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Annunciation Parish, Shumway, Illinois  
4 March 2007

The Second Sunday of Lent (C)

[*Brief discussion of the so-called discovery of Jesus' tomb*]

In the first reading from the Book of Genesis we find the account of the sealing of the covenant between the Lord and Abraham, one of the central moments in salvation history. This same covenant will be continued through Moses and the giving of the Law. It is to this very same covenant that the prophets will continually call the people of Israel. It is this same covenant that is brought to its perfection in Jesus Christ.

To us the sealing of a covenant in such a way seems very strange, but in reality it is carried out in accord with ancient customs; this covenant is sealed like any other. Entering into a covenant in this way

was a risky undertaking because it expressed an obligation which was final and irrevocable, bringing a kind of curse on oneself in the case of breaking the pact, and consequently a binding of one's life and fortune by giving one's word.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, Second Sunday of Lent, in *Journey to Easter: Spiritual Reflections for the Lenten Season* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1987), 67.

By sealing the covenant in this way, the two parties make it abundantly clear that if either of them breaks the covenant and does not keep faith, they, like the animals, will be cut in two.

By doing this Abraham *believes*. He entrusts his life to the words of this contract, entrusts his life, irrevocably, to the promise of the covenant. The promise becomes the span of his life, and with his readiness to give his life for his promise.<sup>2</sup>

Abraham does not simply believe; he lives out his faith and allows his faith to influence every sphere of his existence. We, too, are called to give our lives - in all of their totality - to the Lord because faith is not only worthy of glory,

faith is worthy also of suffering. Faith is worthy of a commitment of life until death. To believe means to stake one's life on the word of God, to unite one's life and fate to that word, to be prepared to sacrifice one's standing, to deny oneself any right over oneself and one's time for the word of God.<sup>3</sup>

We see this clearly in the Gospel today when Jesus talks with Moses and Elijah about "his exodus that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem" (Luke 9). Jesus does not stay atop Mount Tabor in all of his glory; he descends the glorious

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

mountain to climb Mount Calvary to the Cross where his glory will be fully realized.

But there is more to this passage from the Book of Genesis that we are discussing.

The text says that, when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abraham. The word used here for a deep sleep is the same word employed in the creation story, when God created the woman from Adam's rib while he was asleep. This word *tardema* gives the meaning of a sleep out of the ordinary, a becoming deaf to all surrounding, everyday things, a dropping down through the levels of being, and reaching that depth where one arrives at the ground of being, touches the ultimate center of reality - God.<sup>4</sup>

The singer and songwriter Chris Rice sings about this level of "sleep" which is, really, the heart of true contemplation. He says that he sleeps in prayer:

Deep enough to dream in brilliant colors  
 I have never seen  
 Deep enough to join a billion people  
 For a wedding feast  
 Deep enough to reach out and touch  
 The face of the One who made me  
 And oh, the love I feel, and oh the peace  
 Do I ever have to wake up?<sup>5</sup>

Within this sleep of prayer he loses himself and finds himself contemplating the unfathomable mystery of God.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Chris Rice, "Deep Enough to Dream," *Short Term Memories*.

It is within this same strange sleep of prayer - of meditation and contemplation - that Abraham encounters the Lord.

At this mysterious depth Abraham sees something strange and stirring, something like a furnace and a blazing torch passing between the halves of the animals. Furnace and fire are representatives of the mystery of the invisible God. The furnace and the torch are in reality fire subdued and at the same time dangerous. Thus is expressed the inexpressible mystery of God which is at the same time order, discipline, and supreme power.<sup>6</sup>

At this point the covenant is sealed between Abraham and the Lord, and with the children of Abraham.

This says to us, God too follows the rite of promise, he too stakes his life and his fullness on this covenant; he too will claim to be prepared to give his life for this covenant. He too engages himself and his life to cement irrevocable loyalty to the covenant. At first sight, from a philosophical standpoint, this fact seems simply absurd. How could God suffer, die, bind his fate to the covenant with man, with Abraham? The bleeding head, crowned with a wreath of thorns, the crucified Lord, is the answer. The

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 67-68.

Son of God has borne the curse of the broken promise of the children of Abraham.<sup>7</sup>

Thus the unthinkable and the unimaginable is realized. For God, man is so important as to be worthy of his own passion. God offers the price of his fidelity in the incarnate Son, who gives his own life. He accepts to be cut to pieces, to be slain like those animals, when in the final Passion of Good Friday the body of the Son will be snatched away from the hand of God and given into the hands of death. God takes man seriously - he joins himself in a covenant with us, and in the Holy Eucharist, fruit of the Cross, gives his life into our hands, day after day. . . .

God's faithfulness unto death is in search of our faithfulness... God's message, which stakes his life on the covenant with us, is a message for everyday life: in the little things, in the patience of faith every day, is realized the way of faithfulness. And so, fixing our eyes on the blood of Christ, we convert ourselves always more and more to his love (see the First Letter of Clement 7:4).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 68-69.