

Second Sunday of Lent Christ Church Episcopal, 2024. Fr. Oswald Bwechwa

One of my wildest dreams is to plant a church somewhere near my village. I call it a dream because I envision a non-traditional parish.

By non-traditional I mean a parish community that is empowered. In my culture, people look up to the priest for everything. Clergy look up to the bishop who controls everything. Conformity and uniformity are virtues that cannot be ignored. The faithful do what the priest tells them to do, and the priests do what the bishop tells them to do.

Well, I don't plan to be a rebel. But I think that the people should have a say on what happens at church. I dream of an empowered and engaged church community engaged in every aspect of their life including politics, economic, social, and cultural affairs.

I dream of a church where the good news of liberation will take center stage. I dream of a beloved church community that nurtures and serves. Yes, that is my wildest dream. And I know there will be resistance and push back.

In my dreaming, I have also thought about my sermons. What would be my first sermon at that church? What would I say to motivate people to buy into my vision and dream?

After reading the lessons for today, I could not help but wonder whether these readings would be my first choice lessons for my debut sermon. I pictured myself in front of new church seekers. Most of whom are not regular church goers. Perhaps this is their first experience with church.

I imagine reading the first lesson about Abraham and Sarah. God asks Abraham to leave his homeland at age 100. And God promises Abraham a lot of children. I look around at the people gathered there sitting on the floor. The church does not have pews yet. Most of the listeners have a tough time imagining one hundred years. The average life expectancy is around sixty. At 80 most of the villagers are dead.

I imagine many of them politely smiling in disbelief. What is this new priest talking about? They whisper among themselves. Who lives to be one hundred years old? Who can have babies after age 40? How can a 100 year old man travel long distances? Are there no wild animals such as lions on the way? They are bewildered.

Things turn south when I start talking about the gospel. ***“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, will save it.***

By this time, the new church seekers are just waiting for the end of the service. I suspect that the following Sunday, half of my new seekers will not show up. Who wants to come to church to be told that they need to carry a cross? After all, **life** in the village is already a heavy cross.

Who can blame Peter for taking Jesus aside and rebuking him. Even for those who had been with Jesus for three years, this message of the cross was difficult to handle.

No wonder in many African villages and towns the **prosperity gospel** is attracting thousands of followers. People are flocking to hear the “real good news.” Good news of less pain and suffering, good news of wealth and blessings, good news instant success. I can’t blame them because they have lived for too long carrying heavy burdens on their shoulders.

Does it mean that the message of the cross is irrelevant?

Of course, not. Christianity is defined by the cross. The symbol of Christianity is the cross. The message of the cross is front and center in Christian faith. The cross and its message cannot be ignored.

But it is also important to keep in mind that, the message of the cross and the incredible promises of God, are not intended to attract outsiders into faith communities. The message of the cross, and God’s promises to Abraham exist in scripture, in order to help people who **already believe**, to make sense of their most difficult experiences, when God seems to take back, everything they have ever received at God’s hand.

In other words, the story about picking up the cross is not meant to draw people in but rather to help people who are already in, stay in relationship with the one true God, even when their world turns upside down.

But it is important to keep in mind that the message of cross makes sense to those who have developed a deep relationship with God. In the story of Abraham, we are told that God made a covenant with him. A covenant is not made between strangers. A covenant is made in a trusting relationship with the other. It is only in the context of a deep trusting relationship that Abraham left his homeland and was willing to sacrifice his son.

Jesus is going to pick up his cross. He is going to cry out, Abba father why have you forsaken me. He will call upon God, and God will be silent. Deep dark silence. But in the end, he will confidently say, May your will be done. Into your hands I commit my spirit.

I am convinced that the only way Jesus went through his passion, was because of his deep trusting relationship with his father. Jesus knew that his father is trustworthy. On the cross he prayed psalm twenty-two that says:

***For God does not despise nor abhor the poor in their poverty;
neither does he hide his face from them; * but when they cry to him he hears them.***

Yes, Jesus trusted his father. Even in that deep silence, he trusted that his father was listening. His father was there with him. It is this trust that propelled him to accept God’s will for him. It is trust that propelled Adam to embark on his journey. For anyone who has no trusting relationship with God, the message of the cross is absurd.

As Christians, crosses are a reality of life. We don't have to go looking for them. Like Abraham we will be asked to let go of what makes us feel safe. Like toddlers learning to swim, we will be called to jump into the pool. Scary as it is, we will be encouraged to jump in. We will jump into the reassuring arms of our mother.

We will be asked to let go of our pride, our security, and homeland. We will be asked to journey into the unknown. We will desperately watch our loved ones suffer or die. Being in a trusting relationship with God will help us make sense of the crosses in front of us. We will have courage to jump into the deep end, knowing that God is in charge.

The reasonable explanation why we pick up that cross Or why we let go of the safety net is because like Jesus and Abraham we trust. We trust God even when it does not make sense.

My friends, God is trustworthy. We can safely make a covenant with him. When he calls us into carrying crosses or leaving our homeland, we can do it because God is trustworthy.

When Jesus asks his disciples to pick up their cross, he is basically telling them to trust him. The prayer for us during the Lenten season is to develop a close relationship with Christ. The purpose of prayer and fasting during lent s to remove barriers that go between us and God. Prayer and fasting are meant to build a close relationship with God.

Just as Christ did before he embarked on his ministry, with this trust, we can jump into the deep end knowing that we will land in the safety of God's arms. **Amen.**