

## MARCH 11<sup>TH</sup>, 2018: FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

II Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23    Ephesians 2:4-10    John 3:14-21

At times I'm criticized for giving "depressing" homilies. Probably a valid critique. I suppose one reason for my bleak approach to preaching is that I try to give homilies based on the Scripture readings of the day. As any serious student of the Bible knows, our sacred authors are normally motivated to write only when they surface problems in their communities. Rarely do any of these unique individuals sit down on a beautiful, sunny day, no care in the world, put stylus to papyrus and produce an inspired work.

Should they have background music playing as they write, I'm certain it would be a specific cut from *The Music Man*: "Trouble, trouble, trouble! We got trouble right here in . . . ."

Our Chronicles author leaves no doubt about the trouble he's facing. Though the Chosen People have recently been freed from their Babylonian Exile, many in his community seem to have forgotten what originally triggered that nation-changing experience. He clicks off their offenses. Turning from Yahweh, practicing idolatry, introducing pagan worship in the Jerusalem temple are just a few of their blatant sins. But the most horrendous of their transgressions is one we Catholics were never taught to confess: ignoring and mocking the prophets in their midst. They ". . . scoffed at Yahweh's prophets, until the anger of Yahweh against his people was so inflamed that there was no remedy."

Accustomed to obeying canon law, papal decrees, and episcopal regulations, we easily forget the normal way God's will is discovered in Scripture is by surfacing and obeying the prophets God continually sends to us. Not knowing the five (or six) rules for distinguishing real prophets from fake prophets is as inexcusable as not knowing the difference between mortal and venial sin. Yet I'd hate to give an exam on the former to a normal Sunday Mass crowd. (By the way, rarely are any religious institution's administrators prophetic. According to Paul of Tarsus, prophecy and administration are two distinct gifts of the Spirit, almost never given to the same person. Prophets usually make lousy administrators; administrators, lousy prophets.)

The Pauline disciple responsible for Ephesians addresses a different problem. Seems some in his community are looking at salvation as something they've accomplished through their own actions; not something the risen Jesus freely offers. He reminds his readers, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast." Our good works don't cause salvation, they're simply the things saved people do. Of course, as the late Marcus Borg pointed out in *Speaking Christian*, biblical salvation doesn't refer primarily to "getting into heaven." It's a much broader concept.

John agrees. He points out in today's gospel pericope, that eternal life isn't an experience which begins after our physical death; it's already starting right here and now. The evangelist struggles against those who believe "the light" is still in the future. For those who believe, it's already at work in their daily lives.

One last point. Notice what our Chronicles author says about Cyrus. Though this 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE Persian king isn't even Jewish, he's the person Yahweh has designated to liberate the Chosen People from the Babylonian Exile.

One constant message of biblical prophets – one with which conservatives have huge problems – is that God can work in our lives in many different ways through many different people.

I once asked Carroll Stuhlmueller about his view of current prophets. Refusing to share his list, he replied, "If I told you, and my names ever got out, I'd never again be permitted in any Catholic pulpit for the rest of my life!"

Now that's a problem!

## MARCH 18<sup>TH</sup>, 2018: FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Jeremiah 31:31-34 Hebrews 5:7-9 John 12:20-33

Why do we belong to organized religions? Though it flies in the face of popular religion, neither Yahweh in the Hebrew Scriptures nor Jesus in the Christian Scriptures directly command us to do so. Our sacred authors presume we've committed ourselves to being disciples of Yahweh or the risen Jesus, and have sealed our commitment with various covenants, but in none of those agreements are we expected to join a specific religion.

Scholars tell us that organized religions came into existence for one basic reason: to help us have an experience of God in our lives. By regularly joining together with others who've made the same commitments, it should be easier to surface the divine around and in us.

The late Ed Hays once remarked, "Objectively we could do everything the risen Jesus expects of us without being a church member. But practically few of us can pull that off by ourselves. Organized religion is essential for the vast majority of Christians."

The concept of church membership comes into play today because of Yahweh's promise in our Jeremiah reading to . . . "make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." This agreement, unlike the Sinai covenant, will be placed within them, written on their hearts, no longer just inscribed on stone tablets. "All, from least to greatest, shall *know* me," says Yahweh.

In Hebrew, to "know" someone or something means more than just having an intellectual familiarity with the thing or person, it means to actually *experience* that someone or something. (When talking about knowing someone of the opposite sex, it usually means to have intercourse . . . as in the Genesis genealogies, and in Luke when Mary tells Gabriel, "I do not *know* man.")

In Jeremiah's covenant context, the prophet is convinced the deeper one's commitment to Yahweh becomes, the deeper one will experience Yahweh in the depth of his or her being.

The authors of our Christian Scriptures agree. But their road to having that experience runs through Jesus of Nazareth. If we're to experience God in our daily lives, we must do what the historical Jesus did to experience God in his daily life.

Our unknown Hebrews writer hits the nail on the head. Like Jesus, we must first learn obedience through suffering. We don't find God's presence by walking into a magnificent cathedral, or listening to a majestic organ recital. God only becomes present when we generously give ourselves to others. Only those who imitate his painful giving will experience his God in their lives.

John's Jesus agrees. In one of Scriptures best-known lines, he reminds his followers of something all farmers know but rarely apply to their personal lives. "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." Life only comes from death.

But he also shares his personal history of surfacing God: "Whoever loves his life loses it, but whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life." Since for John, eternal life begins right here and now, we're already experiencing God long before we step through the pearly gates.

I'm afraid, as necessary as they are, many of our religious institutions only provide us with an experience of the religious institution. They rarely give us opportunities to die enough to ourselves to provide us with an experience of God in our lives. Were these institutions more welcoming communities and actually developed ministries, for instance, to women, children and LBGT individuals, instead of building cathedrals, perhaps we really could do what God intends us to do. They'd be providing us with occasions to experience the kind of death Jesus experienced.