

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

God's Ways Are Not Our Ways

Fr. Chase 2nd Sunday in Lent

My name is Father Chase Hilgenbrinck, and today's retreat reflection will be based upon the readings that the church gives us for the second Sunday in Lent. *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Heavenly Father, we thank You for this time of preparation, this time of purification. That we may be able to live our lives more fully in You and with You. We ask You especially for the gift of clarity, so that we may see from Your perspective, that we may adopt Your ways. So that we may think and see, speak and act as You would, so that we may become Your representatives in this world that needs Your help so much. So we ask Your blessing upon us in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Now, years ago, I was on a retreat, and the retreat master asked us "What is the most predominant theme in all of sacred scripture?" And of course, as good Catholics, good Christians, we thought that that answer might be easy. We wanted to come up with the right answer. And most of us repeated that the answer would be that God is love. It's certainly a theme that we see throughout all of the entire Old Testament to God's covenants with His people, constantly forgiving them, constantly taking them back. Of course, in the New Testament, we see God's love through the person of Jesus Christ, and we're going to celebrate the culmination of His love when He gives His body and His blood for the salvation of our souls here in Easter.

And, of course, that theme is explicit in John's Gospel. John says the words "God is love." But, of course, he refuted that and said "Yes, but there's something even deeper. There's a foundation. What is the foundation of God's love? What is the predominant theme that brings out God's love?" And the answer that he gave us, something that I continue to think about and pray about today, is "God's ways are not our ways. And therefore, our ways are not His." And this is the most predominant theme in all of sacred scripture, because even God's love had to be revealed to us. His love was so different than ours, that He had to show us that His love is not our love, and that we had to learn the way that He loves. We have to adopt His ways. We had to come to know as He knows, and see from His perspective.

You know, I can say that this is the story of my life too. I know that my ways have not been God's ways. So often, so many people ask priests to tell their story, right. And what I mean by that, their vocation story. "How did you know that you were

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called to be a priest?” And so often, I hopefully humorously say, but also at the same time in all truth, tell them “Well, this isn’t my story. If I were to tell my story, it would be very different than the story that I’m about to tell you. Because I had chosen a different path. I had different desires than what God had desired for me. And so, the story that I tell you is truly my vocation story. It’s the story of God’s work in and through my life, that allowed me to see as God sees, and to adopt His ways.” That’s a priest’s vocation story. That could be anybody’s vocation story, who has been called for a particular purpose for the Lord’s will in their life.

One of the greatest vocation stories in all of sacred scripture, according to my opinion, is the story of a man named Abram who, as we know him more famously when his name was changed to Abraham. Abraham was a man that God had chosen from the beginning, a man that would become, as Saint Paul will say, the father of faith, right. He’s the father of all of our faiths. He is the first, he is the one who trusted first in the Lord and had faith in the Lord throughout all of the trials of his life. And he had trials. Let me name a few of those right now. Some of those are less famous to us, but we probably know the one great story of Abraham’s life.

But nevertheless, before that ever happened, the story of he and Isaac, we should know that Abraham was tested many times. And he wasn’t tested with Isaac, with the killing of his own son until he was matured in his faith. Until he had gone through many trials. We should remember that about God as well. God never gives us trials that are beyond our ability to respond to them, right. And so, look at all of the trials that Abraham went through. First, when he was Abram, God told him to leave his family and his country, so that he could become a father of a great nation. Of course, talking about his family Israel, right, God’s chosen people, that Abraham would become the father of that family.

So, he leaves his own country. And when he gets to that country, that promised land, right, there’s a famine there, right. And so he leaves his own country and he goes to a place of famine, right. “Thank you Lord for bringing me here.” I can only imagine that that tested his faith so much in God. And not only that, but when he gets there, the Egyptians seize his beloved wife Sarai, right, and she goes into the presence of the Pharaoh, right. What suffering would that be? For a man’s own wife to be taken away from him in a strange country. How he must have feared for her. How he must have detested of the sinfulness that he only imagined in his mind, right.

Then he marries Hagar, right. In a moment of weakness, probably, he thinks that God will not make him a father with Sarai, because she is unable to bear a child. He takes Hagar into his own, and he has a son with her. A son named Ishmael,

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right. Talk about suffering. Then God would ask him to send Hagar away, and send the son away. Ishmael, his only son, becomes estranged from him and from his family. The king of Gerar then captures his wife Sarah, and intends to take her for himself, right. So, she's captured for a second time. This guy has been through a lot of things, there's no doubt about it. But of course, we know the final trial came, or perhaps not the final trial of his life, but the culmination of all of those trials, when God knew that Abraham was primed and ready, and he could be trusted with anything.

Abraham asked God, he requested God, "God, You have told me that I was going to become a father. And I have yet to bear a son. I have yet to be able to bring forth Your creation in order to fulfill Your will for my life." And so, he requested that to God. And that's when God changes his name, and He changes his wife's name. Abram, the word Abram, his name means "beloved father". He must have felt like the laughing stock amongst the rest of the men. A beloved father who was unable to bring forth children, right. And so, God changes his name and ups the ante, right. God ups the ante. He doubles down on His promise, and He names him "Abraham", which means "father of multitudes," right. Not just father of one, not just beloved father, but father of multitudes. And He changes Sarai's name to Sarah, which means "mother of nations," right.

