

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent  
March 19, 2011 Anticipatory Mass  
Fr. Joe Bambenek  
Sacred Heart Church, Pine Creek, WI

Genesis 12:1-4a      Psalm 33      2 Timothy 1:8b-10      Matthew 17:1-9

*Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you.*

Weeks ago, when I first reflected upon today's readings, especially the first reading that my cousin Randy proclaimed with its line that I just repeated, I was thinking about how today's celebration, how the Mass of Thanksgiving I am celebrating this evening at Sacred Heart Church, is in some ways backward. At the same Mass during which we hear God telling Abram to leave the place of his forefathers, I have returned TO the place of my forefathers... TO the church in which all of my American Bambenek ancestors have worshiped; TO the parish cemetery where they all are or will be buried... In fact, highlighting the multigenerational connection that is involved in passing on the gift of faith, I just realized this week that today is the 175th birthday of my great-great grandmother Jozefina Lukowich Bambenek. Jozefina, with her husband August, were the Bambenek ancestors that came from Poland to the Dodge/Pine Creek area.

So while there might be something a bit backward about being here to celebrate in light of the first reading, what is common with the message of the reading is that a life-changing calling from God is what brings me here... even if it took me a lot longer than Abraham to say yes to God. In fact, my calling to the priesthood has significant roots here in the Pine Creek/Dodge area. For while the very first identifiable seed of my vocation was planted by my first grade teacher, one could say that it began to sprout here. Thanks to words of encouragement, and undoubtedly many prayers, from my Grandma Sophie Bambenek, and thanks to the encouragement of Sacred Heart's former pastor Fr. Beckfelt following my Grandpa Vince Bambenek's funeral 28 years ago last Saturday, a funeral at which I was a server along with cousin Russ. From that point onward, the idea of becoming a priest was always present in one way or another in the field of my heart. [\[omitted from preached homily: My grandpa's funeral was celebrated as the prior church renovation was nearing completion. I recall being an altar server at that Mass, with cousin Russell, amidst the scaffolding. In fact, the ambo that has stood here the last 28 years was donated in Grandpa's memory. And now I return for my first Mass here since the renovation\]](#). How that proverbial plant grew; how I came to see it being a beautiful plant rather than a meddlesome weed; the journey on which I took to the priesthood from grandpa's funeral to ordination day was a long one, and I won't bore you with any more details now, but as I indicated in the description I gave on why I wanted to celebrate a Mass of Thanksgiving at Sacred Heart, "It is for me one of the holiest places in the world."

In today's readings we gain several important insights when it comes to the call that God gives to people to serve Him in love. In the first reading we hear the call of Abram... As being of Judeo-Christian spiritual heritage, we know the story of our first forefather of faith. Of how, at age 75 Abram left his comfortable retirement in what would have been one of the most modern cities in the world and headed out into a place unknown, ultimately to a desert. He did so against the conventional wisdom to have a relaxing retirement. He did so on account of the faith he had in God's promise that he and his barren wife would be used by God to make a great

nation... that ultimately, all of the communities of the earth would find blessing in him. Wow! That is quite a claim! And that was quite an act of faith to follow it as he did. In his own lifetime, Abram, ultimately renamed Abraham, would not come anywhere close to seeing the promise lived out. He would experience the blessing of life in the richly-blessed verdant Promised Land. He would see the unexpected birth of his son; actually of two of his sons. But it would be close to 500 years until Moses would be used by God to take the promise to Abraham to the next level. It would be 2000 years until Jesus would come along and start fulfilling the promise in mindboggling new ways. And another 2000 years to today when the unfolding of the fullness of the blessing is still happening as the gospel reaches more and more communities around the world. So while Abraham did his part in fulfilling the promise made to him, the blessing of Abraham has been kept alive by people in each generation. It has taken countless additional yeses in faith to what God has called people in their own unique circumstances, to keep the promise to Abram alive on the human level.

As we sit here in Sacred Heart Church, we can recognize that it was our ancestors saying yes to God that resulted in such a beautiful building, built for the glory of God, being erected in Pine Creek. It was the succeeding generations saying yes that has kept the faith alive here. And it was the current generation saying yes that has led to the most recent beautiful refurbishing of this building. I should add that the heritage of faith that has been here for generations, in the Bambenek family and in so many families of the Dodge-Pine Creek area, is recognized and appreciated well beyond the Pine Creek and Trempealeau River valleys. Four years ago when I spent the summer in St. Louis learning about hospital ministry I had an occasion to meet now Cardinal Burke. Looking for something to say, I mentioned to him my tie to here. As I said the words "Sacred Heart in Pine Creek," the then-Archbishop of St. Louis got a big smile on his face and he spoke of the beautiful heritage and history of this church, sharing with me some details about the parish's history that I did not know.

