

2nd Sunday of Lent “A Season for Transformation”

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Here we are already at the second Sunday of Lent. Do you know where the word Lent comes from? It comes from the Old English word “Lencten” meaning “springtime”. And I think it is safe to say that, here in Woodinville, we are ready for some springtime! The Latin for the word Lent, however, means something altogether different. The word for this season is Quadragesima, meaning forty days. A little historical aside, Lent used to begin on the first Sunday of Lent, also called Quadragesima Sunday after the Gospel reading for that weekend of Jesus fasting in the desert for forty days, and ended as the Triduum began the evening of Holy Thursday. If you count the days from the first Sunday of Lent to Holy Thursday, you come up with forty. Over time, however, there was the recognition that the Sundays during Lent should not be fast days. You see, I am always asked whether or not we have to fast on the Sundays during Lent, so here is an answer for you. Solemnities, even during the Season of Lent, ought to still be understood as feast days. Sundays, after all, are the Lord’s Day, a Sabbath Day, and a day of rest. Of course, if Lent started the first Sunday of Lent, and Sundays didn’t count as days for fasting, this would make for less than forty days of fasting before Easter. The solution was to start Lent on a Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, and allow for the Lenten fast to conclude with Easter Vigil, thus giving us forty days for fasting before Easter once you subtracted the Sundays in between. So, there you have it.

I mention this little bit of history because the Second Sunday of Lent is also a good time to check in with ourselves on how we are doing with our Lenten promises. Did we order the Filet-O-Fish instead of the Big Mac on Friday? Inquiring minds want to know. And how are we doing with what we gave up for Lent for that matter? Was it chocolate, alcohol, whatever? You see, as lightweight as our Lenten practices seem to be nowadays, I think it is helpful to consider what Quadragesima would have been like if you lived in medieval times. St. Thomas Aquinas suggested that no food would be allowed at all on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. On the other days of Lent, food would only be permitted after 3 PM (the hour of our Lord’s death on the cross). And, no animal meat was allowed at all, nor were eggs or dairy, and Sundays were not days off from the fast either. Why did saints like St. Thomas Aquinas believe in extreme fasting during Lent? I think for the people living in medieval times, the severity of this kind of fasting was meant to be life changing, life altering, helping Christians to embrace the seriousness of their baptismal identity as a People of God. Lent was meant to be understood as a time for transformation. A person who observed that kind of fast would certainly undergo a transformation by Easter Sunday, as well as their waistline to say the least. I am not suggesting that we bring back that kind of Lenten fasting. Nevertheless, it is clear that however we observe the season of Lent, what matters most is the love we put into it in the first place.

If you think that fasting in medieval times was serious business, check out how covenants were made in the time of Abraham in our first reading from Genesis. Covenants were meant to be truly transformative events as well. The Lord promises Abraham that his descendants would be like the number of stars in the heaven and offers the land before him as his possession. Abraham wants to seal this deal and so God asks him to bring a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. Genesis says, “Abram

brought him all these, split them in two, and placed each half opposite the other”. You see, this is how covenants were made in those days, you would meet in between the split animals to make the agreement which was a way of saying, if I break my word may what happened to these animals happen to me. These kinds of covenants in those days were meant to be life altering events that helped move a person or tribe from one reality to a new reality based upon the agreement being made. These covenants were meant to be truly transformative. As we know, the Chosen People in the Old Testament broke one covenant after the other with God, which makes Jesus’ choice to die on the cross in atonement for our sins all the more remarkable.

All of these observations are meant to help us understand our Gospel reading from St. Luke regarding the transfiguration of Jesus. Here we are on Mount Tabor, Jesus is transfigured before Peter, John and James, foreshadowing the glory of the resurrection. Jesus is also seen conversing with Moses and Elijah, signifying to the disciples that Jesus is the fulfillment of both the Law and the Prophets. However, there is something very unique about St. Luke’s version of the transfiguration. You see, in Luke’s Gospel it says, “And behold, two men were conversing with [Jesus], Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his exodus that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem.” The reference to exodus here is unique to St. Luke’s Gospel and is meant to help us connect the exodus of the Jews from Egypt to the Promised Land, to what Jesus accomplishes for us by his passion, death and resurrection. You see the exodus from Egypt was a transformative event for the Chosen People. They went from a state of being slaves to inheriting the land God promised to Abraham. The process for that transformation took the Hebrews a lot longer than forty days. It took forty years for that transformation to unfold and it took centuries more before God was ready to offer a new exodus to the human race through his only Son our Lord.

This new exodus presented to us, through the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, offers us a path from the tyranny of sin and death to the glory of the resurrection and eternal life with God. This ultimate transformation that Christians seek is what St. Paul is referring to in our second reading from Philippians when he says, “Brothers and sisters: Our citizenship is in heaven”. Think about how radical St. Paul’s message is, “Our citizenship is heaven, and from it we also await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body by the power that enables him also to bring all things into subjection to himself.”

And so, my friends, the second Sunday of Lent is calling us all to embrace this season as a time for radical transformation. Our Lenten observances of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving are meant to help us with this as we make our pilgrimage to Holy Week. We can ask ourselves this week, what areas in my life are in need of radical transformation? In what ways can I allow this season of Lent to transfigure my heart to be more like Jesus? These are good questions to ask as we continue our pilgrimage into the desert with our Lord. During this season of Lent, the level of transformation God will bless us with will depend largely on our response.