

2 Lent Year B readings and Commentary

Celebration summary By Dale J. Sieverding: What does it mean to “rise from the dead?” If you have experienced a significant loss in your life – the death of a dear friend or member of your family, this promise may seem to be for them...and it is. However, grieving the loss of a friend, or mourning the break-up of a relationship is about dying and rising. Hopes dashed, dreams unfulfilled, an emptiness deep inside...not filled, not taken away by God, but left there as a reminder that in time becomes a tranquil joy for the love shared, the good times celebrated and the life given in and through that particular relationship. Imagine the horrified look on Abraham’s face in putting his son on the altar. Imagine the frightened look on the disciples’ faces. Yet, “the truth is out there,” only in dying to self, in making the ultimate sacrifice, shall we know the life that comes from God.

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First Reading

Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18

A reading from the Book of Genesis

God put Abraham to the test.

He called to him, "Abraham!"

"Here I am!" he replied.

Then God said:

"Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love,
and go to the land of Moriah.

There you shall offer him up as a holocaust
on a height that I will point out to you."

When they came to the place of which God had told him,

Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it.

Then he reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son.

But the LORD's messenger called to him from heaven,

"Abraham, Abraham!"

"Here I am!" he answered.

"Do not lay your hand on the boy, " said the messenger.

"Do not do the least thing to him.

I know now how devoted you are to God,

since you did not withhold from me your own beloved son."

As Abraham looked about,

he spied a ram caught by its horns in the thicket.

So he went and took the ram

and offered it up as a holocaust in place of his son.

Again the LORD's messenger called to Abraham from heaven and said:
"I swear by myself, declares the Lord,
that because you acted as you did
in not withholding from me your beloved son,
I will bless you abundantly
and make your descendants as countless
as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore;
your descendants shall take possession
of the gates of their enemies,
and in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing—
all this because you obeyed my command."

The word of the Lord.

Commentary Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18 by Maribeth Howell, OP:
Today's first reading, which appears again during the Easter Vigil, is not an easy one to understand. While this passage is often used to demonstrate the difficult decisions with which we are sometimes confronted, what most people conclude from the preaching is that God tested Abraham to learn whether or not Abraham truly loved God (as if God had not already known this). Implied in this understanding is that the taking of a human life, if understood to be the will of God, is perfectly legitimate.

What are we to make of this text? How can we understand it? While it is impossible to give this passage the attention it deserves, it may be helpful to read the text in its entirety, verses 1-18. Take note that the only place where Abraham and Isaac converse is in verses 7-8. In verse 7, Isaac points out that they have the fire and the wood for the sacrifice, then asks his father "where is the sheep?" The response to this question appears in verse 8, a verse that Walter Brueggemann suggests be given special attention. Although Abraham's response is very brief, he tells his son that God will provide the sheep. Brueggemann emphasizes that throughout this text Abraham responds to each word that it addressed to him – from God, Isaac, God's messenger. In each instance Abraham listens and trusts.

Both Jewish and Christian scholars have written volumes on this particularly difficult passage. Much of what has been written is thought provoking, if not thoroughly satisfying. It may be important that we take care not flatten this text that invites us to ponder the mysterious ways in which God's word comes to us.

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Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 116:10, 15, 16-17, 18-19

✠(116:9) I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.

I believed, even when I said,
"I am greatly afflicted."
Precious in the eyes of the LORD
is the death of his faithful ones.

O LORD, I am your servant;
I am your servant, the son of your handmaid;
you have loosed my bonds.
To you will I offer sacrifice of thanksgiving,
and I will call upon the name of the LORD.

My vows to the LORD I will pay
in the presence of all his people,
in the courts of the house of the LORD,
in your midst, O Jerusalem.

Commentary Psalm 116:10, 15, 16-17, 18-19 by Tom Conry: Psalm 116 seems to have been stitched together from a number of older songs. According to St. Jerome, verse 10 begins a new psalm. Although the NAB translation here is "I believed, even when I said 'I am greatly afflicted,'" the literal meaning is at once more eloquent and problematic: "I said amen, therefore I can speak now: 'I am greatly bowed down.'"

