

The 2nd Sunday of Lent, February 25, 2018, Bill Skubi
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16, Romans 4:13-25, Mark 8:31-38, Psalm 22:22-30

Ground Hog Day

The last time I wore the Alb and processed in with the Altar Party was Fifty years ago in my last year as Acolyte at St Stephens in Seattle. Some things about being Episcopalian never seem to change.

The message I am honored to bring today from our holy scriptures is about third acts, third chances at transformation and the revival of the Holy Spirit in each of us.

But first I will relate a story in the spirit of full disclosure.

One of the first questions I was asked at coffee hour, when Jan and I began regularly attending services seven years ago was, "Are you a cradle Episcopalian?"

I was surprised to be asked this, but then again, I was not – Episcopalian identity is real, and can be a stubborn force to be reckoned with.

Now, I was 8 years old, well out of the cradle when I was baptized in the episcopal church so I guess the strict answer to the question is no, I am not a cradle Episcopalian.

In 1957 my non-practicing Catholic Father and non-practicing Congregationalist Mother decided it was time their heathen children had a Church home. I remember distinctly that day 60 years ago, when all six of us including mom and dad lined up in front of the chapel font in St. Stephens and were baptized one after the other.

I remember that day as one of the most wonderful days of my life.

Baptism is the great second chance, the first and complete do-over, and the foundation of our individual Christian pilgrimage. But our scripture readings today are not about one-time grace and absolution, they are about God's infinite patience and forbearance, about third, fourth, almost limitless chances, that eventually lead to great third acts in the lives of God's children even at age 99 like Abram in our first reading today.

One of the great explorations of this spiritual truth in recent years is Harold Ramis' film classic with a February theme, Ground Hog Day

To quote film reviewer Roger Ebert

The movie, as everyone knows, is about a man who finds himself living the same day over and over and over again. He is the only person in his world who knows this is happening, and after

going through periods of dismay and bitterness, revolt and despair, suicidal self-destruction and cynical recklessness, he begins to do something that is alien to his nature. He begins to learn.

This synopsis resonates with my work on the St Augustine's Future Focus Group. For the past 8 months we have hosted cottage meals, in which parishioners of St Augustine's were asked to anonymously comment on 9 questions pertaining to the direction of our common life.

Without serious self-examination, and much lively discussion over the coming months it seems almost certain to me that the most likely future of our life together will be to repeat together the equivalent of a never ending Episcopal liturgical ground hog day. But, I am here to contend, "Endless, repetition is not a forgone episcopal destiny."

Just like Bill Murray woke up each repeated Ground Hog day to Sonny and Cher's "I got you, babe" we would be well served to begin each day with this Sunday's scripture readings, until their message of Forbearance and Renewal were ingrained in our life of faith, together.

How better for a church with an average age close to 70 years to approach the daunting task of long range planning than with a verse that begins,

'When Abram was 99 years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said " (and what follows is my own translation), "Abram and Sarai, the great I am has planned, and promised great things through you, so just try to listen and not keep screwing up."

This, God said to Abram after the old man had screwed up in every possible way and knowing full well he would screw up some more.

Because God speaks to Abram and Sarai both by name we know there is intimate connection and commitment, and because God renames both of them we know there is transformation and renewal in the offing.

Paul writes in Romans, "the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of Faith."

The lawyer and logician Paul, is grappling with a seemingly unresolvable legal and logical contradiction. In the 120% percent Patriarchal structure of Jewish society righteousness and honor must be attributed to Abraham, the grand patriarch of Judaism, but how can that be when Righteousness can only be judged by adherence to the Law of Moses, the Law that wasn't delivered by God through Moses until hundreds of years after the death of Abraham.

Paul comes to understand that god is all powerful and capable of renewing his covenant with humankind and renewing his relationship with individuals through grace. It would not be lost on Paul that Abraham while the father of the Jewish people was, strictly according to scripture, born under the earlier Rainbow Covenant of Noah.

The rainbow covenant of Noah was god's second chance, or baptism by flood, for Humankind. The Abrahamic covenant was yet another, and the New Covenant of Christ still a further movement of God's Holy Spirit in human history, one that Paul himself was now journeying through.

In Abram and Sarai God did not see perfect people, or even good people. They were faithful in that they mostly believed the promises God made to them, but even in this most fundamental strength there were lapses and without the grace of forgiveness and the instrument of divine direction and correction God's chosen couple would have failed utterly.

