

Last Sunday of Epiphany
February 22, 2009
Fr. Bill McGinty

“Lent is easy to run away from”

Our first reading today comes from the 2nd books of Kings and involves the destiny of two men in the history of Israel.

Elijah is a great prophet in the classical sense of that role. He is brave and courageous, especially in combating evil and tyranny such as King Arab and Queen Jezebel. Yet, Elijah gets little support for all his work in upholding God’s law, his commandments and the covenant. In contrast the people of Israel are fickle, easily straying over to worship of Baal and the Canaanite religion. They see the evil of Jezebel, who murders innocent citizens and gets away with it. “Why should we risk our lives for Elijah?” they say. “Elijah is God’s prophet, let him do God’ work. If he wants to play the hero, fine, and if he is killed, we will honor him as a martyr, but we refuse to put our lives at risk or get our hands dirty.”

Elijah has one faithful friend, Elisha. Elisha is his disciple, his student, and he loves Elijah, his master and the work that he does on God’s behalf. In contrast to Elijah, Elisha is gentle and kind. He is prayerful, faithful and steadfast. He is always there for people, is never judgmental and treats the people with kindness, understanding and compassion.

After all his troubles, miraculous interventions, and battles against evil, the only way Elijah can die and leave this earth, is in a fiery chariot pulled by fiery horses. Anything else would be an anti-climax. Elijah’s exit is as dramatic as his life as the fiery prophet.

Elisha is left behind to mourn the loss of his master, but he immediately throws himself into the role of ministering to his people, he visits the sick, the imprisoned and works tirelessly to lift up the people to return to their duty in worshiping their one true God.

On this, the very eve of the season of lent, the Elijah/Elisha story is placed here in the lectionary deliberately, to ask us to reflect. Lent is our time for reflection. The story asks us the question: “Where are you at on your spiritual journey? Where are you when it comes to your covenant with God? Are you Elijah giving everything, upholding his covenant, being true to his values? Are you Elisha, prayerful, faithful, steadfast and loyal always looking to serve God’s people? Or are you Israel, sitting back hoping that others will do your share?”

Lent is a “bold as brass” season, which takes no prisoners. There is a sort of Christian who avoids Lent like the plague. Lent asks you to acknowledge your sins. Imagine, the cheek of it. We are Americans, with American values, for God’s sake. Next thing, you’ll be telling us that our banks can’t be trusted, or our CEO’s are all crooks. Sin. We don’t talk about sin anymore. Murder, theft,

lying, corruption, hatred, jealousy, greed, they all belonged to Elijah and Jezebel's time. They couldn't possibly exist today. Could they?

Lent asks us: "Where are you at, in your covenant with God? Are you prepared to make penance, forgiving, forgiveness, service and the life of grace a real and sincere part of your life?"

How can I answer that? You might well ask? Can I immerge at the end of Lent a new person, fully committed to all I believe in? I am just an average Joe, I pay my pledge, I come to church when I can and I do my bit.

Lent will not let any one of us hide in the crowd. Lent will not let each one of us say: "I'm just like everyone else, no better, no worse." Lent holds our feet to the fire. The only way to avoid the awkward questions of Lent, is to stay home and not come to church.

Lent will ask you how often you pray. Do you have a personal dialogue with Jesus the Lord going on in your life or is the only dialogue with yourself? Lent will insist that you put yourself out this season and make life a little harder for yourself by making some kind of personal sacrifice that has no benefit to you. "We used to do that as kids" we tell ourselves. But we are more sophisticated now, we don't need that.

"Sophisticated," as a word comes from the Latin and means: "wise history." The wise history of our Christian past is that unless we unite with the cross of Jesus and join him in suffering, he will have no part of us.

I read a book this week that spoke about the 25 films that best exemplified American values. It told of movies like "*Forest Gump*" that illustrated the American spirit and power to overcome difficulties no matter the circumstances. But it also picked out "*Groundhog Day*" and said that we will always fool ourselves until we decide that truth and sincerity are better for our future than anything else. In "*We Were Soldiers*" it pointed out that nothing good or heroic is ever achieved without pain and sacrifice. Then the writer asks: "What happened? When did we stop caring about words like duty, honor, country, faithfulness, loyalty, resourcefulness, love, pity and understanding?"

"When did we stop caring what happens to Scarlett in "*Gone with the Wind*", Dorothy on the yellow brick road or Mr. Smith in Washington?"

We still make great movies; movies with great American values. Go see: "*Grand Torino*", "*The Pursuit of Happiness*" or "*Slumdog Millionaire*." But the writer says: "Do those values still exist in our towns and cities today?"

Lent wants us to do the same thing with our Christian lives, right here in the parish and in our life together as Christ's church.

In the movie *"The Patriot"*, Heath Ledger as Gabriel, goes into the church and asks for volunteers for the South Carolina Militia to fight the British. We get no takers, tell a young woman named Anne stands up and says: "Will you now stop at words when your country needs you. So many of you are as ardent patriots as I will you stop at words alone and allow others to do your fighting for you. I ask only that you now act on the convictions of your heart and that which you believe in so dearly."

If today we applied that clip to our Christian life, the transformation that Jesus promises us in today's Gospel would take place in each one of our lives. Jesus is asking each of us to climb the mountain with him and to join in his life of sacrifice. Lent reminds us of that challenge.

There comes a time for each of us when we must face our Christ, not as a collective church, but as individual Christians. We have to join on the mountain. There Jesus asks commitment of each one of us. He asks us to put on the white garment of Baptism and in doing so embrace his values, not our own. He asks us to love and not in a nebulous way. He tells us that if we say we love him and we love this church, then the truth of that lies in our loving each individual in his church.

He asks us to give; as he gave on the cross that all might share in his salvation. He does not ask us to give from what we have leftover. He asks us to give till it hurts just a little. When did we decide as individuals that what we offer back to God from all he gives to us, is dependant on church politics or letting nine parishioners carry over 50% of our church's expenses? When did we decide that \$40 a week or even \$50 if you can afford it was too much money for God to ask us for his work in the church we say we love. Lent asks us hard questions, such as: "When did we decide that others would carry the burden of our cross as well as their own?"

And Jesus, our Jesus does not stop there. For in examining our Christian values he will take us up that mountain and ask of us the most precious things we have such as our time. "Will you, follow me?" he asks. Follow me is not in the Gospel an invitation to a stroll in the park or a wander through the woods. For Jesus follow me means: "Are you prepared to roll up your sleeves and do the work I ask you to do in the place I ask you to be? Will you labor, unceasingly, without complaint that my Gospel be served, my people are fed and the sick and desolate are cared for? For if you say you love me, if you say you love my church, why would you stand by and let others do your share? Give me your time and effort and I will grace you with happiness beyond your dreams. Give me true love and I will make you loved."

The voice from the cloud tells the Apostles: "This is my son, the beloved, listen to him." In Lent we will hear a lot about following Jesus, inviting his mission to the weak and less fortunate. We will hear about stewardship, not as a collective but as the stamp of our commitment to God. Throughout the readings there is an element of sacrifice, pain and service. Let us not run away from the mountain that Christ invites us to climb with him, just as we cannot run away from the American values that men and women down the centuries fought and died for. Those values are immortalized in a star, spangled banner. The hill that Lent and Jesus invites us to climb is marked with a simple cross.+

Lent begins on Wednesday, 7:30pm with the Ash Wednesday service and the distribution of ashes. It is our opportunity to stand up as Christians and declare that we hold Christ's values as our own.

a simple meal of bread, coffee and soup will be served in the Fellowship Hall at 6:30pm.

Thank you, have a holy and reflective Lent.

Amen+