

I have a particular affection for the story of Abraham. Many years ago, Bob Shaw and I had started a legacy society at our church. We invited all those who had remembered St. Mark's in their estate planning. We had a social hour, served dinner, and I usually had some focused presentation for those present at this annual event. Our church had launched a new Christian Formation program for young children the previous fall and I decided that it would be good to highlight this ministry. So I told them the story of the Great Family, the story of Abraham, of how Abraham would go into the wilderness and God would so come close to Abraham and Abraham would come so close to God that Abram would know what God wanted him to do. The gist of the story is that God urges Abram to leave the security of Ur and go to Shechem. Abram wondered if God would be there...and of course, he discovered that God was there. The story unfolds and God tells Abram to move to a succession of other places: Haran, Bethel, Hebron and the Oaks of Mamre. Now as I am telling this story, unbeknownst to the group, I'm struggling inside. I had been asked if I would accept an appointment as priest in charge of a parish in a different diocese. I didn't want to go and I had told them on three occasions, "No". You see, I had the same doubts that Abraham had had and as I moved the wooden figures through the sand and came to each place name...I heard that voice and realization, O shoot, God is in Manchester too.

On Ash Wednesday, I said that I hope you will receive Lent as a gift. It is a season in which we engage in spiritual practices with more intensity and carve out more time to be in silence. We do this so that we might recognize that God comes close to us and we come so close to God that we know what God wants us to do. Abram wasn't too sure that he would find God in each of those places to which he was sent. To his delight and ours, we discover that God is everywhere and often in the most unlikely places.

Jesus' call to take up one's cross and follow is for me also an invitation. It is a willingness to embrace the pain of others trusting that God is in the midst of our brokenness, working for and calling us to life.

I have been struck over the years that perhaps the one thing that unifies us is that each of us has experienced brokenness: the betrayal of a loved one, the loss of a child, or the death of a dream. Yet this fact remains: to live is to struggle, to hurt, and to experience loss and brokenness.

I have also been struck that most of the time we keep that brokenness hidden. While this may be understandable, my reading of this gospel passage today is that we are called to take up our cross expecting that God is most fully present in the suffering and brokenness of the world. We are called to take up our cross by being honest about our brokenness and thereby demonstrate our willingness to enter into

the brokenness of others. We are called to take up our cross because we follow the One who not only took up his cross but also revealed that nothing in this world, not even the hate and darkness and death that seemed so omnipresent on that Good Friday, can defeat the love and light and life of God.

Denying brokenness and pain is understandable. Peter is dumbfounded by the possibility that God's promised Messiah had come not to conquer and rule but rather to suffer and die. And so, Peter rebukes Jesus. Peter knew where to look for God and it was in places of strength. For this reason, he could only imagine that grief, loss, betrayal, suffering, and death were things to avoid at all costs because they seemed to him to be, quite literally, God-forsaken. Yet in the cross God demonstrates that there is no place God refuses to go in the quest to love and redeem us.

Entering into another's pain and loss is not the end of the story. When we embrace each other's brokenness, we experience first that God is with us through the cross and then also hear and experience God calling us to life and courage in and through the resurrection. How that resurrection call will take shape is hard to predict. Perhaps it will be to believe without question the person who has shared a story of sexual assault or to stand unflinchingly with a person seeking fair treatment. Perhaps it will be to keep faith with the one who no longer remembers you because of dementia or to hold vigil with the one near death's door. Perhaps it will be to call for action when action needs to be taken.

We can't stand *with* people by standing *over* them, reaching from our place of strength to comfort or help them. We meet people most truly when we admit that we are *like* them. And when we discover that God is not absent and powerfully present in our brokenness, it transforms how we look at everything and emboldens us in the struggles of this life. If loss and suffering and death cannot separate us from God's love, then what is there to fear?

We are part of Abraham's great family, as numerous as the stars in the heavens and of the grains of sand in the desert. God made covenant with him and us: "I will bless you that you may be a blessing to the others." This Lent, we make room for the God of cross and resurrection to encounter, call, and eventually transform us.

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