

MARCH 20, 2011: SECOND SUNDAY OF
LENT Genesis 12:1-4a II Timothy 1:8b-10
Matthew 17:1-9

Ever notice that no one in Scripture is ever called by God to stay exactly where he or she is, either geographically or psychologically? Today's Genesis pericope sets the pattern for all subsequent biblical calls.

Yahweh said to Abraham, "Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you."

Though God promises several significant perks, nothing kicks in unless Abraham moves. That's why the sacred author ends this pericope with the comment, "Abraham went as Yahweh directed him."

Because all disciples of God have agreed to form a relationship with God, they're constantly "on the move." As we know from marriage, authentic relationships constantly change, grow and evolve. If they remained static, there'd be no need for vows in the marriage ceremony. We vow our commitment because we know we'll always be dealing with "new people." We're continually discovering new dimensions in our self and in the person we love. Relationships which don't change in response to those discoveries are dead. Chairman Mao was absolutely correct when he observed, "You can't swim in the same river twice."

This insight seems to be at the heart of Matthew's transfiguration passage. Peter, James and John are experiencing Jesus in a new way. "He was transfigured before them." Seeing him standing between Moses, the lawgiver, and Elijah, the prophet, they now recognize him as being the fulfillment of all Scripture. (In Scripture, the Bible is simply referred to as "The Law and the Prophets.") Yet immediately after receiving this new insight about their mentor, "when the disciples raised their eyes, they saw no one else but Jesus alone." No matter where it leads them, their relationship with Jesus is the most important dimension of their lives.

The disciple of Paul responsible for II Timothy agrees. He or she reminds the community, "(God) saved us and called us to a holy life, not according to our works but according to his own design" In other words, by accepting Jesus' call, we're committing ourselves to live a life different from those around us; a life in which we're continually on the road Jesus asks us to travel. We have no fear of changing our perspectives on life because, like Abraham, we're always focused on the person who called us.

My grade school religion teachers often assured me that, as a Catholic, I belonged to the "true church." The knack of other Christian churches to change their rules and regulations through the centuries was one sign they were "illegitimate." We Catholics, of course, had never changed from the day Jesus "founded" us.

Those who taught such things certainly knew nothing of Scripture or Christian history. All students of the Christian Scriptures are familiar with two drastic changes in the first century alone. We quickly went from being a Jewish church to a Gentile church and from expecting Jesus' Second Coming in just a few years to presuming it wouldn't happen in our lifetime.

Those changes were just the beginning. One need only page through Charles Curran's 2003 book Change in Official Catholic Moral Teachings to learn how our church has continually moved from one moral position to another; always because of a deeper understanding of God and ourselves. Vatican II's teaching on slavery, for instance, marked a complete turnaround from Pius IX's beliefs and teachings a century before. It took a drastic moral shift in the 16th century to permit us even to open a savings account. And all 20th century Catholics are well-aware of the church's about-face on democracy and religious freedom.

If we're not moving in our faith, we're certainly not responding to Jesus' call. We're guilty of giving ourselves over to an institution instead of to a person.

Roger Vermalen Karban

This commentary is provided by the Faithful of Southern Illinois. Please share it with a friend. We appreciate your comments and donations.

F.O.S.I.L., BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222

MARCH 27, 2011: THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Exodus 17:3-7 Romans 5:1-2,5-8 John 4:5-42

Every biblical author has unique characteristics in his or her writings which distinguish them from other writers; traits which surface even when their compositions are intermingled with other writings. Today's Exodus pericope provides a classic example. Though the Torah (the Bible's first five books) are made up of at least four distinct sources, even an "amateur" can pick out the Yahwistic author's work when reading those passages which describe the Israelites' forty-year wilderness experience.

Whenever we hear those recently freed Hebrew slaves griping, complaining, or grumbling about their wilderness predicament, we know the narrative is from the Yahwistic source. That author - who many modern scholars believe is a woman - often addressed a problem with which many of us can identify. Given a choice, we'd prefer living during a different, more significant period of history than the humdrum one we experience today. Especially if we're people of faith, we'd like to have participated in such events as the Exodus, or been one of those fortunate individuals sitting at Jesus' Last Supper table. Our faith would certainly be stronger and more committed if we'd actually experienced such "saving" events and people.

This desire seems to be behind the Yahwistic author's frequent mention of Israelite griping, complaining and grumbling during the Exodus. She tried to show that it took just as much - if not more - faith to notice God present and working in the lives of the Exodus community as it does to surface God in our present lives.

So when anyone in the Yahwistic author's community began to excuse their lack of faith on time and place, she'd look them in the eye and reply, "Let me tell you about some things that happened during the Exodus."

In this particular passage, it's significant that what people are griping about - water - is actually as close to the rocks that are all around them. The very thing hiding the water contained the water. Yahweh is just as much in the midst of 10th century BCE Jews as Yahweh was in the midst of the complaining 13th century Jews. In both situations, God's presence could only be surfaced by people of faith.

In many ways, John's Jesus is working on the same level as the Yahwistic theologian. The very thing the Samaritan woman is willing to spend time and effort to acquire, Jesus offers for free. "Everyone who drinks this (well) water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him and her a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

No wonder the somewhat confused woman responds, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

The evangelist is teaching his community that what we most desire - life, symbolized by water - Jesus freely offers us. The problem is that only a few are willing to pay the price of committing themselves to imitate Jesus' dying and rising; the very thing that opens up the source of life. It's right in front of us, but we never notice it; just like Moses' water from the rock.

As usual, Paul provides some of the best insights on the subject. We not only find it difficult to notice God around us, we don't even notice God in us.

Listen again to those well-known words: "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us." Obviously Jesus saw something in us that we rarely see in ourselves: God's presence. Even in our sinful selves, that presence makes us more than worthy to be "died for."

If more of us priests could be convinced to proclaim, "God is with you!" during the Eucharist, instead of the biblically incorrect, "God be with you!" maybe there'd be a lot less griping, complaining and grumbling.

Roger Vermaelen Karban

This commentary is provided by the Faithful of Southern Illinois. Please share it with a friend. We appreciate your comments and donations.

F.O.S.I.L., BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222