

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent

Cycle B, 2.28.21

Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18/

Romans 3:31-34, 11:1/ Mark 9:2-10

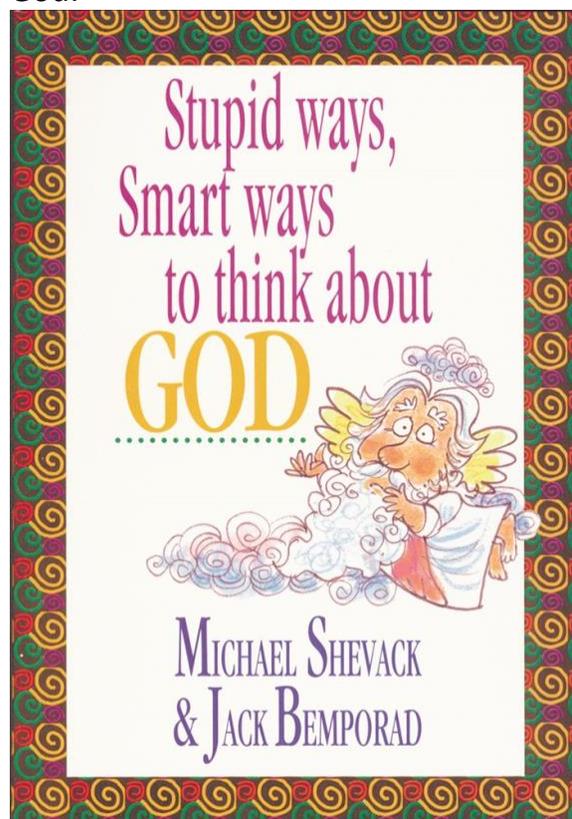
### THE LENTEN CONVERSION WE ALL NEED

On July 18, 1918, the Bolsheviks executed deposed Tsar Nicholas II and his family. Historian Robert Massie wrote a lengthy study, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, exploring the final years of the tsar. Massie relates that when the deposed monarch was being transported into exile across the snow-covered plains, a guard asked, “*Nicholas, do you have any idea how the whiteness out there would look with all the blood you have shed poured over it?*”



Nicholas responded with a blank stare. The guard returned the look for a long time and then finally said, “*Now I understand, Nicholas. You are not an evil man. You simply have no imagination.*” A lack of imagination is the beginning of evil. Without imagination, we can’t begin to know how others think or feel or hurt. With a good imagination we can begin to care and, eventually, to love.

The scriptures for this Second Sunday in Lent lure us into the world of the imagination -- beckoning us to see the many ways in which the love of God has been lavished on us -- the creative, redeeming and sanctifying ways of God. Through the power of the **imagination** there are many ways to envision God. I once picked up a book from a friend’s shelf: *Stupid Ways, Smart Ways to Think about God*.



The title threw me at first, but it’s a good little book and very entertaining about a quite serious subject. It’s neatly divided into parts. The first part contains the chapters that list the stupid ways of thinking about God -- like ‘God the General’ (“Stay

on the straight and narrow path... or he'll lock you in the brig for life and throw the key away.") Or 'God the Garbage Man' ("Don't worry about making a mess of your life... God will clean up after you; just leave your sins at curbside for pick-up on Tuesday morning!") God the Cosmic Hotel Bellhop ("All you have to do is dial for room service and he'll get you anything you want!")

These dumb ways of thinking about God seemed exaggerated and farfetched, but as I read them, I discovered that they were pretty accurate descriptions of the divine image which many people were taught. I found some of my own false notions of God in those pages.



Consider your children and grandchildren, who seem to know intuitively that God is for them and not against them. It takes years of adult indoctrination to reverse a child's native belief that God is **love** and not judgment, **compassion** and not reproachment, **friend** and not dictator. We often invert the divine

process. God made us in God's image and likeness, and ever since that moment of creation we've taken to recreate God in our image and likeness -- not always the best pictures of God.

The second part of the book lists the "smart ways to think about God." Those chapters name God with titles like "God is **creative**: God is so creative that every morning we wake up to something that in all eternity never was before and never will be again. And the you that wakes up was never the same before and never will be again. God is **personal**: When you celebrate the joy of a grandchild's graduation from college, God shares that joy with you. When we cry over the death of a dear friend, God weeps with us. Our laughter finds an echo in God's heart. Our pain is shared with the One who gave his only Son to death on a cross. God has a **plan**: Ours is no anonymous divinity who began human history willy-nilly and left us to our own devices. Everything that happens is part of God's plan. Even the stumbling stones become rocks in the path that lead to our divine destiny. God as **fulfillment**: Not a hair on our head is unnumbered or unheeded. Not a sparrow falls from the sky that our God does not notice. All finds its fulfillment in God.

So our Lenten prayer and the scriptures we hear can provide an antidote to any false notions, unhealthy ideas, or off-base teachings about God that we may have received. And we have to begin with today's reading from the Book of Genesis and the horrifying, even scandalous picture of God it presents. God demands that a father sacrifice his son in a most excruciating way – as a sacrificial holocaust. What kind of a God is that? Mary McGlone, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet and a wise biblical scholar and teacher, offers us a helpful insight which is hidden in the original language. The “God” who first calls Abraham, putting him to the test and ordering the sacrifice is translated from the Hebrew – *Elohim*, a common Semitic name used for all the ancient gods. This name, *Elohim*, refers to gods who act as absolute rulers, sometimes as tyrants whose anger must be appeased. Abraham thought this way about God and accepted the demand to make a holocaust of his beloved only son. Abraham respected *Elohim* as a fearsome, self-centered God who prized authority and obedience over love.

But the story doesn't end there, does it? The Lord who stopped Abraham from harming his son was translated in that part of the text from *Yahweh*, the Lord who had

entered into a covenant with Abraham and promised him descendants. The Lord appreciated Abraham's desire to be obedient, but went on to teach him that instead of sacrifice, the Lord simply desires loving relationship with all the creatures made in the divine image.



This is the creator God who gives life in abundance, from beginning to end. So Abraham has to undergo a conversion, moving away from “stupid ways of thinking about God” (as my little book would call it) to “smart ways” – ways we would call enlightened and inspired, or simply, loving.

A worthwhile Lenten practice for you to consider is to purify your own understanding of God. Like an annual eye exam at your optometrist's office, check your vision. How do you see God? Who is God for you? This isn't an easy question because our view is limited by the range of our senses. Obviously, for an invisible God, proof can't be as simple as a “show-and-tell” classroom exercise. When it comes to the experience of God,

“seeing ISN’T believing.” In fact, just the opposite is true: believing IS seeing. With the eyes of faith we can see God everywhere. Faith in God is a matter of the heart, more than a conviction of the mind. All our efforts to describe or picture God will always be filled with huge gaps. The God we worship is too big to be contained by human thought. But, like the disciples on the mountaintop with Jesus, we can receive glimpses of the Divine, hints that reveal to us the presence of the Spirit. This is the journey of faith that we all must take.



If we’re serious in regard to thinking about God, we also have to think more seriously about ourselves. That, too, is part of the inward journey of Lent – to admit our need for transformation, to live our lives more authentically, to grow into the truest version of ourselves, reflecting the God in whose image we have been created.

*John Kasper, OSFS*