

Second Sunday of Lent, Cycle B

Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18; Romans 8:31b-34; and Mark 9:2-10

The second Sunday of Lent places us in the presence of the numinous. The numinous means God and all things having to do with what transcends human experience. When we encounter the numinous, we find ourselves at the edge of our experience. After all, who is it that requires Abraham sacrifice his child and, just as stunningly, why does Abraham oblige? Is God really for us, as Paul declares in Romans, and is that enough? Are we as terrified or in awe of Jesus, transfigured, illuminated and conversing with the greatest figures of Judaism, as the disciples were? Don't we know him too well to be in awe?

The Second Sunday of Lent asks us every year to acknowledge that we really do not. God is way out of our league. To acknowledge this and reverence it is an essential part of spiritual life. It will make us able to believe in the resurrection. It makes us able to recognize the Numinous in our lives and have a genuine relationship with God.

- Consider this example. Amanda had a baby boy mid-December. She found herself appreciating Christmas in a new way. As she cared for her vulnerable and helpless infant, she was filled with awe at God's willingness to become powerless in order to be close to us.
- Similarly, Elias, a Syrian refugee, reflects on his life since the Syrian war began in 2010. Each of the six members of his family made a different choice about what to do when their hometown became a battle zone. Each option entailed terrible hardships. Elias still wonders, "Did I make the right choice?" How do we choose our path forward? What is the purpose of our lives? What does it matter?
- Likewise, we all face the Numinous in the pandemic. As the snow piles seem endless and the vaccine is slow in coming, our suffering surges again. We are variously cut off from fun, community, school, incomes, health care and doing works of mercy. What does God want us to see in all this?

Maybe this Sunday's readings can help us with our mystery.

Abraham's test comes toward the end of a long relationship with God. They have some history together and Abraham relies on that history to get himself through. In the part of the story we do not read, en route to the place of sacrifice, Isaac asks where the lamb is. Abraham replies, "God himself will provide the lamb." Abraham knows that there must be another outcome in store besides the death of his son. The God he knows is a God of life. If we too have a long relationship with God, we too can enter the tough things God asks of us with trust that God has in store a life-giving resolution we may not foresee.

Although what we read of the story leaves Isaac out, he actually is an active character. He makes the journey; he carries the wood; he lets himself be placed on the altar. Abraham is teaching him about God at every step of this journey. We need to be aware of the lessons we teach one another as we walk through our numinous times. We teach each other who God is. We help each other do the hard things.

God protects us, even as we are stretched. When the disciples are overwhelmed by the true nature of Jesus, a cloud overshadows them blocking the light, while a voice explains what is happening. Clouds are often associated with confusion and difficulty seeing, in both senses of the word. Counterintuitively, our difficulty seeing helps us stay close to God. We can be okay with not having all the answers. The cloud makes the numinous bearable.

Keep in mind that Peter, James and John, like us, are in the middle of the story. It is okay to keep questioning as they did. As the poet Rainier Marie Rilke advises, we can "live the questions." We know for certain that God is good and God, for some reason, is on our side. We must never let go of Paul's proclamation, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" No one defeats God or persuades God to abandon us. Why? Well, that sounds like something to ponder this Second Sunday of Lent!

- ❖ Remember a time in your life when you encountered the numinous. What did you learn? What did it make you wonder about?
- ❖ Who around you is struggling to know God? How can you accompany them?

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