



BENEDICTINE SISTERS OF CHICAGO

2nd Sunday of Lent – February 25, 2024 – Virginia Jung, OSB

Genesis 22: 1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18 | Psalm 116: 9, 10, 15, 16-17, 18-19 | Romans 8: 31b-34 | Mark 9: 2-10

First of all, Happy Feast of St. Walburg! For those who may not know, St. Walburg is one of our foundresses because it was sisters who came from her abbey in Bavaria to the United States in 1852. Our house is descended from the one they established in Pennsylvania.

So, hanging out in the archives, I learned, and you may already have known, that Eichstatt means "place of the oak."

When you read the two foundation narratives side-by-side - Germany and the United States - the situation is so similar - a missionary effort takes the sisters to a foreign country to a thick forest wilderness to establish a monastery and spread the gospel. However, the tone is so different. The Walburg story is heroic and speaks of courage and good zeal. In the case of the United States, the story is of misery and complaint, or as St. Benedict might say, grumbling. I wonder why that is so. It would be a good research subject for someone to undertake-why does the tone of the narrative change 1000 years later?

Another connection back to Eichstatt is that we are also the place of the oak today; before it was subdivided, this area was an oak forest moving in from the birch groves along the lakefront. So Happy Feast Day, may it be a day of good zeal.

At mass today to celebrate Eucharist on the 2nd Sunday of Lent. We have a good foothold in Lent so it's a good moment to check in -

Am I reading the book I chose from the library? Am I keeping the fast I proposed? Am I setting aside money to donate to AIM on Holy Thursday? Am I dedicating additional time to prayer?

If yes, what am I experiencing? If no, there is still plenty of Lent left, so it is a great day to begin.

As we reflect on today's readings, love just barely peeks out from them but of course, we know that love is always present in the Word of God. In the 1st reading from Genesis, we hear it related to Isaac, speaking to Abraham, God emphasizes Abraham's love - "your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, your own

beloved son, your beloved son"- and he recognizes Abraham as his devoted servant, which is close to love.

In the letter to the Romans passage, the word love does not appear directly, but these verses are couched in a famous passage on God's love. I think it is fair to say that the expression "God is for us" expresses God's love - a love that scholars note is powerful, overcoming all obstacles to our salvation. In Romans, Paul emphasizes that this love is a 2-way street; it flows between us and God.

In the gospel of Mark, God declares "This is my beloved son. Listen to him". That echos and amplifies the language we heard about Isaac in Genesis. But from where we stand, we know that this time, the beloved son will not be rescued at the last minute. He will suffer death, which was also a great act of love in itself.

Love as it shines through in these readings is a parent's love for their beloved child - life giving, nurturing, sustaining, encouraging, and life long. A love that we can each count on from our God. This relationship is not between equals though. There is emphasis throughout the readings on being a devoted follower, discerning and following God's loving call. I appreciate how Richard Clifford comments on this in his study of psalm 116:

"Modern culture values autonomy as a mark of maturity, so that obedience to another is not an instinctive response. How is obedience to be interpreted? Obedience means whole-hearted commitment, listening to the other, and a union of hearts and minds. (that sounds a lot like love, right?) He continues: Though forms of worship have changed as well, (since the time the psalm was written) it remains true that one is invited to honor the saving God in a bodily and communal way in rites, songs, and communion."

I think that is a great way to look at it when we balk at the idea of obedience in the story of Abraham and Isaac or more importantly, when we balk at the idea of obedience to God in our own lives.

In his book, *The People Called*, Paul Hanson emphasizes the quality of this relationship between God and the people. He writes, "An important quality of the ancestral faith as described in the Genesis narrative is the intimacy of fellowship between the patron God and the human follower-(We experience that over and over again throughout the book of Genesis. The name for that fellowship is covenant). Hanson goes on - "Moreover, though the deity tests Abraham, he does not forsake him in the moment of the most dreadful crisis, but provides a substitute

sacrifice for Isaac, and the renews the covenant "because you have obeyed my voice" (In our lectionary it says - because you have obeyed my command).

This intimacy of fellowship that Hanson describes in Genesis is seen in the gospel story also. That Jesus selects a few of his followers to come apart- to go up to the mountain for this experience-and what they see is Jesus in conversation with Moses and Elijah! Scholars say that this is to show Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law-Moses and the prophets-Elijah. But I appreciate the detail that they are in conversation. What were they discussing? Midrash like the doctors in the Temple? Holy things like Benedict and Scholastica? It is a detail that adds to our understanding of a relational God.

The story of the Transfiguration appears here because it occurred after Jesus had told his disciples of his coming passion and death which they were all about to head into it. We already know that and we have walked the *via crucis* through many Holy Weeks and times of personal crisis throughout our lives.

So what might it mean for us to hear it now-this story of the revelation of God's beloved child? When Pope John Paul II added the Mysteries of Light to the rosary, the Transfiguration became the 4th mystery of light. Alice Camille has a beautiful book on the rosary - it's in our library if you still need a book for Lent. She gives Saint Peter credit for recognizing the "pure gift" of the moment and wanting to stay there. May we always recognize those moments of glory and be grateful for them. Alice Camille notes that John Paul II calls the Transfiguration an icon for Christian contemplation that invites us to do just what Peter wanted to do - linger with this revelation of the Christ, this miracle of the eyes. And then what? What do we do with the experience of contemplating the illuminated face of Jesus? How does it flow into our lives?

This brings us back around to the question of Love, that as we contemplate this icon that lives in our minds, that it increase our capacity to "see this beauty and truth in ordinary places, in the face of the stranger, in simple rituals, that we open ourselves to this way of seeing." She says it is a path learned through the practice of contemplation: "The hidden revelation of God, we might say, resides in the everyday Jesus. So if we pay close attention to the ordinary we might just see some remarkable transfigurations ourselves."

And this is a challenge, right? Because when we see God revealed in our world, it calls for a response and often, an affirmative response will draw us out of our comfort zone. So contemplation is not for the faint of heart but for the strong of heart; it is a practice for those who love.