

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

March 8, 2009

Lent 2B 2009

In the name of our one living, ever challenging God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our reading this morning from Genesis continues last Sunday's theme of covenant. Here God makes a solemn covenant with Abram that changes his identity to Abraham and his wife's from Sarai to Sarah. Names matter in the Bible and they still do, especially in cultures like the Hawaiian's. Abram is to walk blamelessly before the Lord and God covenants to make him into Abraham – the father of many nations, the patriarchal ancestor of kings. But there is a problem here. Abraham is already 99 years old and his wife is barren. Hoping against hope, that's what it is all about. That is what it is all about – seeing the world as it truly is but in our hearts believing that it could be better and knowing that God wishes it to be better. Abraham had to surrender his fears and doubts and put his trust in God's faithfulness.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is preparing his disciples for what will happen shortly in Jerusalem. Peter has declared Jesus to be the Messiah, but what did he mean by that? Messianic expectation was running high in Jesus' days. Life was hard, if not unbearable under the Roman yoke. The institutions that were meant to protect them, to be instruments of God's peace and justice – the King and the Temple – work out. He will be rejected by the religious authorities of the Temple and be put to death. But he will also be raised from the dead in three days into new life. When Peter took

him aside and started to scold Jesus, Jesus rebuked him strongly likening him to Satan, the angel who tests God's chosen by trying to seduce Jesus from following the path God has chosen for him. Peter's problem is the same one most of us have – he wants things to turn out the way he wants and not the way God has in mind.

Jesus now calls the crowds into the conversation indicating that the teaching He is giving is not meant just for the twelve, but for all who would follow Jesus and his teachings. A disciple is one who will pick up his own cross and follow Jesus. It is not enough just to confess faith in Jesus as Messiah. One must put one's faith in a totally vulnerable suffering Messiah and live that faith out in a life that exhibits self-denial. Self doesn't disappear, but loyalty to Jesus and his teachings come first.

Jesus poses the ultimate paradox: those who seek to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for his sake and the sake of the Good News will save it. "What," Jesus asks, "does it profit for them to gain the whole world and to lose their lives?" He then points to his post-Resurrection status and tells all that those who are ashamed of him and his message in this life. Of them he will be ashamed when he comes in glory. I wonder how many signed on for this and continue with Jesus on the path to Jerusalem? Discipleship for Jesus meant taking risk, sometimes the risk of total failure in the world's eyes for the sake of the Gospel.

What do these words mean for us today? Martyrdom, let alone crucifixion, is rare these days. But the call to put trust and faithfulness before self-interest is not. The call to suffer physical abuse is rare, but not unheard of today. However, the call to suffer ridicule and to be publicly reviled and shamed for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel is a common occurrence. In this morning's *Maui News* there is a letter to the editor excoriating one of our elected officials for daring to be for the constitutionally

mandated principle of equal protection and rights for all of Hawaii's citizens. The letter writer calls on "all Christians" to join her on a crusade of injustice and fear mongering.

Everyone is called to live out discipleship – the covenant we make with God at our baptism – in the context of their place and time. So how has the Church been doing? More than a few people bemoan the sorry state of the church today and long for the good old days when the church was both respectable and respected. Many long for a church that is peaceful in the absence of conflict rather than a church that will fight for justice so that real peace may come.

On Thursdays at our weekly Eucharist we celebrate the feast days of those on the Church calendar. If there is no one for a given day, I pick one that is closest to the day. Over the past 3 ½ years, we've covered a lot of the Church calendar. The earliest saints are usually martyrs, male and female, or those who led their communities through perilous times always adhering to the Gospel. Then comes a period with a lot of bishops and priests who spread the church to the corners of the then known world. After that comes a period extending to the late 1800s when the church was closely tied to established order of the society. The saints of this period are largely known for their pious or scholarly lives including lots of bishops and priests.

But lately the newer names added are almost entirely lay people who have witnessed or suffered oppression and endured society's and often the church's hate and derision for standing up for justice. Some like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jonathan Myrick Daniels have even taken the bullets aimed at them to halt them from respecting the dignity of every human being. Many are late recognitions: people like Absalom Jones, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Florence Li-Tim Oi who

followed the Gospel in earlier days when they were an embarrassment to many in the Church. Some, like our own Kamehameha IV and Emma as well as Native Americans are recent additions to the calendar now that the injustices done against them and their peoples by Christians move into the distant past.

In our Gospel lesson does not mention the church; indeed Jesus never founded a church. But Jesus did talk a lot about discipleship. Today it seems we have two competing visions of what it means to be a disciple and what it means to be church. That is not just a problem for the Episcopal Church but for all mainline churches. This division is even beginning to show up in some of the new evangelical churches.

I think it is important to see those whom groups select as icons of discipleship. It will tell you a lot. Frankly, I much prefer a church which holds up Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. over those churches which still oppose equal civil rights for all or say that society is not ready for justice. I much prefer a church that holds up Jonathan Myrick Daniels, a seminarian who in the 1960s took a shotgun blast meant for a 16 year old girl in a little town outside of Selma than the church which produced and ordained the gunman who murdered him.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is challenging us to choose between safety and risk, between justice for the few – or even for the many – and justice for all, and between loyalty to him and our self interest. That is as much a challenge for today's Church and society as it is for each of us.

Amen.