

## “Sacrificing for the Greater Good.”

Things usually work like this: We plan our lives, and then we ask God to bless those plans. In other words, we expect God to place his stamp of approval on what *we* are convinced is true and best, and generally get with the program. *Our* program.

But if we don't get what we want from the Almighty, we might end up identifying with the psalmist who wrote:

“Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord?” (Psalm 44:23)

And if things *still* don't get any better, we might begin to wonder if God has the power to intervene in the ways of the world; or, we might begin to wonder if God even cares about the plan we make; or, we may even come to the conclusion that God is dead, if he ever even existed at all.

Whichever answer we settle on, the words of Woody Allen seem an appropriate commentary, when he writes:

“If it turns out there is a God, I don't think he is evil. I think that the worst thing you can say about him is that he is an *underachiever*.”

Now, our reading from Mark's gospel, contains some elements of the phenomenon of those who claim a living relationship with God, but who still experience disappointments in the way things turn out.

It's important to note that, in the section of Mark's gospel just *prior* to today's reading, Peter has just correctly identified Jesus to be the Messiah. And what that meant was that it was time for the disciples to start making big plans; plans, they were certain, God would quickly bless and prosper. Because, as the Messiah, the disciples expected Jesus to lead the war for Israel's independence, and establish God's rule over all the earth. And in all this, the Messiah would need help, and this is where the disciples would come in. After all, every leader needs

his generals, and the disciples were more than willing to go the extra mile to help Jesus in his war of reclaiming the holy land.

However, what follows Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah — and all of the baggage attached to that confession — is not only disappointing to the disciples, it's downright shocking.

For, rather than being “high and lifted up,” Jesus reveals that he will be brought low and cast down.

And rather than being coronated, Jesus will be castigated.

And rather than being praised, Jesus will be persecuted.

And finally, rather than being extolled, Jesus will be executed.

I don't imagine that the disciples even heard the part about “rising three days later.” They were probably only thinking in terms of “damage control.”

One day, a reporter was interviewing a rabbi after a bolt of lightning had struck his synagogue's roof, sending it crashing down in ruins. And he asked the rabbi, “What was your first reaction when you saw this terrible devastation?” “My first reaction?” The rabbi chuckled. “I thought, thank goodness, we took out insurance against acts of God.”

But how do you take out insurance against crucifixion? You can't, because “the way of the Cross” is *not* a natural disaster, but a chosen lifestyle, a sacrifice-of-self freely accepted for the sake of the Kingdom of God. In fact, the only thing we *can* do is to ask God to give us a changed heart; which is to say, to ask God to enable us to see the world, and to be able to relate to it, in an entirely new way. And the only way *that* can happen is if we have a relationship with God in the first place.

In fact, the only “insurance” available is to become part of a community that is centered in a childlike, and unbreakable trust — no, not trusting in *our* plans, or in our abilities, or our dreams, but trusting in *God's* faithfulness.

The late Peter Marshall — who was a noted preacher, and chaplain to the U.S. Senate — used to ask God to forgive adults for how easily their faith was, and I quote:

“blighted with doubts, withered with worry, [and] tainted with sophistication.”

Marshall would pray that God would make us “children in faith” once more. To be willing to do what they hear God telling them to do, without asking a lot of questions, *and* without demanding so many guarantees.

And all this, of course, is the hardest thing to give up — for Lent, or anytime in our lives — to give up our egos. To give up our plans. To be able — and not to mention willing — to be able to give up something that we value because there is something *more* valuable out there. Yet, this is exactly what Lent — and really all aspects of our faith — asks of us. It was as hard for Abraham, in our first reading, as it was for Peter, in our gospel, as it is for us.

This is a true story.

There was a little girl named Lisa who suffered from a rare, serious disease. Her five-year-old brother had suffered from the same disease, but he had miraculously survived, and his body had the antibodies to fight the disease. Lisa’s doctors determined that the only hope for her survival was a blood transfusion from her brother. The doctors explained the whole situation to the brother, and asked him if he would be willing to give his blood for his sister. The little boy hesitated for a few moments, but then took a deep breath, and said, “Yes, I’ll do it for Lisa.”

As the transfusion progressed, the boy lay in the bed next to his sister’s. He looked at her and smiled; the color was beginning to return to his sister’s cheek. Then the boy’s face paled, and his smile faded, and he quietly asked the doctors: “Will I start to die right away?”

If you’re wondering, the answer was “No.” The boy was *not* going to die — that was never even a risk. *But the boy didn’t know that* when he made his decision. However, he was willing to give up something important to him — his life — for

something which was equally important to him — the life of his sister. The true gift, as it turns out, was not in the gift itself, but in the offer.

Thank God most of us will never have to make a decision like that. But the story puts into perspective the sacrifices that we're so often asked to make. I mean, living as Christians in community, the most important attribute that each of us can have, is often the attribute of being *willing* to compromise; no, not compromising our faith, nor the tenets of our religion. But a willingness to compromise our *goals*, our *visions*. Because, to move ahead, we have to move together. And to do that requires that we *all* make sacrifices, and often, sacrificing things that are important to us.

And so, it's good, sometimes, to be like Abraham, or like Peter. It is good to have grand plans. But Abraham and Peter both suffered from that all-to-common human malady which we call Tunnel Vision. *Their* plan, they thought, was the *only plan*. They each had to learn a hard lesson. They each had to be willing to give up their goals, to give up things that were ultimately valuable to them, for a *greater good*.

In the end — and I acknowledge this — it's hard to entrust others with things that are valuable to us. Sometimes, it's even harder to entrust *God* with them. But Lent teaches us that, when we give up the little things, entrusting them to God, we can eventually have the courage to give up the bigger things, knowing that God, who was faithful in the little things, will be equally faithful in the bigger ones.

Let us pray: O God of peace, who has taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and in confidence shall be our strength: By the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray you, to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.