So, God has doubled down on His promise. He has promised to fulfill this. And they are now in their old age. Imagine that. And Abraham even says that. "How will You do this in our old age?" Nevertheless, we know the end of the story, that God is faithful, and God does something that is beyond our imagination. Our ways are not God's ways, right, and God is able to bring forth a son even out of their barrenness. And that Son's name was Isaac. And, of course, God said that "through that son, you will become a father of nations." Through that son. So, you can imagine why he's called the father of faith, when in the face of seeing his son, who was meant to become the father of nations, God says "Now sacrifice that son." Every promise that God had given to Abraham to that point has been negated. The greatest test of his life. Yet Abraham trusts in God. Even when He says that "through this son, you will become the father of nations, and now you must kill this son." Logically, in human logic, that is impossible. What God has asked Abraham to do is humanly and logically impossible. Yet, Abraham trusts God.

Listen to what it says in the letter to the Hebrews, Chapter 7, right. It says: ***By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac. And he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only-begotten son, of whom it was said "through Isaac, your descendants shall be named."*** Now listen to this: ***He considered that God was able to raise men, even from the dead.*** He had no idea how God was going to do this, but he trusted God. Hebrews will also say that faith,

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as a definition, faith is the assurance of things that are unseen. It's the assurance of things we can't see. So, Abraham becomes the father of faith, because he is assured by God's promises that he will complete something that he is unable to see with his own human mind, his own human logic, and even beyond his wildest dreams. He dreamed that, perhaps, God can raise people from the dead, something that before Christ's time we would have never conceived of either. And therefore he becomes this father of many nations, right.

And so, we go into the gospel, and somehow the church wants us to see this story of Abraham, this faithful story, to become seen in the light of the transfiguration, which is what our gospel is today. Notice some peculiarities of this story. Jesus takes His inner circle. He takes Peter, James, and John, and He takes them up high on a mountain. We know the details of the transfiguration perhaps, that while He's up there, Jesus transfigures Himself, He shows Himself to be bright as light, bright as light, as no man has ever seen. And He reveals Himself to these men. What He is showing him is He is showing him His glorified body. He's showing him His very glory, right. He's proving to them that He is God. And why is He doing that? Well, we understand it when He says to them something that sounds illogical to us: He has shown Himself for them to be able to see, and then as soon as they see it He says, "Tell this to no one."

Why would He do that? He adds something to it. He says "Tell this to no one until I have been raised from the dead. Until you see Me die, you must not tell anyone." Well, therein, we see Jesus' plan for them. We see Jesus' plan for His life revealed in them. He is building them up in faith. He knows that these men do not see as He sees. He knows that these men do not yet believe in the resurrection. In fact, these men do not even believe that He is going to suffer and die, which is what Jesus reveals to them immediately after. He says "The Son of man is going to suffer at the hands of other men. You're going to see Me die. But wait for it, you're going to see me rise from the dead." And, of course, Jesus knows that their faith is weak. Jesus knows that they can't possibly understand this. There is no Jew that could ever conceive, in that time, of a Messiah who would come and who would suffer. The Messiah was the one who was supposed to be the most powerful, the one who was supposed to rout all of the Romans who were oppressing God's chosen people, the Israelites, right. And so they could never conceive of the fact that He must suffer. But that's exactly what Jesus was telling them.

And He knew that when they saw Him suffering, their faith would grow so weak that they would start to believe that maybe He wasn't the one. And so, He's telling these men "When you see Me suffer, remember what you saw on this mountain. Don't lose faith. Remember that you saw My glory. Remember that you saw that I

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truly am God. And that My ways are not your ways. And I will show you the glory that is to be revealed in humanity.” And so, Jesus is strengthening these men.

I wonder if we look at our lives, how we’ve grown in our own faith throughout time. I bet if we were to examine our own consciences now, we would be able to recall times in our life where we didn’t believe a certain thing about our faith. Where we didn’t believe something to be true about God, or we said, “How could I ever believe that?” And today we believe in it. I know for many people that may be the Eucharist. We look at the Eucharist and we say, “How could that possibly be true?” But yet each of us, pray God, have come to the faith that it actually is true. Perhaps some of us in our life have experienced extreme suffering, abuse, broken families, broken relationships, death of someone in our family that we’re very close to and we could say “I could never live life without them. Why have I been dealt this hand? How could I ever go on living my new life ever again?”

And maybe we’re experiencing that right now. And God is telling you, and He’s telling all of us, “Your ways are not My ways. Trust in Me. Have faith in Me. Behold, I make all things new.” He is the one who is faithful. With our own human logic, we can’t possibly understand. Our own human logic compared to the eternal wisdom is tiny, it’s puny, it’s small, it’s insufficient. And therefore, that is why we need faith. That is why we must have faith. Because our human minds cannot grasp the eternal realities. Not meaning that they’re not true, but just meaning that we’re unable to grasp them in our current state. But nevertheless, we have come to faith, we’ve come to believe things that we thought previously impossible.

And so, I’d ask you to consider for yourself this week: Is God asking you, like the apostles, like those 3 who went up the mountain with Him and said, “You’ve seen something that other people have not seen before.” And I’m asking you to go and strengthen their faith. I’m asking you to go to those who are struggling, who are suffering, your family members, your friends, your coworkers, your classmates. You know those who are suffering who are around you. Those who don’t understand, those who felt like they had been dealt a bad hand of life. And God is asking you, who have received faith, who have come to know Him, to now go out and say, “We may have seen all of this suffering,” but you are to be the one to strengthen them. You are to tell them what you have seen. You are to allow them to see from God’s perspective. To know that their ways are not God’s ways. But that God is faithful, and in Him we put our trust. Amen.