

From our first breath at birth to our last breath at death, life is all about experiencing new things, growing and learning.

One day my mother left my dad alone with the responsibility of giving my older brother, Dave, his breakfast.

My dad *loved* bananas on his cereal, and offered to cut some up into Dave's Cheerios. Dave, I'm told, refused. He was a picky eater.

Dad insisted, proposing, "try some banana, or I'll stick it in your ear."

Later that night, when mom was giving Dave a bath, she was startled to find in his ear traces of a sticky white substance that smelled faintly of bananas.

Perhaps there's something encoded in our genetic makeup that makes us fearful of the new.

"New" could kill you.

How many people's last words were along the lines of, "O.K., I'll taste it first," or "I think those strangers are friendly."

Imagine the response if I suggested changing the Mass schedule!

This should help us appreciate Abram in our first reading.

He's 75, and settled down in the suburbs with his wife, servants, and flocks.

Then God invites him on a road trip and promises that if he pulls up stakes, he will be the father of a great nation, and a source of blessing for the world.

His wife is sterile and about as old as he is, so it wasn't clear how God was going to pull this off!

But we're told, "Abram went as the Lord directed."

What's left unsaid is that Abram had to overcome the fear of living in a different culture, with a different language and traditions, much like many of your parents and grandparents.

He had overcome the fear of leaving the familiar and safe.

And we are faced with a similar choice.

Like the rich young man in Matthew, chapter 19, like the fishermen Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John, we are invited to leave everything that is safe and familiar, and follow Jesus.

Recently in a discussion of Jesus' teaching to love our enemies, someone contrasted this command with "the real world."

It was a significant choice of words, revealing a serious problem.

Too often we hear the words of Jesus, but don't take them seriously because, well, after all, "the real world isn't like that."

We're like the rich young man who followed the rules.

He didn't murder, didn't commit adultery, was honest and loved his parents and his neighbors.

He was a good guy, but he couldn't go all in and become a disciple of Jesus.

That was a journey he wasn't willing to make and a change he wasn't about to embrace.

That was too much of a contrast from the "real world" that seems safe because it's known, accepted and doesn't set us apart from other folks.

The journey you and I have to choose to make or not is as challenging and frightening as Abram's.

It's the decision between making faith "a part" of our lives or making faith *our life*.

What do I mean?

When faith is a part of our lives, we're still in charge, like Abram enjoying the good life.

When faith is our *life*, God is in charge.

It's the difference between coming to Mass so we don't feel guilty, and wanting to do everything we can to serve God.

St. Paul knew this difference.

He tells Timothy that God has already saved us through the cross and resurrection of Jesus and is now at work in those who believe, strengthening them to do God's will.

We are *not* saved by our good works, he says, but through the death of Jesus that reconnected heaven and earth.

The good we do, if it is good at all, is a loving response to what God has already done for us, not an attempt to get God to love us.

Making faith our *life*, not just a *part* of our life, is risky.

Desiring and acting for the good of your enemy is risky; people will call you a fool.

Forgiving, rather than seeking revenge, is risky; people will call you weak.

Speaking out for the unborn is risky; people will call you a misogynist.

Faith is our life, not just a part of our life when the goal of our career is helping others, rather than making as much money as possible.

People will mock you for living faithfully because your life will convict them, just as the holiness of Jesus convicted the scribes, chief priests and Pharisees.

It is risky to be a living contradiction of the so-called "real world" and to trust a heavenly Father Who allowed that real world to crucify His only-begotten Son.

That's why Jesus takes his closest friends up the mountain.

He gives them a glimpse of the glory that was His from the beginning, and will be His after the resurrection.

The Father calls Jesus His “beloved Son” – *and* He will allow sinners like us to torture and kill Him.

The transfiguration will perhaps be the only thing that prevents them from utter despair when they see their friend and Lord hanging in agony on the cross.

We are basically insecure people, constantly looking for assurances and no-risk guarantees.

I’m insecure. I’m afraid to make mistakes, especially as a pastor, and one way to avoid that is to change nothing at the parish.

But I’m haunted by the sight of empty or near-empty churches in Europe, and the statistics in this country that show more and more people – especially young people – no longer identify as people of faith.

So let’s do a test. Please stand if you are 24 years of age or younger. If you’re short, raise your hand, as well so we can see you. Look around, everyone. Thank you, have a seat.

Now, will those 65 years of age or older, please stand. Take your time, you need a stretch, anyway. Look around, everyone. Do you see a problem?

Pope Benedict XVI said, "Christianity is not a new philosophy or new morality. We are Christians only if we encounter Christ... Only in this personal relationship with Christ, only in this encounter with the Risen One do we really become Christians."

We have to make a journey together, folks – to leave our comfortable way of doing ministry and to focus the life of the parish on helping people encounter Jesus.

We have to leave the idea that faith is a nice, comfortable “part” of our life and seek this encounter with Jesus who said, “I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.”

This Lent I challenge you to open the scriptures and read a Gospel carefully, seeking Jesus, and listening to Him.

I challenge you – and myself – to beg the Holy Spirit to enter our hearts and transform our lives.

Becoming holy is more than just overcoming sin.

It is just as much about overcoming fear and leaving the security of our conventional “real world” attitudes to listen to Jesus and to follow him with all our heart.

*Let us pray.*

*Jesus, your glory was revealed on the mountaintop. Help us to trust you as you invite us to transformation.*

*May we feel your hand on our shoulder and hear your voice in our ears saying, “Rise, and do not be afraid.”*

*Amen.*