

## Weekly Reading – Monday, March 2, 2009

Before we turn to the texts for Sunday, March 8, 2009, let's take an overview of the Lenten sequence. Folks working on recovering the ancient practice of the catechumenate for our time, offer a sense of the sequence/ development implied in the Lenten gospel texts. It may be helpful to you in personal reflection or preaching preparation to have this sequence in mind. Lent I (Mark 1: 9 - 15), "We turn away from evil;" Lent II (Mark 8: 31 - 38), "We turn toward Jesus Christ;" Lent III and IV (John 2: 13 - 22 and John 3: 14 - 21), "We confess that we thirst for Jesus and for the work of God in our lives;" and Lent V (John 12: 20 - 33), "We enter into death, putting our whole trust in Jesus Christ who is 'the resurrection and the life.'" Now on to the lessons for Lent II or Sunday March 8, 2009.

Genesis 17: 1 - 7, 15 - 16

Last week we had the covenant God made with Noah, a covenant made with all humanity and all animals (including the human ones) too. This week the Abrahamic covenant is made with two specific people, Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, for the sake of all humanity. Those last six words are key. Without them the doctrine of election devolves into claims of special protection or privilege rather than particular vocation. The church too tends to have that problem or challenge of forgetting the "for the sake of the world" part.

In a recent on-line devotion that some of us do for the UCC, Quinn Caldwell said that a contract is a quid pro quo thing. You do this for me, I'll do that for you. But, observed Quinn, wonderfully I thought, a covenant from God is not a quid pro quo but rather a quid pro nil. What do we do to merit or gain God's choosing? Nil. Nada. Nothing. Nothing entitles us to this commitment from God. It's God initiative, God's doing. We are, however, asked to respond, to answer with our lives. Abraham's answer, never perfect but generally consistent, was trust, trust in God's word, God's promise, God's capacity. By starting out, here in Genesis 17, with the note that Abraham is 99 and Sarah similarly up there at 90, and that they still have no children, not one much less a multitude, the "nil" of Quinn's quid pro nil is dramatically clear. So far as human power goes, Abraham and Sarah aren't bringing a lot to the table. And yet, somehow God uses us inadequate, very human people to work God's providential and redeeming purpose. (If you're interested in getting our on-line daily devotions go to [i.ucc.org](http://i.ucc.org) and click on "Subscribe to daily email meditation.")

Romans 4: 13 - 25

Paul's riff on the Abrahamic story. Vs. 19 puts a fine point on what the Genesis story, above, implies. Listen, "He (Abraham) did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was already about a hundred years old), or when he considered the bareness of Sarah's womb." Thus does Paul ground the Jesus story, or what God has done in Christ for our salvation, in the Jewish/ Hebraic story and so does he critique the way in which Judaism of his day had turned a religion of grace into a religion of achievement.

When we turn to our time and place, I wonder if some "as good as dead" mainline churches might not see themselves in Abraham and Sarah and take heart? Many of our churches are as old, or older, than Abraham and Sarah. Some of our buildings and many of our congregants might be described as being "as good as dead." We don't seem to be producing a lot of offspring, maybe none. Good news! This is when God can work with us. Good news; this is when we can learn again that it all depends on God, or as Paul puts it in 4: 16, "For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace . . ."

Mark 8: 31 - 38

The heading I gave above for this lesson, in the overview of Lenten texts from catechesis, is "We turn toward Christ." Neither Mark nor Jesus make such a turning easy! This text contains the first of three times that Jesus speaks of his coming betrayal, suffering and crucifixion. Peter, pretty much representing us Jesus' faithful/ unfaithful followers, doesn't want to hear it. Of course, he doesn't! He wants this thing to work and to work according to his and the world's notions of what work means. But God's way are not our ways and Jesus is intent on teaching and demonstrating that. So intent is Jesus and so off target, if humanly understandable, is Peter that Jesus "rebukes" him, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Thus "turning toward Christ" is a turning away from other gods, other paths, other promises. This turning too is a work of God's grace in us. Then Jesus turns from Peter and the disciples to the crowd (handy that they were apparently waiting in the wings) and teaches that all who would follow him will take up their cross and follow him.

Three quick thoughts: the category of rebuke is richly biblical, but not much invoked or employed in our sensitive times. When is the time for rebuke? Proverbs tell us that the wise receive a rebuke and learn from it while fools don't receive or profit from a rebuke. Second, the idea of "saying yes and saying no," as it relates to turning toward Christ. In every "yes" there is a "no." In saying "yes" to Christ, to what do we say "no?" Finally, Jesus tells the disciples and crowd that those who would follow him must take up "their" cross and follow him. This whole business of "take up your cross," and "your cross to bear" is sometimes sentimentalized, but my thought here is that Jesus doesn't so much ask us to take up his cross but to take up our own, hence "their cross." Take up your own life and the consequences for you, as well as the blessings, of your turning toward Christ.