This realization humbled Saul of Tarsus as God gave him eyes to envision a great Third Act, a new covenant that through the Apostles of Christ would spread in a short time around the world through most of Europe, North Africa and Asia as far as Beijing, by the year 450 AD.

So, when we look forward to envisioning the revival of St. Augustine's in the years ahead, we do well to remember that the arc of the covenant of god is always on the move, the third act we build together will probably not be altogether different, but neither will it be just like what we've always done. Let us be open to every angel that God sends us during our discernment process.

Whoa, this sounds pretty radical for an Episcopalian, what about upholding tradition and ritual observance that seems so foundational to our worship and identity. Most of us intend to be law abiding in daily life, but a quick survey of the rapid evolution of earthly law in our life time should have us truly wonder if the arc of justice isn't on some fearsomely steep and holy trajectory. Most of us present, can remember a time when, racial segregation was law in a third of the United States. When it was against the law to be yourself, if gay, and when consenting adults were cruelly prosecuted for inter-racial marriage. We remember when doctors and their patients faced felony charges for terminating pregnancy, when cigarettes were included at every airline seat and leaded gasoline was dispensed at every pump.

Now we live in an age, when the science of genetics and medicine should put long held fictions concerning race and gender distinctions in a new and dazzling light. What an age to live and move in.

Can it be that a third act of Christian faith will have the holy church of god finally lose its underpinning of patriarchy for a new covenant of radical human equality, that the early church glimpsed but could barely dream of working until now. Or will we find it more comfortable to slide back into reaction to change, and cling to our traditions.

Let us all acknowledge that what we can realize of this new covenant at St. Augustine's will not come easily through intelligence or planning solely rooted in our human agency, we will have to put ego and self to death, and walk forth seeking the guidance of God's Holy Spirit?

Finally let's look at the gospel reading from Mark to see how this could happen. And to illustrate this I would like to look at a famous "get behind me Satan" moment from our own time.

Apple computers, the most valuable human enterprise on earth was created by two California misfits, Steve Jobs, the visionary leader, and Stephen Wozniak, the brilliant but plodding engineer. Wozniak single handedly built the first 100 personal computers Apple sold in Steve Jobs garage. By 1979 they had in production, the Apple II, the most advanced personal computer in world and it was selling as fast as they came off the factory floor.

Now reading from the Gospel of Steve: (And you may want to follow the gospel reading in your bulletins)

"Then Steve Jobs began to say the Apple II, even the Apple III would soon pass, and make way for a Macintosh, the company would lose 80% of market share, Steve Jobs will be fired by the board of Apple directors, be returned and die of cancer, and all this must come to pass before Apple becomes the biggest tech company in the world."

"Wozniak took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his workers Steve Jobs rebuked the Woz, and said, "Get out, take your stock and go, you will never work at Apple ever again."

Something like that actually happened, of course the big difference between the readings from the Gospels of Mark and Steve, is that where God is at the center of things there is forgiveness and reconciliation, and not just second chances, but third acts as well, Remember Peter, rebuked by Jesus, even denied he ever knew Jesus, but after receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost went on to have quite an impressive third act.

In reviewing the parish responses to our St Augustine's future focus meetings thus far one thing struck me, there were a couple hundred great ideas on how we could take our Parish into the future, but something was largely missing and this is big.

Only one response included the name of Jesus and not a single one had any reference to the Holy Spirit.

Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." I see that one person of our parish who responded to the question, "what is your call at St, Augustine's" as 'to follow Jesus," as saving this whole parish from a hundred identically repeated ground hog days. Same old (Episcopal) Same old, or a marvelous third act that is ours to claim in faith through the inward leading of the Holy Spirit. We will all have to take this journey with fear and trembling.

It's time for our community to renew our covenant with God. It is certainly not for me or for any one person to dictate the terms. I am here to say that this covenant conversation should include all of us, listen to everyone, and be prepared to heed the new directions where God's Holy Spirit is leading us all.

I have no doubt that *the* Holy Spirit of God that lives in us will find as many ways of true expression as there are individuals in our parish. It is the substance of this marvelous third act, the miracle of unexpected renewal, that we listen to everyone, and together hone our skill at discerning the difference between the call of divine things and human things, and to generously extend forgiveness and reconciliation to any of our brothers and sisters who have felt compelled to leave over “Get behind me Satan” moments within our own fellowship.

If we trust God to guide us on the road ahead, perhaps it will be said of our Third Act at St. Augustine’s, as it states in today’s psalm,
They shall come and make known to a people yet unborn the saving deeds that God has done.