The setting of the rest of the psalm seems to be a song of thanksgiving performed at the temple in Jerusalem. The singer's identification as the "son of your handmaid" recalls the story of Moses, the paradigm of the helpless and threatened one who becomes the agent of liberation for the whole people. Meanwhile, throughout the psalm the land of death (sheol), where fear reigns and God seems to be absent, is powerfully contrasted with the land of the living, the festival assembly, the situation in which all the people are gathered in order to claim the protection of YHWH.

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Second Reading

Romans 8:31b-34

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans

Brothers and sisters:

If God is for us, who can be against us?

He who did not spare his own Son
but handed him over for us all,
how will he not also give us everything else along with him?

Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones?
It is God who acquits us. Who will condemn?
Christ Jesus it is who died—or, rather, was raised—
who also is at the right hand of God,
who indeed intercedes for us.

The word of the Lord.

Commentary Romans 8:31b-34 by John Paul Heil: Main Theme: We have a sure HOPE for salvation because Christ intercedes for us with God. Since God has revealed how much he is “for us,” in any situation of judgment, trial or judicial process there is simply no one who can possibly prevail “against us.” Indeed, it was God who gave us his very own Son in death “for us” all. With this undeniable evidence of how much God has already done “for us” in giving us his own Son, Paul convincingly asserts the firm hope that therefore he surely will give us, together with Christ, “all things”—the totality and completion of God’s future, definitive salvation.

Any possible answer that could be offered to the bold question of “who will bring a charge against God’s chosen ones?” Paul supersedes with the resounding protestation that “it is God who justifies.” Indeed, God’s “chosen ones,” we Christians, have already been unequivocally “justified” by God, so that we stand clearly acquitted before any tribunal or judgment seat. And, since in the last analysis it would be the charge or condemnation of God himself that would really matter, it is all the more certain that no one can really bring a charge against us. Paul finally convinces us that there is no one who can possibly condemn us, because Christ himself, who died and was raised by God, even now sits in a privileged position at the right hand of God interceding “for us!”

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Gospel Acclamation

cf. **Matthew 17:5** From the shining cloud the Father's voice is heard:
This is my beloved Son, listen to him.

Gospel

Mark 9:2-10

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

Jesus took Peter, James, and John
and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves.

And he was transfigured before them,
and his clothes became dazzling white,
such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.
Then Elijah appeared to them along with Moses,
and they were conversing with Jesus.
Then Peter said to Jesus in reply,
"Rabbi, it is good that we are here!
Let us make three tents:
one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."
He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified.
Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them;
from the cloud came a voice,
"This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."
Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone
but Jesus alone with them.

As they were coming down from the mountain,
he charged them not to relate what they had seen to anyone,
except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead.
So they kept the matter to themselves,
questioning what rising from the dead meant.

The Gospel of the Lord.

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Commentary Mark 9:2-10 by Tom Conry: The entire gospel of Mark is framed by the question at its literal center (8:27): but you, who do you say that I am? The gospel is bracketed with this problem at its beginning (1:1) by the author and at the end (15:39) by the words of the centurion in charge of the execution detail. In this episode the voice from the sky that was present first at Jesus' baptism in front of the followers of John the Baptizer is reaffirmed in front of Jesus' inner circle, Peter, James, and John.

The dilemma of Jesus' status is the mighty narrative stream that runs throughout the gospel of Mark. Mark has no infancy narrative as does Mark or Matthew; neither does it have an opening poem establishing Jesus as the divine Word, as does John. As a result, in Mark, Jesus is God's own Rorschach test, moving throughout the land, his very presence demanding an answer to the question of 8:27.

For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, he is the inbreaking of God into history. His standing is "son of God," an ambiguous category that meant different things in different times and places in Israel's history. In Jewish scripture, it could refer to mythical angelic beings (Gen 6:2), to Israel itself (Ex4:22-23; Hosea 11:1), to a king, father of a tribe, prophet or rabbi (e.g. Psa 2:2, Sam 7). It was even more common in the Greek-speaking world, in which there were any number of kings (e.g. Alexander, Augustus) and philosophical figures (e.g. Pythagoras) who were called "son of God." For others, the status of Jesus is a stumbling block. They cannot get past Jesus' humble origins (e.g. Mk 6:3).

Here Peter, James, and John are given a vision, one which doesn't seem to solve their inability to come to grips with Jesus' identity and message. It will be only after they encounter the empty tomb (as do all believers) that their faith will be demonstrated by their willingness to take up the mission of the reign of heaven.

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