

Archbishop Lori's Sermon - Ecumenical Service, Morgan State University

Morgan State University

Baltimore, MD

Feb. 25, 2018

First, let me say how happy I am to return to Morgan State University, (now celebrating your 151st year of education, research, and service) to share in Sunday worship and to offer reflections on the Scriptures just proclaimed. In a special way, I wish to greet and thank Dr. Victor McCrary, for your friendship and for your kind introduction; I'd also like to thank Dr. Gloria Gibson, Provost and Senior Vice-President for your presence and for your kind welcome; and Mr. Marvin Perry, Executive Director of the Morgan Mile, a wonderful initiative designed to enhance academic success and to open doors of opportunity. And it is a special joy to greet Reverend Bernard Keels, University Chaplain, and to thank you for your warm welcome and for your devoted service to this entire University community.

Before I offer my message this morning, may I ask that we pause and bow our heads in prayer - for young people across the country who have lost their lives to gun violence, for the young people in Florida and for so many young people in this city. Let us pray that we will have the wisdom and courage to take the necessary steps to end this senseless and heartrending violence once and for all.

I am especially honored to be here at Morgan State during Black History Month. It is critically important that we hold up and celebrate the greatness and accomplishments of African American men and women. As a Catholic, I think of Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange who came to Baltimore in the 1820's, when slavery was the law of the land and education was denied to many women. Mother Lange opened a school to educate young women of color and went on to found the Oblate Sisters of Providence. The school she founded, St. Francis Academy, and her

religious order continue to this day to serve the underserved in our city. We think of many other heroes such as Frederick Douglass, born 200 years ago, a former slave and a prophet of human dignity and equality in our culture. We think of Mary Jane McLeod Bethune, a great educator, Rosa Parks, and this year we observe the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, the prophet of non-violent action – a prophet for his own times and a prophet whose voice must resound in our times. I was humbled to write a reflection on Dr. King and his principles of nonviolence for the Catholic community but also for the wider community in the hope of lifting up his message and contributing to a very necessary conversation in a time when racism continues to rear its ugly head, in a time when our nation and our world have become so divided and so violent. May his dream live in our hearts and may it be realized in us and through us!

These and many other black leaders form a legacy, an inheritance. We read, study, and write history not merely because it is required. As you are taught here at Morgan, the study of history is much more than cramming into our heads the names of people, momentous events, dates, times, and places. All that is important, but there are much deeper reasons for studying history. From history we learn lessons not to be forgotten – as indeed the lessons of the Civil Rights Movement have been forgotten by far too many people in the United States. From history we learn about human nature – about our better angels but also about our demons. In the midst of human mischance, sinfulness, and confusion, there arises great men and women who emerge as leaders – men and women who point the way forward when all seems to be lost. In reflecting on history, we focus on that of which we must repent, those sins against human dignity which will forever be a blot on our humanity. So also history must help fuel our desire never again to be complicit in injustice. And finally, history guides us in writing our history. Whether we think of it or not, all of us are involved in making history, a history that is formed by what we love, by what seizes our imagination, by what we do with our weekends and evenings, by what we read, whom we know, what breaks our hearts, what fills us with joy and gratitude (cf. Fr. Arrupe). We are not just the recipients of history; we are actors in the unfolding drama of human history – for weal or woe.

For that reason, we need to pay special attention to today's Scripture readings

which speak to us of a common inheritance that we share, viz., the faith of Abraham. Indeed, passage from the 4th Chapter of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans draws a line going back from the faith we share as Christians to the faith of Abraham, portrayed in today's reading from the 17th Chapter of the Book of Genesis. Abraham was preeminently a man of faith and because of this, he was deemed righteous; because of this, he became the father of many nations; because of this, he is *our* father in faith.

