

## IT'S ABOUT DECIDING

Sermon delivered by the Very Rev. Titus Presler, Th.D.,  
Dean & President of the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest,  
Professor of Mission and World Christianity,  
at the Community Eucharist on Thursday in the Second Week in Lent,  
20 March 2003. Year B, Lent II: Genesis 22.1-14; Mark 8.31-38

### **It's all about deciding.**

These scriptures are all about deciding.

*Life* is all about deciding.

*In what is now probably one of the ten most quoted statements in American culture,  
Woody Allen is reputed to have said,*

*“Eighty-five percent of success is just showing up.”*

To which we might retort, “Yes, but the other ninety-five percent is *deciding* what to *do*  
when you show up!” —

in fact, just showing up is not nearly enough.

Lives are wasted,

opportunities are lost,

relationships languish,

institutions die

— all through people *just* showing up.

Just showing up is what makes people roll their eyes about committee meetings;

faculty here have been amazed to hear me say that I love meetings —

committee meetings, board meetings, the works —

I enjoy being with people, but what I really like is those groups becoming  
catalysts for people making decisions.

### **Life is about deciding —**

Our past is a history of decisions,

a biography of decisions —

yes, lots of things both good and bad have happened *to* us —

things over which we had no control —

but the real story of our lives is not what happened to us

but what we made happen,

the decisions we made, whatever was happening to us.

Some of those decisions we celebrate, others we still grieve;

decisions that seemed complex at the time may look simple in retrospect;

decisions that seemed simple at the time we now realize were conditioned by  
complexities we were unaware of at the time;

whatever the case, our autobiographical reflections are always decision-ographies.

We're all here in this place, through these quite peculiar institutions of ETSS and LSPS,

because each of us made what the ordinary person on the street might

consider a quite peculiar sequence of decisions.

Our present is all about decisions:

We're addicted to feeling burdened by each day looking like an impossible load of tasks  
 over which we have no control —  
 in fact, each day is simply a landscape of decisions, a decision-scape.  
 And our future is a trajectory determined by decisions —  
 some of today's decisions will determine that trajectory,  
 lots of decisions await us as we move into that future.

**Likewise, the world we live in is shaped by decisions.**

Fifteen years ago, smoking bans were a pipe dream — or a pipe nightmare — but now  
 smokers have to hunt for havens — lots of decisions made that happen.  
 Fifteen years ago, cancelling Two-Thirds-World debts was a pipe dream, but Jubilee  
 2000 cancelled a great deal of debt — lots of decisions made that happen.  
 The atrocious and widening gap between rich and poor in the world — lots of decisions  
 have made that happen.  
 The deteriorating global environment — lots of decisions have made that happen.  
 The anguish of this day, the war breaking out on Iraq— lots of decisions have made that  
 happen.

**“Get behind me, Satan!”**

Jesus rebuked Peter, much as one might shush a child while the grown-ups talk,  
 but he was *speaking* to Satan.  
 He addressed Satan, because he felt addressed *by* Satan.  
 Peter had taken him aside,  
 doubtless to de-operationalize the talk about death,  
 and in Peter's possibly rational, pragmatic and optimistic alternative Jesus felt  
 addressed by Satan.  
 He felt addressed by Satan, not simply because the alternative was the wrong way to go,  
 but because the alternative was so attractive.  
 Jesus felt profoundly tempted.  
 Here was temptation appearing every bit as vividly as it did when he was alone in the  
 desert,  
 only now it appears through the voice of one he loves.  
 The issues are the same —  
 own way versus God's way,  
 lordship versus servanthood,  
 shining glory versus self-eclipse,  
 the works!  
 The moment was precarious,  
 just as the moments in the desert were,  
 just as countless moments during Jesus' ministry were.  
 In temptation Jesus needed, once again, to *decide*.  
 Isn't it interesting that he immediately calls the crowd together with the disciples and  
 launches into a costly-discipleship discourse?  
 We're used to seeing Jesus as the know-it-all whose only problem was helping his friends  
 get it.  
 I think Jesus may be preaching to himself —

“Here, let me hurry and get a bunch of people together — they’ll be my witnesses that I actually said it, then it will be harder for me to go back on it.”

