

2nd Sunday of Lent [A] 2023

(OSF, St. Joan of Arc)

When a person who is “up in years” dares to step out and make a new beginning in some way, we are usually surprised—probably because we expect that as people get older, they should settle down into a peaceful, undisturbed pattern of life. Unfortunately, we often seem to confuse “peaceful” with routine, unexciting, even boring. What we presume is a blessing is often, in fact, a curse.

There are many examples of older people who have dared to do things a little differently and done them very well. These days, President Jimmy Carter has been in the news, as the 98-year-old former president has entered hospice care at his home in Plains, GA, making the final steps on his journey to the Lord. He certainly did many remarkable things after he turned 75. But I remember back in the 1970’s, while he was president, his mother Lillian Carter joined the Peace Corps and was off to India at the age of 70. I also remember that many people sort of smiled and shook their heads at that, writing her off as a little senile. But there were hundreds of Indians who saw not senility, but only love....

The first reading today from the Book of Genesis, the story of Abram, for some inexplicable reason ends in the middle of verse 4. Left out is the last part of the verse, a very important part, which says that “Abraham was 75 years old when he left Haran.” 75 years old!

Lent is a time to open ourselves or to re-open ourselves to God’s call in our lives. Abraham was open to the call—he was asked to leave behind his relatives and all the taken-for-granted things of his life, to set out for an unknown place—and he was 75 years old! What if God was calling us to do something just as dramatic?

God *does* call each of us—not just the young, the single, those who aren’t tied down. If we don’t find any call like that for ourselves, maybe we have been too quick to exempt ourselves from being called in the first place. We can think of a million excuses: “I have three small children”; “My health is not very good”; “My business takes so much of my time”; “I’m almost ready to retire.”

Abraham did not look at the circumstances of his life as an excuse. He was a tribal leader. Though he had no children of his own at the time, he was still a family man. He had ties to his father’s house, and he had a wife Sarah. But the Lord said, “Go.” And very simply, Abraham went.

God does not seem to pay much attention to circumstances. He called Jeremiah, who claimed he was too young. He called Abraham who was 75. Joseph was a carpenter; Mary was 13. David was a shepherd boy; Moses had a speech defect. Matthew was a tax collector; Mary Magdalene was mentally ill. Elizabeth Seton had 7 children; Elizabeth, Mary’s cousin, had none, until John. None of these circumstances made any difference to God. The important thing is that each of these people—just like us—was given the gift of faith; and each was called to use it in love.

What at first looks like the hardest part of Abraham’s call—to pick up and move to a foreign country, may have been easy compared to what had to go on first inside his head and heart. He had to understand the possibility that the Lord really was asking this of *him*. Are you sure you have the right guy, Lord? Then he had to give that possibility room to grow and take root in his heart. That is also probably the hardest part about God’s call for us—believing that he could possibly be asking us to do something beyond what we are already doing in our normal day-to-day lives.

Faith in Jesus, it is said, both comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable; and we all need both. But since we prefer the comforting, we usually tend to pass over the need for the afflicting, the unsettling. We are much like Peter, James and John. We prefer the comforting vision of the Transfigured Christ to the unsettling insight that that kind of glory comes only after suffering, like the suffering on the cross. We want to arrive at the Promised Land, but we want to do it without leaving Haran. We want Easter, but without Good Friday and Lent. We would like to be different, but without having to change.... But we know that doesn't happen. Transfiguration requires transformation.

Lent is a time for praying and changing. If we believe in the God of Abraham, then we must take time to hear this God's call for us. But we must also take time to prepare ourselves to *respond* to his call—to build up our confidence that we, like Abraham, can go when and where he calls us.