

The Second Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2021; Year B
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38; Psalm 22:22-30

Years ago—a whole generation ago, now, I remember a minor scandal on the television news. Late on election night in 1996, veteran newscaster David Brinkley called the just re-elected Bill Clinton a “bore” and his speeches “nonsense.” I had first watched David Brinkley as a small child, when he and Chet Huntley hosted a nightly news program that my mother watched while making dinner. 35 years later, in 1996, Brinkley was 76 years old, and about to retire. This election night was expected to be his swan song. So, he said what he thought.

Brinkley had perhaps forgotten that he was to interview the President a couple of days later for what was scheduled to be his last interview as moderator of his news show. The interview began with Brinkley apologizing. He did not say that he did not believe what he said, but that he was sorry for being “impolite and unfair.” And President Clinton said something that I have always remembered, “I always believed you have to judge people on their whole work. And if you get judged based on your whole work, you come out way ahead.”¹

Today’s Gospel lesson is picked out from a larger conversation between Jesus and his disciples. It is a conversation about who Jesus is, and what other people think of him. And Peter listens to the other disciples as they dance around the point—the people are comparing Jesus to the ancient prophet Elijah, and to the much more recent prophet John the Baptist. The people think that Jesus is saying important things—he is *not* a bore and his speeches are *not* nonsense. There is a future for this man of God. And then Peter blurts it out: *You are the Messiah (8:29)*. Jesus hears this and then warns the disciples not to tell anyone this thing about him.

Remember that this year we are reading from the Gospel as recorded by Mark, and Mark doesn’t waste any ink on making tidy stories. In this instance, Mark doesn’t tell us why Jesus wants to keep this particular secret—he just continues on in his retelling of the story of Jesus. Mark told his readers back in the first verse of the first chapter that Jesus is the Messiah—the one foretold by the prophets—God become one of us to bring us closer to God. So we, Mark’s readers, have known it all along. And now, Peter and the other disciples know it—but for some reason, Jesus wants everyone to hold off on telling the everyone else.

And that is where our Gospel portion for today begins. The disciples have been warned by Jesus not to talk about this Messiah thing. And Jesus begins to teach. And this particular teaching seems to be *not* good news. He teaches about the trouble that is coming to him.

¹ You can read about the incident here: <https://www.mcall.com/news/mc-xpm-1996-11-11-3119281-story.html>

He explains that his message is going to lead to his death—although that death won't be the end of him. And so, Peter steps up again, and again, says what he thinks.

What Peter thinks is that Jesus should stop talking about the suffering and death thing. And when he says that to Jesus, he gets another stern talking to: *Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*

I have some sympathy for Peter; he is just saying what he thinks. But we don't need to worry about Peter—Jesus does, indeed, take the whole of Peter's life into account in his judgement. We can follow their friendship throughout the Gospel stories of Jesus' life on earth and in the accounts of Peter's ministry following Jesus' resurrection and ascension. It is tempting to worry about Jesus' flip-flopping on Peter in this conversation—but this story is less about what Jesus thinks of Peter and more about what Jesus thinks of what God is asking him to do.

Mark told us at the beginning that this is the story of the Messiah—but this is the passage where Jesus works out in public what it is he will do to bring us closer to God—AND what we will have to do to accept that gift. And here is the thing: sometimes it is tempting to turn aside from the gifts that God gives us.

Take Abram and Sarai for instance. In our first lesson, we are told the story of how Abram becomes Abraham, the father of many nations. All these millennia later, Muslims, Christians, and Jews all call Abraham father. God made a promise, and God has been abundantly faithful to that promise—but back when it happened—Abram was 99 years old—and Sarai, who throughout her decades of life had so far been barren, was not much younger.

I am a good 30 years younger than Abram and Sarai were when they embarked on this journey of faithfulness to God, and I have to tell you that if Bill Stroud came home one day and said that in order to be faithful to God, we were going to commence having children—well, it's preposterous, that's all. And I am not at all surprised that their child was named Isaac, which is a form of the word for laughter! I laugh every time I read about those two old people believing in God's faithful love of them by having a child.

Every time we say the Creed, that statement of what we believe about God, we declare our belief that God created the world. And every day that we live in the world that God created, we understand that God's ways and the ways of the world are often in conflict. A couple in their 90's has a child—it's preposterous, and yet often enough, it is how God acts.

Our lessons from Holy Scripture today ask a very Lenten question: How are we to live? Are we going to respond to the faithfulness of God with our own faithfulness? Or are we simply going to react to each event of our lives as it happens to us? Either way, we will be judged both by the world and by God.

The portion of Psalm 22 we have for today praises God for all that God does for the poor, and promises our faithfulness—but it leaves out the most remembered verse, the first one:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me and are so far from my cry and the words of my distress? We remember that verse as the words of Jesus from the Cross. *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Long before I realized that Jesus was quoting Psalm 22 as he was dying on the Cross, I felt great empathy that even Jesus would cry out exactly what he was thinking in the moment. The world is harsh and cruel, and God seems absent.

Get behind me, Satan! Jesus wasn't indicting his friend Peter—he was struggling to find a way out of what he knew was coming. But, of course, Jesus did not give in to the temptation to avoid the struggle, suffering, and pain of his life. That is why we are talking about him today.

That Jesus' earthly life ended in death was inevitable, of course. We will all die. But Jesus was not just a human, Jesus was the Messiah. We teach about Jesus—we pray to Jesus, because his love of the people was more important to him than avoiding struggle and pain. Jesus was faithful to God's love for all the people—even the ones who said what they were thinking, right out loud. Because Jesus stood with the people, because Jesus would not turn away from us, even when it led to his death, the world knows that death does not have the last word.

That is faithfulness. Hanging in when the struggle is hard, and scary, and intense. Loving someone when it is NOT to your advantage—but when you can help them anyway. Forgiving someone when they said what they thought, and it hurt, but still you know that they know better. That, as Paul would say, is reckoned to us as righteousness.

Being faithful to the goodness that God sees in each one of us, the goodness that God gave us in creation—that is how we share the love of God even amidst the struggle and pain and oddness of the world. It is not easy, choosing to be faithful. It isn't easy, but it is the way of love. And that faithful love draws us to life in God, now and forever.