In the gospel, we hear the story of the Transfiguration. It was an event in which Jesus revealed Himself in His glory, along with the glory of Moses and Elijah, to three of his closest Apostles in a profound way. Why did He do this? While I am sure there were many reasons, undoubtedly one reason for the Transfiguration is that Jesus knew that He would soon be on the top of another hill in an act of glory, on Mount Calvary. But that next hilltop moment would appear anything but glorious to His apostles. On Good Friday, the gospel message, which had been to the Apostles so amazing up to then, would prove to be difficult to the point of them abandoning it. The Transfiguration was, among other things, a great act of encouragement to these three apostles; Jesus' most intimate friends. It was a gift to them, a way of helping them be prepared to "bear your share of hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God," to use the words of Paul in today's second reading. The memory of the Transfiguration was one of those "strength from God" gifts. It was a moment to which they could later turn back, to recall how glorious God really is, as they tried to make sense of the crucifixion.

In the Transfiguration account we, too, can see in a new way the glory of God. At that moment it was saved for Peter, James and John. But just as God did not call only them to follow the gospel with the sacrifice it entails, He does so to each one of us in one way or another. In the Transfiguration account we, too, can find comfort. Each one of us, as we live out our God-given vocations, will face hardships. In those moments we need to be encouraged; and the Transfiguration is one of the best examples of the encouragement found in the Bible.

Furthermore, the Transfiguration event reminds us that if we are faithful in following the gospel, in following our vocation, we have the great hope that we too will be able to see God in the fullness of His glory at the end of our lives. As I was reflecting upon it, I could not help but think about the fittingness of the reading as it relates to the cemetery on a hill that is right behind me here in Pine Creek. That just as Jesus took his disciples up the hill to see His glory, when our body someday is taken up the cemetery hill at the end of our lives, to have our tent pitched you could say, we have the great hope that we will see God in the fullness of His glory, and that our bodies will be transformed with His, as were those of Elijah and Moses.

So as I return to this place of great family and faith heritage, I do so with great gratitude. Gratitude for our ancestors who built the parish. Gratitude to the generations since who passed along the faith, including those in my family; most notably my parents, grandparents, and Godparents, for the gift of faith and the gift of life they have given me. Gratitude to Fr. Beckfelt for his encouragement of my vocation over the years. Gratitude to people like my recently deceased Uncle Roger, like Danny Jazewski who, at my request led the rosary before Mass this evening, and the many others of the present generation who are working with Fr. O'Hara to keep alive the promise to Abraham; to keep alive the faith at Sacred Heart.

This Mass of Thanksgiving is also an opportunity, during this second Sunday in Lent, for each one of us to reflect upon God's call in each of our lives. It is a chance to ask ourselves if we believe that we have been called by God to a special vocation, a special mission. If the answer is yes, then I hope and pray that a grace of this Mass is encouragement for you. Encouragement for those who are following your call to persevere in bearing the hardships for the gospel that is entailed in following any true vocation; whether it be as a priest, a parent, a widow. Encouragement as well for those who have not yet mustered up the courage to follow the example of Abraham: to leave a place of comfort for a land unknown where God wants to bless us more abundantly than we could imagine. And if the answer to the first question is no: that God has not yet seemed to call me... then today is an opportunity to commit to spending time in prayer so that we can come to hear His voice. As we learn from Abraham, age is not an excuse. 75 was pretty old in his day, even if it is not anymore. Today is also an opportunity to do some spring cleaning: to commit to removing some of the clutter from our souls... clutter in the form of sin that should be taken to the Sacrament of Penance; clutter in the form of time we waste on loud, unfulfilling pursuits, so that we can be sufficiently interiorly quiet in a way that God's voice does not get drowned out by the noise of our lives.

And finally, we are to do all this with the great hope that if we are faithful in following where God leads us, if we set aside our desires in favor of His will, when it becomes our turn for our bodies to be taken up the hill of Sacred Heart cemetery for their final rest, our souls will then experience in ever greater fullness, the dazzling presence of God that was foreshadowed to the Apostles in the Transfiguration.

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