

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT (YEAR B)

February 28, 2021

Genesis 22:1–2, 9a, 10–13, 15–18 • Romans 8:31b–34 • Mark 9:2–10

I.

An archaeological discovery in Williamsburg was announced on Monday: the presence of human remains at the original site of First Baptist Church, one of the oldest continuous African American congregations in the United States.

This congregation was formed in 1776—
the year of American independence—
when Williamsburg was the capital of Virginia (1699–1780).

The first church building of that congregation dates from either 1818 or 1855.

The original church was torn down in 1955,
and, the following year, a new church was built close by.

Interestingly, in 2016,
the bell from the old church was used to dedicate
the National Museum of African American History and Culture
in Washington.

To me, it was fascinating to read that the archaeological discovery in Williamsburg confirmed the oral tradition that some members of First Baptist were buried just behind the church.

II.

This archaeological event in Williamsburg
was both a discovery and a confirmation,
along the lines of today's Gospel.

Jesus' transfiguration unveils his identity to the apostles,
and it confirms his earlier prediction of his passion, death, and resurrection.

“He was transfigured before them,
and his clothes became dazzling white,
such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.”

Earlier in the Gospel,
Jesus told the apostles of his approaching death and resurrection.

Now, a select group of apostles—
Peter, James, and John—
see Christ's heavenly, glorified, and resurrected body,
which is a preview of his resurrection.

Especially during Lent,
the designated Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer
explains the meaning of the Sunday Gospel.

According to today's Preface,

“After he had told the disciples of his coming Death,
on the holy mountain he manifested to them his glory,
to show... that the Passion leads to the glory of the Resurrection.”

This divine revelation takes the apostles beyond their limited understanding,
and, in time, it will help them to cope with Jesus' passion.

We, too, have a limited horizon:
for perceiving and understanding the presence of God,
and for changing the world for the better.

God is at work—
in the world at large, and in our particular lives—
even when we do not perceive it.

An instance of divine revelation, like the transfiguration,
helps us to carry out God's will,
even amid uncertainty and confusion,
which characterize the world today, especially during the pandemic.

Christ was assuring the apostles of his ultimate victory over sin and death,
although they did not—and they could not—understand it at the time.

Still, the transfiguration helped them to follow Jesus—
God the Father ordered them to listen to his Son—
and then, after his resurrection, they could look back and understand.

In the First Reading,
Abraham didn't understand why God was asking him to sacrifice his son, Isaac—
he must have been heartbroken—
but he was ready to do what was asked of him.

Abraham's example of faith and trust in God offers an important lesson:
feelings and understanding are not the measures of spiritual progress.

Advancement in the spiritual life is marked by doing what is right.

I say this because today, increasingly,
religion is seen as the means to personal, emotional fulfillment.

We say things like,
"This is how God speaks to me."

Yes, God brings our lives to fulfillment—
but only after we have lived them fully.

In fact, we prayed in today's Collect or opening prayer
that God would "nourish us inwardly by [his] word" so that, one day,
we might "behold [his] glory"—that is, in heaven.

The danger of seeing religion as primarily a means to emotional fulfillment
is that we focus on ourselves and not on God.

We seek to fulfill our needs above else,
but can easily forget about other people's needs.

We can fall into the trap of domesticating God,
presuming that he will approve of everything we think we need to do
in order to be happy as we define happiness,
but not as God does.

There is no promise in the Bible that God will fulfill our every emotional need
at every moment.

The Gospel is saying that, even for the Son of God,
the fulfillment of resurrection comes after the suffering of the passion.

Feelings themselves are neither good nor bad;
they are human emotions,
and, therefore, they are important indicators of what is happening in our lives.

But advancement in holiness is about carrying our God's commands,
fulfilling them as best we can in our circumstances.

Parents do this all the time:
they sacrifice to take care of their kids,
even though it doesn't necessarily bring them immediate emotional fulfillment.

These days,
we all feel fatigued, beleaguered, and uncertain about the future:
the pandemic is still here, the country is deeply divided,
and everyone seems on edge.

But the presence of God at work in our lives gives us strength and courage
to do what the Lord asks,
and to provide what the world needs.

God's commandments, and the world's needs,
are neatly encapsulated in the seven corporal works of mercy
and in the seven spiritual works of mercy.

During February,
here at the Cathedral we've focused on the corporal works of mercy;
the focus of March will be on the spiritual works of mercy.

For each set of works,
the parish staff has created a great clickable PDF that is sent out each week.

That document explains each work,
including the references in the Bible,
and it lists one specific, concrete, and feasible way to accomplish a given work.

III.

A quick return to First Baptist Church in Williamsburg.

According to oral tradition,
the first congregation,
which was composed of both enslaved and free African Americans,
gathered in the woods in an outdoor shelter,
in order to avoid white suspicion of an uprising.

Jesse Cole, the white owner of the land,
happened upon the gathering while out for a walk,
and he was moved by what he saw.

He donated his carriage house on Nassau St. to the congregation,
which became their first church building.

It's a good reminder that our example matters,
even if only one person is watching.

God is always at work—that is enough.