As we listened to the readings from Genesis and Romans, the promises made by God did not seem to be, well, promising. In fact, they seemed to be humanly impossible. God told Abraham that his offspring would be more numerous than the stars yet here he is, 99 years old, his wife Sarah beyond her childbearing years – and their son Isaac is yet to be born. St. Paul describes Abraham as being 'as good as dead' painting a picture that helps us understand how deep, how radical, how unflinching was the faith of Abraham: he hoped against hope; he believed even when no evidence was in sight that God would fulfill his promises and make him the father of many nations.

Not unlike the history we study and lift up during Black History Month, St. Paul wrote his commentary on the Book of Genesis not just to inform us but also *to shape the course of our lives*. Thus, St. Paul also draws a line from the faith of Abraham to our faith as followers of Jesus Christ as those who proclaim Jesus as the fulfillment of all God's promises – Jesus who died on the Cross and rose from the dead for us and for our salvation. Paul is urging us to open our hearts to the Holy Spirit, to receive God's free gift of faith and to believe with our heart and soul, thus permitting God to justify us, to lead us to salvation. Yes, we must believe, just as Abraham believed when all seemed to be loss.

What, then was the faith of Abraham like? What were the enduring qualities of Abraham's faith? And what should our faith be like? A noted Scripture scholar, Scott Hahn, suggests three qualities of Abraham's faith, qualities which I would like to take up and explain in a way that might have some application to your lives and mine in the here and now.

First, the faith of Abraham was *personal*. Abraham did not put his trust in nameless,

faceless cosmic forces; he didn't put his trust in idols who cannot speak or think or act. Rather, Abraham believed in a personal God and believed in turn that God knew him, loved him, cared about him, and that God had a providential plan for him and his descendants. Abraham adhered to God with his whole mind, heart, and soul. Let us ask ourselves, as think of the history we've been called to make – Is our faith personal? Do we believe in a personal God, a real God? And in the drama of our lives, including its tragedies, do we still believe, do we hope against hope, that God knows us, loves us, cares for us? Let us not forget how consequential such faith is for the life of the world today! Let us believe *personally in a personal God*, as did Abraham.

Second, Abraham's faith was *propositional*, that is to say, it had content. His faith was not a vague feeling of optimism, a spirituality without content, without truth to be comprehended and believed. Rather, Abraham entered into a covenant with God a covenant based on faith but also with terms and with promises. Paul sees in that covenant a promise fulfilled supremely in Jesus, a descendant of Abraham according to the flesh – for in dying on the Cross and in rising from the dead Jesus won for his Father in heaven a multitude of sons and daughters – a promise that is now to be fulfilled in you and in me. So our faith must not be reduced merely to a vague spiritual feeling. How many people today say, "I'm not religious but I'm spiritual" – yes, we are spiritual but our spirituality is meant to engage in what God has revealed; in what God has said through Holy Scripture; in God's promise of mercy "the promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham and his children forever!" Let have a personal faith but let us ensure that our faith has content and meaning that gives our lives a horizon of hope and decisive direction.

Finally, Abraham's faith was *persevering*. We've already seen how Abraham hoped against hope. But how do we live and express an enduring faith in Christ? Here, the answer comes from the Gospel of St. Mark where Jesus says to you and to me that 'if we would be his disciples we must deny ourselves, pick up our cross, and follow in his footsteps.' Jesus is challenging us to believe not merely when everything's going our way but when we meet with failure, misunderstanding, suffering; when we must sacrifice even our personal goals of success to keep our faith. "What profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" To deny oneself, to give one's life away for the sake of others, to consider faith in Christ and discipleship more

valuable than all else – this is what it means for us to have a faith like that of Abraham, a faith that endures and perseveres against all the odds, against the suffering that is bound to come our way. Do we not see this kind of faith in Dr. King's principles of nonviolence? Dr. King refused to take the most expedient path but instead followed the way of love and understanding in resisting and overcoming injustice . . . so too for us!

All that we have comes from God has his gift to us. Let us then give thanks to those who gone before us in faith, resolving that we will live the faith they exemplified in our day, in our time, in our communities for the glory of God and for good of others. Then, we too shall be make history, a history that will be recorded not only in earthly books but in the Book of Life.

May God bless us and keep us always in his love!