**God is all about deciding.**

We often treat the need to make decisions as a kind of curse.

We often envy dogs and cats — and I know that many of you have such friends — whose decisions seem either totally hard-wired or utterly trivial.

We sometimes envy other religious spiritualities, where the decisions of life are backgrounded as trivial distractions behind a foreground of inner peace and harmony.

*But the God of the Bible is all about deciding.*

The God who acts is the God who decides, the activist God is a decisive God — deciding, in the first instance, to create and then deciding to convene community.

That’s where we come in, created in the image of God.

To be created in the image of God, declares the Episcopal Catechism, “means that we are free to make choices: to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God.”

“Free to make choices” — that’s the heart of the *imago dei!*

Deciding is the heart of the image of God in us.

The God of the Bible continues to make choices with us, alongside us, despite us — deciding to call, deciding to intervene, deciding to liberate, deciding to cajole, deciding to scold, sometimes deciding to throw a tantrum!

**And when the tantrums weren’t enough, deciding to come among us and be with us, not as an exemplar who had it all figured out and who just had to be followed, but as a human being just like you and me, who had to make decisions every day with no more native ability or equipment than you and I have.**

No omnipresence, obviously, but on that same model, no omnipotence, no omniscience, no intrinsic perfection — no, emptied of those divine prerogatives, as the Christ hymn in Philippians suggests.

In other words, it wasn’t all figured out in advance, there was no destiny just waiting to be fulfilled.

The divine project and, indeed, the very nature and integrity of God rested on the decisions of this human being.

So when I say that today’s gospel moment is a precarious moment I mean totally precarious —

the God project hung in the balance, as it did many times during the Jesus event.

Whatever was remarkable about Jesus,

as so much was remarkable about Jesus, was a function not of deity, which was real but totally emptied, but a function of faithfulness, his God-ward orientation, his prayer, which is to say that it was a function of his decisions.

The passion prediction today, for instance, I see not as a piece of divine foreknowledge, but as a hunch derived both from looking around and from praying.

So Jesus' willingness for self-eclipse  
 reflected God's willingness for self-eclipse —  
 and that for you and for me.

It is at that point that I feel I finally touch what Isaac Watts exclaims in our Lenten hymn:  
 "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all!"

This radical incarnationism,  
 this radical kenoticism  
 is what breaks open the love of the story.

It is also what breaks open God's solidarity with us as deciders,  
 as decision-making creatures living out the decision-making nature of God.

For if God's nature is to decide, and deciding is the heart of God's image in us,  
 how could it not be that Jesus was not only a decider,  
 but one whose decisions were completely free —  
 or, at any rate, as free as the decisions of you and me?

**It's the gravity of the current moment that prompts me to focus today on the deciding.**

We're living in an environment of decisions in the Iraq war and its runup —  
 decisions in Iraq and the Middle East,  
 decisions in the White House and the Pentagon,  
 decisions in Europe and Britain,  
 decisions, interestingly, by at least several billion ordinary people around the  
 world who have some kind of opinion on the matter.

Decisions, all of these, that affect profoundly 26 million people in Iraq as a life-and-death  
 matter,  
 decisions that affect the world community in a host of ways.

Today we see Abraham deciding.

Today we see Jesus deciding.

**Deciding is a holy act.**

**Deciding is an act that arises from God's image within us.**

**Deciding is the first step in discipleship.**

**Deciding is an act in which Jesus joins you.**

**It's easy to take deciding for granted. Don't.**

It's easy to think that not much hangs on your deciding. Don't.

So how much *does* hang on your deciding?

Well, a natural corollary to a high christology is a high ecclesiology.

If Jesus was the word made flesh, as John declares,

and if, as Paul declares, the church is the body of Christ in the world,

it follows that the church sacramentally continues the incarnation of Christ in the  
 world.

Yes, the church: in all its weaknesses and failings.

Yes, you and I: in all our weaknesses and failings.

**How much hangs on your deciding?**

**How much hangs on our deciding?**

**Everything.**