

Homily: Lent II – Cycle A
Promoting St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish Retreat
Weekend of March 15 & 16, 2014
Scriptures: Genesis 12:1-4 & II Timothy 1:8-10 & Matthew 17:1-9

Everybody knows what this is. A cardboard box has several functional purposes. It is used for packaging, storing and shipping. Today, however, I'm giving it a new purpose and using it as a prop for preaching.

The unique thing about a box is not what is on the outside but what is on the inside. There's always suspense about that until the box is opened up. Eventually I'll show you what's inside this box. But for now lend me your imaginations as I bring this box into conversation with the scripture readings to see what spiritual truths are hidden there that God wants us to download for our continued faith formation.

Last week's first reading from Genesis we heard mention of Jacob after whom God's people was named. Today we learn of Abraham, Jacob's grandfather, the true "*Father of the Jews*." He had been chosen to leave his native land and become a "great nation." As the story opens today Abram has just returned from doing battle, and coming to the rescue of his nephew, Lot. Now God promises an heir and an inheritance. But it comes at a price of an *outside-the-box* idea. Abram will have to leave his homeland and completely trust God and begin a great nation in a foreign land. If Abram agrees it will be sealed in a covenant ceremony. He does agree revealing a right approach to God. For the purpose of this homily I suggest that we imagine how God's *outside-the-box* approach to Abram nurtured his imagination to take an *outside-the-box* approach with God. Trust begets trust. Thus a covenant was fulfilled when both kept their words and "all the communities of the earth, were blest."

St. Paul's second letter to Timothy was written in Rome, as a prisoner who expects to be put to death soon. It was written in 67 A.D. the same year he was martyred so it's a kind of last will and testament. It is known that Timothy had a DNA for being shy and timid. So Paul invites him to think *outside-the-box* when it comes to facing his own hardships and suffering. If Timothy stays *inside-the-box*, then the voice that can empower him to be bold will be smothered by the dominant voice of being timid. For St. Paul, that *outside-the-box* voice is God whose call to Timothy to salvation is pure gift and has nothing to do with his deeds. By thinking *outside-the-box* then Timothy approaches God the same way Abram did. And Timothy keeps the new covenant, revealed in Jesus alive by the way he leans on Jesus and not on his shyness to give bold testimony in his preaching and suffering.

Finally, Matthew clears the stage so that Jesus alone will be the center of our attention for the rest of our Lenten journey. Last week, he ordered Satan to depart so our eyes and hearts can be fixed on the Lord.

Today, Matthew introduces two giants from the past, and has them depart once and for all. Moses and Elijah came from the “Age of the Law and the Prophets.” With the appearance of Jesus, a new age of history has dawned. New Moses and New Elijah are present in him, so they depart in this story leaving him alone. Jesus “alone” is the one who speaks for God.

To reveal this new message to three of his intimate friends, he invites Peter, James and John to take a break with a mountain getaway. Today we would call it a Spa experience. While they are praying Christ is transfigured. Moses and Elijah appear “in glory”; a glory that covered them when they spoke with God. Now they speak to Jesus about his “passage” soon to be fulfilled in Jerusalem, his Passover from death to life. Jesus’ appearance is transformed and his “face shines like the sun.” It is an *outside-the-box* moment for the three apostles.

Peter is de-stabilized by it. He de-focuses away from it by suggesting they set up three booths; three tents. He’s thinking *inside-the-box* wanting to contain the moment. Both the cloud and the voice are God’s way to get Peter *outside-the-box* again to just behold the glory: to stay in the moment and try to find the meaning of it. But the demon fear shut them down and brought them to their knees. It took the healing touch of Jesus to free them from the fear that put them back inside the box. Only then did he coach them not to share “the vision with anyone until the Son of Man was raised from the dead.” This was a totally *outside-the-box* idea for their Jewish imagination.

Tomorrow the parish goes on retreat for three days. It is designed to invite you to come to this meeting tent and to think *outside-the-box* about how to nurture a culture of vocations in the parish.

Five months ago I asked the pastor, what is one thing that is unfinished in the parish in 35 years? His answer was: we have not given any vocations to the church. As you begin the second stage of your parish life this Lenten retreat is designed to help you to think *outside-the-box* about that response.

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton will be our retreat companion and guide. Her story is a woman who became a wife, mother, widow, educator and founder of a religious community, the Daughters of Charity. If you look at that story through the lens of my interpretation of today’s scripture readings she became an *outside-the-box* thinker. Her life parallels the life of Abram, Timothy, Peter, James and John. She is your version of the prophets and disciples who grew in trust of a God whose *outside-the-box* plan for salvation history took on a life of its own when they became *outside-the-box* witnesses.

We will invite God to do the same for us by reflecting on three themes of her life: *Mother, Mystic and Mentor*. By sowing these seeds of her life in the parish God will invite you to trust in a vision of how to nurture a culture of vocations in each one of you. Then it will be up to you to respond to God as she did.

The next three days is a retreat, not a mission. We will slow down, change the normal rhythm of life, get quiet, proclaim scripture stories about Rachel's plea to God to become a mother, Paul's discovering the mystic inside by his conversion and Jesus's mentoring his disciples about how to sow seeds that produce good fruit. There will be faith witness from parishioners, preaching by myself and faith sharing among you. It will be an opportunity for our *outside-the-box* God to sow some seeds for thinking *outside-the-box* about how to nurture a culture of vocations.

Here are some things *inside-this-box* that might help.

- A Tibetan prayer bowl to get you quiet and still.
- The chant *Be Still and Know that I am God* based on Ps. 46:10.
- The scriptures containing stories about an *outside-the-box* God encountering *inside-the-box* humans.
- A Litany of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. Your pastor had 300 of these printed. On the final night you may take a copy home for private and family prayer.

The only thing not inside this box is your imagination. Bring it along so God can convert it and use it, like He did with St. EAS. Her story began as mother and ended with a legacy.

As a retreat preacher, I see myself as a seed sower. With the help of the retreat team, we will sow spiritual seeds that hopefully will bear spiritual fruits in the parish. That will happen when the retreat is over. On Wednesday a retreat will become a mission. Those seeds will be in your hands, your imagination and for your doing.

This closing story will help you prepare for the next three days:

Once upon a time a young lady entered a gift shop and much to her surprise found Jesus Christ behind the counter. She said to him, "what do you sell here?" Jesus answered, "Anything your heart desires."

Hardly believing what she heard she asked for the most impossible things. "Well, in that case, I would like shelter for all the homeless, food for all the hungry, work for all the unemployed and peace around the world."

Jesus smiled and said to her, "You have me wrong my dear. We don't sell fruits here. We only sell seeds."

Amen.