based on the whim of that special individual, no matter where it takes them.

The unknown author II Timothy takes that for granted when he reminds his community that the risen Jesus has also "called us to a holy life." Though we believe the good news he proclaims about eventually destroying death and bringing us life and immortality, we're only going to achieve those things by putting our security in Jesus right here and now.

I presume many of us, because of our past track records, don't even notice the calls God frequently extends to us. If we actually did hear some of them, we'd probably take for granted they're cases of mistaken identity. We forget that just as Jesus was "transfigured" by generously responding to his Father's call, so our response would also transfigure us.

We can't let our preconceived notions of how God should act stop us from seeing how God actually is acting, especially when that concerns our own lives. The only way we're ever going to transfigure the earth is to first acknowledge how God and the risen Jesus have already transfigured us.

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